

A romantic scene featuring the silhouettes of a man and a woman walking together in a field. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The woman is on the left, wearing a long, flowing dress, and the man is on the right, wearing a dark t-shirt. They are walking towards the right, with the woman's hand near the man's. The overall mood is peaceful and intimate.

finding
peace

ELLIE MASTERS

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Finding Peace

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This book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my one and only, amazing and wonderful husband.

Without your care and support, my writing would not have made it this far. You make me whole every day. I love you “that much”, which for the rest of you means from the beginning to the end and every point in between. Thank you, my dearest love, my heart and soul, for putting up with me, for believing in me, and for loving me.

My husband deserves a special gold star for listening to me obsess over this book and for never once complaining while I brought these characters from my mind to the page.

You pushed me when I needed to be pushed. You supported me when I felt discouraged. You believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. If it weren't for you, this book never would have come to life.

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Acknowledgments

This book wouldn't have been possible without the tireless work of the ELLZ BELLZ BETA team. I am forever thankful for your eyes on this, helping to make my baby the best it could be. You helped with that last bit of spit shine, and were the first to see this in its nearly finished form, and the first to give reader feedback. Your enthusiasm and support mean the world to me. Thank you for making Finding Peace something I can be proud to introduce to the world.

I'd like to thank Michelle Thomas, in particular, for kicking me in the ass when I needed a swift smack to get on it! I really appreciate all her time, effort, and supportive words.

Thank you to my editor, Julie Cameron. She took my words, cut off the rough edges, patched some holes, and dressed up my baby for its debut. There aren't enough words. Thank you!

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To my readers

This book is a work of fiction. It does not exist in the real world and should not be construed as reality. As in most romantic fiction, I've taken liberties. I've compressed the romance into a sliver of time. I've allowed these characters to develop strong bonds over a matter of days.

This does not happen in real life, where you, my amazing readers, live. Take more time in your romance. I urge you to move with caution. Be open and honest about your needs, and your expectations. Never allow anyone to violate the tender trust you give into their hands. Most of all, don't be afraid to seek who you are, become what you want, and share your journey with your partner.

*Love,
Ellie*

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Moose

Nothing helped leaving the past behind like a thousand miles and a snowstorm to cover her tracks.

Abby Knight gripped the heated steering wheel and cursed the foul weather. Whoever heard of a blizzard the first week of May? She increased the speed of the windshield wipers. Not that it helped.

The swirling snow decreased visibility to dangerous levels, and instead of illuminating the dark road, the headlights of her Jeep made things worse. The seething mess turned into an impenetrable wall of white as the light from her high beams reflected off the falling snow.

On last check of Google Maps, the town of Peace Springs, was less than ten miles away. It could well be a hundred for the mess outside. A hot meal, warm bed, and getting off the snowy highway topped her list of things-to-do.

It wasn't like she'd never seen snow either. She'd grown up in Redlands, nestled at the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains. Those peaks had their fair share of snow, but it was a take it or leave it kind of thing. If she wanted to go skiing, she drove the hour up to Big Bear, skied all day, and returned home to balmy seventy-degree weather. She wasn't a fan of snow unless it was something she could play in and leave behind.

Her uncle had promised she would enjoy working in Peace Springs. The only reason she'd agreed was because he needed help, and she needed an excuse to leave her home. Peace Springs was growing, he said, and he wanted to retire sometime soon. Taking over his practice would be a great experience for a newly licensed family medicine physician. He had more reasons than she had excuses, and it made sense to relocate her life.

Redlands held too many bad memories. Her parents' deaths being merely one reason. Her abusive ex had been the defining factor. It was long past time to leave that town behind.

Leaning over the steering wheel, she peered through the windshield to curse the falling snow. For a girl born and raised in Southern California, she was used to endless sunshine, concrete buildings extending to the horizon, and highways five and six lanes wide. Not this tiny road the locals claimed was a highway.

Her sigh filled the cab with a mixture of regret and frustration. This was a permanent move, which meant she needed to embrace it. Especially after her hopes for establishing a practice in Redlands had died when one punch became one too many.

Not going back there. Ever.

She glanced at the back seat and checked on the Boston fern. The houseplant was the only thing her ex, Jacob, had let her take from their shared apartment. She'd transported the darn thing halfway across the country, not because the plant meant anything special, but because Jacob would've killed it within a week.

Her entire life had been condensed into three suitcases, a potted plant, and—holy crap! A moose!

Her scream shattered the silence as she slammed the brakes and wrenched the steering wheel to the right. The massive animal stood in the middle of the road without a care in the world, whereas her pulse thundered and her stomach leaped to her throat.

The tires slid over the ice, launching her off the road toward a line of barbed-wire fencing and a ditch. Counter-steering, she pointed the car back in the direction she wanted to go. It didn't work. The Jeep skidded into a spin.

Coming full circle, she plowed into the ditch and landed nose first into a drift of snow. A loud bang sounded. It felt like someone slugged her in the face and chest all at once. A fine, white powder coated the inside of the car, making her cough. The airbag had pushed her back and saved her life, but damn that had hurt. Her heart hammered, and the ragged pull of her breaths scraped in her ears.

"No, no, no!" she screamed. *This can't be happening.*

This place sucked.

It was too isolated.

And moose on the loose?

What next? Lions, tigers and, bears?

More likely, she'd find mountain lions, wolves, and bears.

Outside, snow began to pile up on the hood of her car.

She batted the airbag out of the way. Board certification in family medicine wasn't as much help as the extra training she'd taken in acute care and emergency medicine. Not that she'd ever planned on performing a secondary survey for injuries on herself. Thankfully, she had none.

The bridge of her nose hurt. Her cheekbones and orbital rims were tender but intact. Her eyes stung, and her eyelids dragged against the grit from the powder released when the airbag deployed. She took a deep breath. No pain in her ribs. Her shoulder hurt from where the seatbelt had held her in place, but nothing seemed broken. She wiggled her toes and moved her legs. No pain there.

Where was her phone? It had been in the drink holder a second ago. She needed to call her uncle and get help.

She searched while the oppressiveness of the outside temperature stole her precious heat. Staying put might seem wise, but what if no help ever came? There hadn't been another vehicle on the road for miles. Even in the daylight, would anyone see her car? Or would the snow cover it, encasing her in a chilly grave? Just in case, she flipped on the emergency flashers.

Her phone. There, on the passenger floorboard.

Damn. No reception.

Not that it mattered. The battery was down to less than five percent and wouldn't last much longer.

The engine sputtered and died. The heater quit blowing warm air. A chill crept in through the windows. She placed her palm against the glass and withdrew it with a hiss. There were only a few hours left until midnight, which meant it would only get colder outside.

Thanks to that damned moose, she was half-buried in a ditch. Any passing cars wouldn't be able to see her. She shivered with the encroaching cold.

No way to get the car out of the ditch. Should she wait out the storm? Was it even safe to run the engine? She had less than a quarter of a tank. It wouldn't last. The biggest threat to her safety would be hypothermia. Staying warm and dry was her top priority.

And finding help.

Twice she turned the key, but the engine wouldn't start. What was the right thing to do in a situation like this? Stay with the vehicle? Or would she be safer walking along the road? Hell if she knew.

The wind seemed to be dying down, and a stillness hung over the countryside. Snow continued its relentless fall. If it hadn't been for her life and death situation, she would take a moment to admire the beauty of freshly fallen snow. No time for that. She needed to think.

Well, walking would generate body heat. Sitting in the car wouldn't.

A glance back at the jumble of her luggage and she made a decision.

She had a thin coat and a hat, but plenty of shirts and even a pair of sweats. Layers would be the key.

A few minutes later, and after many contortions inside the vehicle, she was out of breath but warmer. She'd layered seven shirts and shoved her legs into a pair of sweats, tugging them over her jeans. Shame she didn't have anything but sneakers and sandals in her luggage. A good pair of boots would've been nice.

One last look outside the windows had her weighing the pros and cons of leaving her car. Once she stepped outside, there was no telling how deep the drift might be. Cold feet would make walking difficult. But cold, *wet* feet would make her trek downright treacherous, not to mention the danger of frostbite. Would the snow even melt? Maybe once it was against her skin? Shit, she didn't have the experience for this.

Turning back to her luggage, Abby grabbed three sets of socks, just in case the pair she wore got wet during her climb out of the ditch. She grabbed another pair to put over her hands in place of gloves.

Time to go. A deep breath in and she gave a silent prayer, hoping someone happened to be cruising the highway.

Abby had to shove and kick to open the door. She stepped onto the snow and promptly sank to her knees.

Frigid air bit her nose. Her cheeks prickled, but at least there wasn't much wind. Snow encased her feet, freezing her ankles. Soon, it would melt against the warmth of her skin.

"Nice way to extend the welcome mat," she spat.

A gust of wind blew snow into her eyes, making them water. The wetness froze on her cheeks.

Time to get out of the ditch.

On her climb out, she stumbled and fell face first into the snow. The tip of her nose burned with the cold. Her cheeks prickled until she couldn't feel them anymore. Her fingers numbed. Deep wracking shivers took control of her body. She finally made it to the road and already questioned her sanity. However, the car would be her coffin if she'd stayed.

As she'd feared, it was hidden from the road. No chance in hell anyone would've spotted her down there. The falling snow had even obliterated any sign of her skid. Not to mention, there was no sign of the damned moose.

Abby wrapped her arms around herself to conserve body heat. She worked quickly to peel off the wet socks and put a dry pair on her frozen feet. Her sneakers were damp, but she couldn't do anything about that. Other than her rapid breathing, the night was almost tranquil.

Getting back to her feet, she stamped away the cold, urging circulation back into her frozen toes. At least there was one positive in all this mess. She knew which way to go, if not how far she'd have to hike. Less than ten miles for certain. Probably fewer than five.

She could do this. As long as she kept to the road, and kept moving, she should reach Peace Springs within the hour. Two at the most.

Turning left, she took her first step. Biting chill lashed at her, taking precious heat and stealing her energy.

About an hour later, the wind had returned. Each step had become a chore. All she wanted was to curl up, stop, and sleep. Not once did she see approaching headlights. Nor did she see lights from farms or ranches to either side of the road. Open sky territory, the land was barren of people, and no-one was on the road. That would never happen in California.

Time dragged. Her molars knocked against one another. The muscles of her jaw bunched with the constant chatter. And her back. The small of her back tightened with each gust of the wind.

This was hell, but she took another step, and then one more. Her thoughts drifted with the swirling snow, thinking back to another time. A situation she'd barely escaped. Hopefully, her poor choices, and Jacob, would stay in her past.

A crackling of branches sounded to her left. Had the moose returned? She wished she had a flashlight. Instead, she moved to the center of the road.

More breaking branches. A smaller animal than a moose?

“Ha!” Like she was some expert.

Okay then. Dog or coyote? Dogs were friendly and not a threat. Coyotes tended to be skittish and scared of humans. As long as whatever moving in the brush wasn't a wolf, she was happy to let it be.

Silence followed, and she breathed out, teasing herself for every flinch made in response to the random noises of nature. Maybe that was the problem? Snow muffled sound, and stillness echoed in the quiet. Every little sound seemed amplified in comparison.

An ear-piercing howl broke the stillness. A deep, wailing noise. The howl carried itself through the air and crashed against her ears, making her pulse race.

She came to a halt, heart jackhammering in her chest. It was impossible to pinpoint the location of that noise.

A streak of red flashed in front of her, less than ten feet away. She jumped and forced herself to calm down. That animal was too small to be a wolf. Fox maybe?

She tried to laugh, but it came out strangled and scared.

A squeaking of snow sounded behind her, followed by a low *huff*.

She spun around and came face-to-face with a pack of timber wolves. The lead animal pointed its nose to the sky and let loose a long, piercing howl. The long, skin-crawling sound split the night air with its deep reverberations. The wolf pawed the ground and faced her down. It raised its thin lips and gave a throaty growl. The others hunkered down and snarled.

Wolves

Abby froze with the snarl of the pack alpha. The wolf stood waist—no chest high. The thing was massive. Its teeth sharp. White foam coated its muzzle. And it looked very hungry.

What the hell was she going to do?

A deep voice called out from somewhere to the right. "Don't move."

The alpha wolf shook its massive head. Its growl lifted the hairs at her nape and had her hyperventilating, moments from doing exactly the opposite of that male voice. The others in the pack supported their alpha, forming a loose semicircle behind it, moving to flank her. Their strategy was clear and terrifying. Each animal would be free to attack without getting in the others' way.

"Don't make any sudden moves," the man said. "Run, and you're dead."

A wolf toward the back of the pack pricked its ears up, rotating them toward the man's voice. Its nostrils scented the air as it looked back to its leader, its head swiveling with indecision.

Her hands trembled and her breath caught in her throat. An hour ago, her biggest concern had been hitting a moose. Now, it was facing down a pack of wolves.

The urge to seek out the owner of that voice warred with his command not to move.

"What do I do?" Her voice cracked in the quiet of the evening.

"Take a slow step back."

Abby maintained eye contact with the lead wolf while she slid her right foot back. The animal lowered its head and released a warning growl. Its

lips pulled into a snarl, and it stared at her, as if daring her to run. Instinct told her that would be the cue which would initiate the wolf's attack.

"That's it, darlin'," the unidentified man said. "Now, take another step back."

The rear wolf's ears twitched, rotating to locate the voice. It gave a low whine and dipped its head to huff at the snow.

The alpha's shoulders twitched and its muscles bunched as if preparing to spring.

She transferred her weight to her right foot and slid the left one back. The alpha hunkered down, nose brushing the snow. It took a step forward.

"Again," the man urged. "I need more space for my shot."

She snapped her head around. "Your shot?" Was he going to kill the poor animal?

Her sudden movement triggered the wolf. The alpha reared back on its haunches and leaped. A shot rang out. Abby screamed. A yelp sounded and then the alpha landed in a heap at her feet with a whimper. A blur of tawny gray sprung from her left. Another shot rang out, followed by a yelp, and another hard thud.

"Goddamnit! I told you not to move!"

She cast around, searching for the man, but found nothing. At her feet, the alpha whimpered. Its forepaws scrabbled at the snow until it took a final, shuddering breath and grew still. The three remaining wolves looked uncertain, their cohesion destroyed with the loss of their pack mate and alpha. She thought they would break and make a run for it. Instead, they attacked.

She stumbled back beneath the onslaught of fur, teeth, and claws. More shots split the air. Wolf cries rushed in to fill the thundering silence as wolves fell dead at her feet.

"You killed them," she screamed. "Why did you kill them?"

Where the hell was he? And why couldn't she see him?

Crunching sounded from her left, more of a squeaking noise. She peered into the landscape of white on white.

"To save your life," he said. "What the hell are you doing out here anyway?"

Dressed in shades of white and gray, she could barely pick the man's form out from the background. He was massive. Tall and broad shouldered, his winter gear protected him from the cold. The tops of his gloves had been

pulled back, freeing his fingers to grip the deadly rifle. Like a phantom, he stood with lethal prowess, his head swiveling to take in the carnage.

Abby tucked her hands under her armpits seeking warmth. Her fingertips tingled with cold, and what she hoped wasn't the beginning of frostbite. The thin cotton of the socks provided little protection from the plunging temperatures.

A hood covered the man's head, casting his face in deeper darkness. While clouds covered most of the sky, the light of the moon diffused through them and reflected off the blanket of white. Without the snow, the night would be plunged into total darkness. But the snow glowed under the filtered moonlight.

Beneath the hood, a pair of thick goggles hid his eyes, and the white and gray fabric covered most of his face. His voice held a hint of maturity to it, but without the quaver of old age. She guessed him to be a few years older than her by his tone of voice alone. Heavy boots encased his feet. Mid-calf, fabric gathered halfway above and below his boots. She'd seen that before. Called gaiters, they were designed to keep out snow from boots.

"Did you have to kill them?" she demanded.

He'd wiped out the entire pack. Abby loathed guns, and hated violence of any sort, especially against animals, but if he hadn't been there... she wasn't going to think about what might have happened.

"That pack was tracking you. Good thing I was here. Bastards are a menace."

He climbed the last few feet up the bank and approached her with a ground devouring stride. Cocking his head, he regarded her for a long moment. The glass of his goggles glittered in the faint ambient glow of the snow.

"What the hell are you doing out here dressed like that?" He made a vague gesture, sweeping from her head to her toes.

Abby rolled her eyes. "You think I'm out here by choice? My Jeep ran into a ditch."

He placed the butt of his rifle on the toe of his boot, and a low, throaty chuckle spread from his chest, bursting forth into a deep, belly laugh.

"I'm sorry, but I don't see anything funny about an accident." She stepped back from the dead wolves, eager to place distance between her and the bodies.

In death, the animals appeared majestic and peaceful. They didn't look nearly as ferocious as they had a few minutes ago.

"Couldn't you have given a warning shot?"

"Warning shot?" he repeated. "Now why would I do that?"

She pointed at the dead animals. "To scare them away. I'm sure they would've run. You wouldn't have had to kill them."

His tone turned incredulous. "What part of tracking you did you not understand?" He shook his head. "Wolves are no better than vermin around here, and they're breeding like there's no tomorrow."

She knew little about the debate surrounding wolf preservation efforts, except there were two sides to the story. Man had nearly brought timber wolves to the edge of extinction, and reintroduction efforts had been a topic for debate ever since. Well, not any topics she'd been involved in. Wolves were a non-issue in Southern California. What she hated was the senseless carnage, and the fact he didn't seem to care he'd taken out what looked to be an entire pack.

She fisted her hands and placed them on her hips. "I don't see how that gives you license to kill them. You could have run them off."

He laughed. "Obviously, you know nothing about wolves." He grabbed a wolf and dragged the body to the side of the road. "This pack has been harrying the sheep and cattle all through the winter. They've even taken out a few of Bert Winston's llamas."

Llamas?

"It still doesn't give you the right to kill them."

With a shake of his head, he fixed her with a penetrating stare. It didn't look like the cold bothered him at all, whereas she worried about her core body temperature approaching dangerous levels. She tucked her hands under her armpits.

"Fish, Wildlife and Parks gives me the right," he insisted. "I can kill up to a hundred if I want."

"A hundred?"

"What part of menace did you not understand? And you're welcome, by the way."

"I'm sorry? Welcome for what?"

"For saving your life."

She hated that he was right, but damn his arrogance. For that reason alone, she wouldn't say thank you. Her father used to say she was too

stubborn for her own good. But that stubborn streak had been the one thing which had given her the tenacity to finish medical school and complete her residency, despite everything that had happened.

She took in a deep breath and blew it out. “Can you tell me how much farther it is to Peace Springs?” Standing in one place wasn’t keeping her warm.

He pointed back the way she’d come. “About eight miles that way?”

No! She’d been walking the wrong way?

“Excuse me?”

Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, he said, “Eight miles.” He dragged another wolf body off the road. “Now care to tell me why you’re headed out of town, dressed like that in a snowstorm?”

Her coat wasn’t meant for winter weather. She’d bought it on a whim because she liked the color. Style had been more important than function. Besides, she had all year to build up a stash of warm clothes. Right now, seven layers of cotton shirts, jeans covered by sweats, and a lightweight coat had her wishing for something more like what the man was wearing.

“I told you, my Jeep ran off the side of the road. I thought it was this way.”

He pulled another two wolves off the highway. “Lady, you’re really mixed up.”

Tears of frustration brimmed in her eyes, and she wiped at her cheek. In the last hour or two, she’d probably covered three or four miles. There was no way she’d make it eight more. She would have almost been there by now.

“Listen, I’d really appreciate some help.”

“Looks like you need it.” He came for the last animal and pulled it over to join the others. The man towered over her, having at least a foot, maybe a foot and a half, in height over her. The top of her head barely came up to his shoulders.

“So, that’s why you’re out here at midnight?”

“Why else would anyone be out in this godforsaken weather?”

He stepped toward her, concern replacing the snide comments from earlier. “How long have you been out?”

“I don’t know. An hour, maybe two? I thought I’d be able to walk to town.”

“In this?”

“The snow had stopped falling when I had my accident.”

“You should have stayed with your car. You’re going to freeze to death out here. And I don’t know what you were thinking getting out and walking.”

It must have been the skid. She couldn’t really remember which side of the road she’d wound up on, and by the time she’d climbed the bank the skid marks had been covered by the snow. The longer she stood in one place, the colder she became, and she couldn’t stop her teeth from chattering.

He glanced at her feet and made a *tsking* noise. “You’re not going to last much longer out here.” With a rasp, he lowered the zipper of his coat and shrugged out of the thick material.

“Honey, put this on before you freeze to death. We have a long walk ahead of us.”

“How far is your car?” she asked with a shudder.

“Car? Don’t you pay attention? I was hunting that pack. My truck is back at Bert’s place.” He pointed across the field.

“How far is that?”

He tilted his head, looking at her feet with those weird goggles. “There’s no way you’re making it in sneakers.” Gripping his chin, he seemed deep in thought.

She took the opportunity to wrap herself in his jacket. A deep woody scent filled her nostrils and had her taking a deep breath. The faint aroma of male sweat, sultry and dark, smelled divine. She tugged at the collar and pulled it close and shamelessly took another inhale. His chuckle brought her head snapping up.

“It works better when you zip it, not sniff it.” He turned and headed back the way she’d come. “We need to do something about your feet and the snow.” Bending down, he unfastened the white gaiters over his boots.

“Oh, I can’t take those,” she said.

“You’re taking them. Impossible to hike cross country in sneakers, and I’m not carrying you.”

Instead of handing the gaiters to her and having her figure out how to secure them around her calves, he knelt on one knee and tapped his other thigh.

“Put your foot here, and we’ll see what we can do.”

A little hesitant, she didn't argue. Especially when this stranger was going out of his way to not only give her the coat off his back, but his gaiters as well. He snapped the top and bottom buttons and tacked down the Velcro strip binding the whole thing together. Then he pulled an elastic tab over the back of her heel and settled it against the sole of her shoe.

"Try not to drag your feet, or the strap will slip off. These should keep most of the snow out of your shoes."

When she put her foot down and tested the elastic strap, he stood. His size intimidated her, and she couldn't help but take an involuntary step back. She was what she called 'tall enough for her feet to reach the ground,' which meant she was terribly short and more than a little self-conscious about her five-foot-three frame.

Standing so close to him, she had to crane her neck to see his face, or what little there was to see. He hadn't removed the goggles or the fabric covering his nose, mouth, and chin. But the real reason she stepped back was because of the strange things being so close to him were doing to her insides.

Needle-thin flakes filled the air, more snow coming down. She zipped the jacket, not because he'd told her to, but because she wanted to keep the residue of his warmth, and maybe some of his scent, inside the jacket.

"Shouldn't we call someone?"

He took off with a gruff shake of his head. The deep rumble of his voice rolled back toward her. "Cell reception sucks this far from town. Don't worry, it's a short hike to Bert's."

He headed off the road, waving for her to follow. Leaving the safety of the road went against her better instincts, but he had two things she didn't. First off, he knew which direction they needed to travel. Left to her own devices, she would have hiked into the wilderness and froze to death or ran into another pack of wolves. But she followed for another, more unsettling reason. This man knew what he was doing. His confidence filled her with a sense that everything would be all right. Not to mention, she was no longer alone, or afraid.

"How far?"

"Two miles," he said.

Behind them, another piercing howl filled the night sky. The man stopped in his tracks and turned around.

"Damn wolves. Come on, let's get a move on."

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Llamas

Two miles he said. Just a little further he said. Abby felt like they'd been hiking for ten miles instead of two. Her feet were lead bricks. Every step became a massive investment of energy. She wanted to curl up into a ball and just...stop. But the man who'd shot the wolves set a relentless pace.

They'd been hiking cross-country for well over an hour, and there was still nothing but rolling white stretching out in front of them. The sky was a featureless gray. Backlit by the moon, the clouds glowed a faint mottled gray, providing barely enough light to show the way. Which way that might be, she had no idea. She depended on her savior to take her to safety.

Snow drifted downward, piling up beneath her feet, and generally making the hike unbearable. They weren't back in blizzard-like conditions, but another few inches had dropped since they'd left the road, making overland travel challenging.

And, she was hot!

Sweat slicked her back and pooled under her breasts. Perspiration saturated the band of her bra and chaffed her skin. As thankful as she'd been for the coat, she had it unzipped, and it flapped in the gusting wind. The physical activity kept her pulse elevated and deepened her breath. She'd take the damn coat off if she didn't think her guide would disapprove.

Despite the fact her body had become a toaster oven, the same could not be said of her face. The frigid temperatures pricked at her cheeks and numbed the tip of her nose. She rubbed at her nose repeatedly, even held her hand in front of her face like a shield, trying to warm up the tender tip. And

her ears! They had burned like fire when the flurries kicked up their intensity. Now, she couldn't feel them at all. Which was bad.

Very bad.

That meant the skin and cartilage of her ears had frozen or were in the process of freezing. Her medical mind dredged up facts differentiating frost nip from frostbite. Her inner monologue was pointless. She didn't want to lose an ear.

Lifting the hood of his coat helped somewhat, and she tugged down her hat. Feeling came back to her ears with a fiery burn as blood rushed in and brought warmth to nearly frozen tissue. But the hood trapped in her body heat, making her sweat even more.

She'd been cold while walking on the road. Her movement barely enough to keep her body temperature from plunging to dangerous levels. Now, she wished for an air conditioner.

And whoever her savior was, his powerful legs devoured the ground with barely any effort. She'd spent the first ten minutes jog-stepping to keep pace. Finally, she decided he would have to match her pace, not the other way around. It took a few minutes as they crossed a pasture before he realized how far she had fallen behind. He stopped and waited, saying nothing as she struggled through a knee-high drifting of snow. His brooding silence confused her, but as she was out of breath, she was content to not engage in unnecessary conversation.

The moment she caught up, she expected a short reprieve. That didn't happen. He continued his trek, slowing down out of consideration for her much shorter stride, but never stopping for a break. That had been the first of many moments she cursed him behind his back.

The gaiters were amazing. Despite plunging mid-calf, and in some cases, up to her knees in snow, the waterproof fabric kept her lower legs free from snow and prevented it from sneaking into her shoes. Nevertheless, snow caked the top of her sneakers and melted through the layers of material. Her feet were wet, cold, and numb. They felt ten pounds too heavy, and she struggled with every step.

Several times, she asked how much farther. His response 'just a little more' turned sour after her fifth or sixth demand.

They hiked in silence, broken only by the crunching of their feet over virgin snow and the occasional gusting of the wind. After that first keening

wail, they heard nothing else from that distant wolf pack. And then, it happened.

When she'd lost all hope of ever making it to anything resembling civilization, he crested a steep rise and stopped.

She climbed after him, slipping more times than not, wondering why he didn't offer his hand, and cursing him for not helping her with the climb. But she made it to the top of the hill where she caught her breath and listened to the thrum of her pulse surging past her ears.

A tiny house sat in the valley below. Light spilled out of its windows and splashed onto the virgin snow, promising warmth inside. She clasped her hands and brought them to her mouth. They'd made it. A few hundred yards and she could strip out of all these layers, and maybe, just maybe, she would be warm again.

He pointed down the slope to a barbed wire fence.

"We have to crawl over the wire. I would've taken us to the gate, but that's not for another mile to the west. Be careful you don't snag yourself on the barbs. It'll leave a scar, and you'll need a tetanus shot."

She knew all about painful tetanus shots. Not that she would have to worry. All her immunizations were up to date. Besides, the barbs would have to penetrate seven, no eight layers of fabric before piercing her skin.

"And we'll have to be careful crossing the field," he continued. "I don't think the llamas are out. Bert keeps them in the barn in weather like this."

She'd been expecting sheep or cattle, but llamas? Livestock scared the crap out of her. Cows were placid creatures, but she didn't trust something that weighed close to a ton. Sheep were basically overstuffed dogs and stupid, but didn't they bite? Llamas? She knew nothing about llamas except they were the dorkiest animals she'd ever seen.

"Um, okay?"

His chuckle filled the stillness. She had yet to see his face and had imagined him any number of ways. What would he look like? Tall and handsome? Or tall and fearsome? Either way, he was overwhelmingly tall, and more than fit.

Unlike her, he wasn't out of breath and looked like he could continue this pace all day long. He was definitely comfortable with the outdoors. He'd kept those odd goggles on their entire trek, scanning left and right as they'd moved across the fields. Other than the deep timbre of his voice and his powerful frame, he remained a mystery.

“Llamas?” she asked.

And why did this Bert guy have llamas? She was used to horses, cattle, and sheep. Next thing her guide was going to tell her about a nearby ostrich farm.

He spoke over his shoulder, leading the way down the hill. “Well, they aren’t like horses or cattle, that’s for sure.”

“Why is that?”

“You really aren’t from around here are you?” His voice echoed into the breach of wintery silence. All around them the land seemed to slumber, caressed to quiet by the rumble of his voice.

She shivered and shook her head. What did he look like under that mask and those goggles? It was killing her with the need to know.

“City girl?” His voice held a little more than a bit of scorn.

“Not really city, but definitely not country.” Redlands wasn’t exactly a big city, but it was more built up than a suburb.

“Suburbs then,” he said with distaste.

“Not sure Redlands is considered the suburbs. More like a little, big town.” She didn’t want to continue that conversation, not when his tone had been so disparaging. “Tell me about these llamas.”

He huffed another laugh. “They’re curious and alert creatures...related to camels, which means they spit. I’d keep your distance.”

“Well, I think I’m capable of staying out of range of llama spit.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Their necks are longer than you think. You’ve been warned.”

“I’ll stay back.”

“Well, if any of them are out, I’d suggest getting behind me.”

“Why?”

“This herd has been harried by the wolves. They’re a bit strung out, and llamas tend to meet threats head on. They’re likely to attack a stranger.”

Great. Don’t impale herself on the barbed wire. Avoid spitting llamas and don’t get trampled by one either.

“Anything else I need to know?”

“Nope.”

She couldn’t see but imagined a smile behind the mask. He was probably having a good laugh at the poor *city girl*. Well, she would prove she could handle anything country thrown her way.

“Well, lead on,” she said, gesturing toward the house across the field. “I can’t wait to see my first llama.”

“Definitely a city girl,” he said with a rumble of his deliciously deep voice.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” Her words came out more defensive than she’d intended. Her savior had been light on the compliments, inclined to point out every mistake she made. Not that it had been her choice to nearly run down a moose. Or walk the wrong way, headed out of town. Okay, that may have been a colossal mistake, but she swore she’d been headed the right way.

They reached the bottom of the hill and approached the snarl of barbed wire fencing. Abby wasn’t clear how he expected her to make it over the fence.

He placed the sole of his boot on the lowest strand and stepped down. The action opened a six-inch gap. Not something she would be able to crawl through. She gave him a dubious look.

He gestured toward her. “Come here.”

She crossed her arms and stayed where she was. “Maybe we should find this gate?”

“You don’t have another mile in you, city girl. Now take my coat off and give it here.”

While she had been complaining about being overly warm a few minutes ago, standing at the base of the hill had her shivering again. She didn’t want to give up the coat, but his command didn’t allow for argument. She shrugged out of the coat and handed it over, shivering as a gust of wind blew the snow into a flurry. He wrapped it around the upper strands of wire forming a U-shape. Then he lifted. The six-inch gap widened.

“Hurry up,” he said. “This is harder than it looks.”

She rushed forward, eyeing the opening, hoping his arm didn’t give out while she was halfway through. One glance at the fullness of muscles bunched under his shirt, and she didn’t have much to worry about.

Picking her way over the exposed wire, she cleared the fence.

He released his hold, and the gap in the fence collapsed, leaving him on the outside of the fencing.

“How are you—”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence because he placed his hand on the nearest post and vaulted over the wire like it was nothing. She admired his

strength and agility as he twisted around and landed beside her. He freed the coat from a barb with a little rip of the fabric. Damn, now she would have to buy him a new coat.

“Come on,” he said. “Almost there. Put the coat back on.”

“I’m a little overheated,” she said.

“Don’t care,” he said, shoving the coat at her. “It doesn’t take long to freeze out here, and we’re not inside yet. Put the coat on.”

His insistent tone left no room for argument. Abby took the coat and slipped it on. She’d been taught to be cautious. Not to trust. Yet here she was, following a stranger into a house in the middle of nowhere. It didn’t help it was nearly midnight. Past midnight? She didn’t really know what time it was. He could do anything to her, and no one would ever know. Maybe it would’ve been better to stay with her car?

It didn’t take long before he was ahead of her again, marching toward the small ranch style house. A single-story structure, it had the classic rambling farm architecture, but what drew her eye, and energized her step, was the thin trail of smoke twisting up from the chimney. She’d give her first born to sit in front of that fire right about now.

His pace picked up, and the distance between them grew. Remembering what he’d said about testy llamas, she stumbled to a jog, intent on closing the gap. Or maybe, she just really wanted to be out of this damn weather.

Blanketed in white, the rolling fields reflected what little moonlight filtered through the clouds. The entire landscape sparkled, and the blanketing of snow smoothed out the hills. Images of building snowmen and making snow angels came to mind. Family trips when she’d been little up to the mountains. She and her parents would play all day until the sun dipped below the horizon, and then they’d pile into the back of the car, blasting the heater as they drove down to the valley floor. They would stop at Taco Shack for dinner, strip out of their thick layers until only jeans and t-shirts remained. While they watched passing cars, they’d sit under the open-air awning and chomp on tortilla chips, salsa, and queso dip waiting for their burritos to be made.

Abby sniffed, missing her parents with an aching loneliness. There were many reasons to put Redlands behind her, but leaving her parents’ graves hadn’t been one of them.

Fresh wood smoke filled her nostrils, a thick, homey scent. Her savior waited at a wooden gate, holding it open. She stepped past him and took a

deep breath. The ordeal of her evening was almost over. She was safe.

He latched the fence and walked beside her the remaining distance. His impressive height dwarfed her much smaller frame, but there was something about it which felt strangely natural.

“When I forget to tell you later how grateful I am for your help tonight, please know that I am.”

He placed his arm around her shoulder, the first real physical contact between them other than when he’d fastened the gaiters around her legs. Tugging her close, he gave her shoulder a squeeze.

“The people of Peace Springs look out for one another. No need to say thank you, but you’re welcome. Now, let’s get you inside and warmed up.”

With a tug, he pulled at the strap of the odd goggles and tugged off his hat, revealing midnight black hair and the darkest eyes she’d ever seen. A jagged scar stretched from his cheek to the corner of his mouth. Abby gasped and took a step back. Normally a disfigurement like that would make a person repulsive, but it did exactly the opposite with him.

Ruggedly handsome wasn’t sufficient to describe his aching beauty. Even the ferociousness of his expression spoke to something mysterious. Scar aside, it was the black depths of his eyes which hinted at something dangerously intoxicating.

The intensity of his expression pinned her in place; perhaps he waited to see her reaction to his disfigurement. She couldn’t help but reach out, her frozen fingers trembling as she tried to trace the contours of his majestic face.

He grabbed her wrist. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

She drew back, or tried to. His grip tightened, dragging a strangled cry from her throat. He pulled her close, close enough for the heat of his breath to warm her cheeks.

“Get a good hard look at it, city girl. Take your fill, but don’t ever assume you can touch me like that again. I’m not some circus freak.”

“I didn’t—”

“Hey,” a gravelly voice called out. Light spilled from an open doorway onto the expanse of untouched snow. “Drake? Is that you?” The man gave a low whistle. “Whatcha got there?”

Drake released her wrist, practically tossing her aside. “Road rat,” he said. “Found that pack and picked up a straggler.”

“She don’t look like no straggler.”

“Bert will take care of you, city girl.”

She swallowed and then waved to Bert Winston, llama rancher. “Hi,” she said. “My name’s Abby.”

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Whiskey

Perhaps it hadn't been fair to stereotype the llama rancher, Bert Winston, but she'd imagined a hick in baggy suspenders, maybe worn out jeans, a plaid shirt, and cowboy boots. She'd even included a piece of straw sticking out between the gap she'd imagined between his two front teeth. Oh, and a cowboy hat!

The llama rancher surprised her with his wool trousers, buttoned-up Oxford, tweed blazer, sleek boots, and what looked like a fedora perched with impeccable style atop his head. Impeccably groomed, even his gray beard had been trimmed and combed. Instead of chewing on a piece of straw, Bert puffed a cigar. Deep laugh lines crinkled the skin around his eyes and told her his huge smile was a comfortable, and lifelong, friend.

Blueish black smoke curled around his head. A puff made the tip of the cigar glow. He even blew honest to goodness smoke rings. And what was that in his hand?

Abby leaned forward, eyes pinching, and caught the unmistakable title. A *Wuthering Heights* fan? And she could label him a fan without feeling guilty about it because the edges of the leather-bound cover were worn and the pages curled as if they'd been lovingly handled many wonderful times.

She looked into his twinkling eyes, such a contrast to Drake's black pools of mystery and pain. Jade colored gems rounded with mirth as Bert puffed on his cigar.

"Well, Miss Abby," he said. "Sounds like you've had a frightful night."

"Yes, sir," she said. "It began with a moose."

"Began?" He cocked his head to the side. "What did it end with?"

Now that was a question she didn't have an answer to, considering her evening still seemed to be a work in progress.

"Wolves," Drake answered.

Bert popped the cigar out of his mouth with a squelching sound. "You found the curs it seems."

"Found and killed." Drake swung his rifle over his shoulder and puffed out his chest. "Five down. Had to leave the bodies on the side of the road, though."

Bert shoved the fat cigar back into his mouth and drew in a breath. The tip crackled and reddened with the smoldering fire. "I'll call Charlie and let him know."

"Don't bother. I'll tell him. We'll grab them in the morning and send the pelts to Fish and Game." He jerked his thumb toward Abby. "And her car is in a ditch somewhere a few miles outside of town."

"Ah, gotcha," Bert said. "I'll call Henry to bring his rig in the morning."

"The morning!" Abby looked between the two men. "I thought we'd be able to get it out tonight."

They gave her twin expressions like she was crazy.

"Why can't he come tonight?" Where was she going to stay? With Bert and his llamas?

"She's not from around here is she?" Bert twisted the cigar in his mouth.

"Not even close," Drake said.

Bert wrapped an arm around her shoulder and tugged her toward the door. "Come child, let's get you out of this weather. I've got a nice fire going, and even some leftover stew."

At the mention of food, Abby's stomach rumbled. In her haste to get to Peace Springs, she'd skipped dinner, thinking her uncle would have something laying around. Little did she know she would nearly run down a moose and become wolf bait.

"That would be very nice," she said, "but please don't go to too much trouble."

"No trouble at all. You're in Peace Springs, child. The people here take care of each other." Bert swept her into his home, while Drake remained outside.

She twisted around. "Isn't he coming?"

Bert pulled the door shut. "Naw, Drake's going to check on the llamas, but don't worry, that brooding bastard will be back to join you by the fire in

no time."

"That's not what I meant." But then why did the thought of sitting by Drake have her stomach twisting in knots?

"I know what you meant," he said with a wink.

He walked her through his kitchen, and unlike the man, the kitchen fit every country stereotype she could imagine, from the copper molds displayed over the cupboards, to the hen and rooster knickknacks tucked into every available corner, and even to the wooden bread box on the counter top. The kitchen could easily grace the cover of *Country Living* or *Southern Comfort* magazines. Even his stove was one of those cast iron antiques. Its jade green metallic paint contrasted perfectly with the floral wallpaper and wooden butcher block countertops. The whole place would've been terribly garish, except it all worked perfectly together. It was a home made for making people feel welcome.

The living room continued the quaint feeling, but instead of the expected plaid sofa and rocking chair with crocheted throws, the living room had an understated elegance to it yet very masculine with its dark brown leather couches and mounted gun racks over the fireplace. One glance at the roaring fire in the stone fireplace and her muscles relaxed, reminding her how exhausted she was from her tromp across two miles of countryside, and three miles the wrong way on the county highway.

Bert took Drake's coat and gestured to the sofa. "Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I'll heat up the stew and get you a drink. You a wine or whiskey girl?"

"Wine. I've never had whiskey." She didn't take the offered seat. Instead, she reached beneath her shirts and felt the innermost layer. Ugh, slick with sweat. "Um, Bert, is there a place I can..."

He pointed down the hall. "Bathroom is the second door on the right. The guest bedroom is the first one on the left, just across from the study."

"Thank you."

While he disappeared back into the kitchen, she located the bathroom. There wasn't a lock on the door, which made her nervous. She took care of business and then stood in front of the mirror. A quick inspection of her ears eased her fears about frostbite. Bright red, she had the very beginning of frostnip, barely missing the more serious frostbite. It had been too close, and she thanked her mysterious stranger yet again. No lingering damage

would occur to her ears. Her cheeks and the tip of her nose pricked with sensation as circulation and heat slowly returned.

She peeled out of all seven shirts. The two innermost layers were damp, but the ones in the middle were still dry. Maybe Bert had some hangers or a place where she could dry out her damp clothing? Her sweats were a wet mess. The snow had melted, and the moisture had spread to her jeans. It would have been more comfortable to spend the rest of the night in sweats, but they had to be dried before she could wear them. She hadn't seen a washer or dryer in the small country kitchen, but maybe Bert wouldn't mind if she placed them by the fire. In the meantime, damp jeans it was, and she needed to get out of this wet bra.

Abby unsnapped the constricting band of fabric and hung it on the towel rack. Her reflection stared back at her, rosy cheeks, pinker than the ruddy red of a few moments ago. The warmth of Bert's home seeped into her bones, and her shivering had stopped. She toed off her wet sneakers and yanked at her socks, tugging them off. Those would need to dry as well.

As she grabbed for one of the dry shirts, the door creaked open. Abby jumped, pulling the fabric close to her chest, and glanced down at the tawny tabby cat rubbing up against her leg.

"Oh, you surprised me." Hadn't she shut the door? "My, aren't you a friendly kitty?" She draped the shirt over the edge of the sink and bent down to pet the cat.

A creaking of the wood flooring in the hallway had her snapping her eyes to the half open door where they collided with the coal black of Drake's dark visage.

She squeaked and grabbed for the shirt hanging off the sink, clutching it yet again to her chest.

Drake didn't react, just stood there, all six-foot-plus of his stoic body framing the doorway. He didn't look away. Instead, his eyes took a languid journey over her body then wandered up to caress her face. Under his penetrating assessment, she froze. The muscles of his jaw bunched and a winter storm churned in the depths of his eyes. He took in a sharp breath. Only then did he turn to the side and avert his gaze.

Her body went haywire, responding to the full force of the man standing before her, looking as if he had every right to feast upon what he saw.

Her pulse thrummed through her veins as her heart jackhammered with conflicting emotions. A glance down revealed her failure to fully cover her

breasts. She'd just given him a peep show. Clumsily, she spread out the fabric of the shirt and covered herself. Her breaths huffed in and out, as he turned back and transfixed her with the intensity of his gaze.

He gave a tight nod and then spoke, his words clipped and tight. "Bert thought you needed something dry to wear." His voice was deep and cautious, as unhurried as his gaze. He pushed the bathroom door until it was fully open and took a step forward, holding out a pair of pink flannel pajamas.

One hand clutched the bunched t-shirt against her chest, while the other stretched for the clothes. Their fingers touched and the air crackled between them. His gaze drifted down again, and his chiseled jaw tightened. The heat swirling in the depths of his eyes caused her ribs to expand as she took in another staggering breath.

She took the pajamas from him and spun around, placing her back to him, straightening her spine. Her insides knotted as tremors skated down her spine. Her legs weakened, and her balance wavered. Her entire body pulsed with an odd inner warmth, even as goosebumps shivered across her skin.

"Thank you," she tossed a clipped response over her left shoulder. "Did you see enough? Or are you waiting for more?"

Drake cleared his throat. "I don't think it's possible to see enough of that perfection, but I apologize for invading your privacy, city girl." He shifted back, pivoted, and headed back to the living room.

Abby shut the door, making sure it closed this time. Only then did she look down at the clothes Drake had given her. The tabby had disappeared.

Pale, pink, flannel pajamas with roses and red bows. She glanced at her wet jeans and decided on comfort. Lifting the fabric to her nose, she gave it a sniff, perhaps hoping to smell a little bit of him. Nothing. It smelled with the freshness of fabric softener.

When she was dressed, she returned to join the men in front of the fire.

Bert sat in the leather recliner, puffing on what looked to be a new cigar, the copy of *Wuthering Heights* held open by the spread of his fingers. Reading glasses perched on his nose, and he stroked his bearded chin. On the coffee table, two bowls of steaming stew sat beside two empty cups and a pot of tea.

Drake sat on the sofa, a paperback clutched in his hand. From the cover, it looked to be a mystery or thriller. His gaze took her in from head to toe

and landed on her face. A storm brewed in his eyes, a war in the making between desire and need. She felt the energy pulsing between them but was unsure what to do about it. This was something she'd only read about. It had certainly never happened to her.

He'd stripped out of the white camouflage he'd been wearing, and had changed into jeans and a collared shirt. The fabric stretched over the expanse of his chest and strained over the muscles of his arms. He affected a casual pose, relaxed with one leg kicked over the opposite knee, but she caught the hitching in his breath as she approached.

"Ah," Bert said. "I thought Bethany's clothes would fit you." He placed his book on the side-table and moved the recliner to its upright position. "I'm a recent widower and still have a few of her things. I'm glad they fit you."

"Oh, well, thank you," she said, unsure how to respond to his statement about being recently widowed.

He filled in the pause of conversation. "I'm not a coffee drinker, but I made some hot tea. I've got cocoa if you'd prefer that?"

Next to the teapot and cups, two tumblers of amber colored fluid waited.

"The tea is perfect," she said. "Thank you for your hospitality." She pointed to the glasses. "What's that?"

"Bert said you've never tasted whiskey," Drake answered. "Time to make you a whiskey girl."

"I prefer wine."

"Doesn't matter. In Peace Springs, we drink whiskey." Putting his book down, Drake uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. He grabbed the two glasses and handed one to her. He tapped his glass against hers. "Cheers, and welcome to Peace Springs, Miss Abby...?"

"Abby Knight," she gave her full name.

"Now that is a pretty name," he said. He pressed the cup to his lips and tilted his head back, downing the entire glass. The hardness of his eyes glittered, waiting for her to do the same.

She sniffed the aromatic liquor. It was definitely stronger than wine. She tipped the glass against her lips, coating them in whiskey. Then she licked her lips, closing her eyes at the sweet flavor.

"What kind of whiskey is this?"

Drake poured himself another drink. “Tennessee Honey, a good starter drink.”

His eyes locked onto her mouth as she licked her lips.

She took another sip. “It’s like wine, with all the different flavors, but very different.”

“Do you like?”

Another sip, this one bigger than the previous one. The burn of alcohol lit a fire inside her mouth and throat.

“Oh my, that’s strong stuff,” she said with a cough and sputter.

Drake smiled at her, then turned to Bert. “I think we have a convert.”

“Seems so.” Bert barely followed their conversation. He seemed to have become one with his chair and turned the page of his book.

Drake picked up a bowl of the hot stew and handed it to her.

“Eat,” he ordered. “You’ve had a hard night.”

The ceramic filled her palm with warmth, while the steam carried the savory aromas of the stew to her nose. Without warning, her stomach rumbled.

With a laugh, Drake sat back on the couch, cradling his bowl in his massive hand. Dipping a spoon in the thick mixture of meat and vegetables, he blew at the surface to cool off the stew before taking a bite. She joined him on the couch, tucking her legs beneath her as she took another sniff.

“It smells heavenly. Thank you.” It didn’t take long to empty her bowl. With a yawn, she stretched.

Bert lifted his nose out of his book and glanced at her. “You ready to hit the sack?”

“I can’t thank you enough for your hospitality.”

“Drake,” Bert said, “why don’t you show your city girl to your room.”

Drake stood, his towering presence causing her to catch her breath. He collected their bowls and carried them into the kitchen. Her whiskey glass sat on the side table, empty. She’d taken her time drinking it, savoring the sweet burn. Her face felt flushed from the alcohol, a welcome change from the burning sensation of near frostbite.

A strange twisting knotted her stomach when Drake returned. She didn’t understand why her pulse quickened or her breathing hitched, but there was something about him which unsettled her on a gut level.

“Come,” he said, and then headed down the hall to the first door on the left.

Opening the door, he gestured for her to go inside the room. She stepped through the open doorway and stopped short at the pair of twin beds. A glance over her shoulder caught his grin. Bert had said 'your' room, not 'her' room, as in a guest room. Surely Drake wouldn't be sleeping in the same room?

He waited while she approached the far bed and crawled under the covers. Once she pulled the sheets up to her neck, he flicked off the light switch and closed the door.

That's when she realized the men had literally 'put her to bed.' Warm and soft, the flannel bedsheets sucked her into a blissfully relaxed state where thoughts of moose, snow, and wolves became a distant memory. In their place, images of a man with raven hair, and even blacker eyes, filled her dreams.

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Barn

Abby had no idea when she had fallen asleep, or even when Drake had gone to bed. He wasn't in the room now, but he'd clearly slept in the other twin bed. The sheets were a ruffled mess, and there was a clear indentation of his head on the pillow.

Had she slept so soundly that she'd missed him crawling into the other bed? It certainly seemed like it. She stretched, luxuriating in the warmth of the flannel sheets and quilted coverlet. Her toes, fingers, nose, and ears pulsed with warmth. Sunlight streaked through the lace curtains, and she blinked out the sleep from her eyes. Her lips curled into a slow smile, the feeling of being home settling deep within her chest. She twisted side-to-side, loosening her back and stretching her neck, enjoying the slow process of waking up.

Nose twitching, she caught the faint aroma of breakfast drifting down the hall from the kitchen. Is that what had awoken her? She sniffed again, and this time a broad smile curved her lips.

Bacon!

The warm, sizzling scent brought back memories of her mother's cooking, making the room smell like a lazy Sunday sleep-in kind of day, with a whole lot of awesome.

Maybe Peace Springs wasn't so bad after all?

As much as she wanted to stay in bed and soak up the warm feeling, she needed to get up and greet her hosts. Swinging her feet around, a neat stack of her folded clothes caught her eye. They'd been placed on the nightstand beside her bed. Had Bert washed and dried her clothes, or had it been Drake?

A glance toward the door confirmed it was shut, but after the bathroom incident last night, she padded over and checked to make sure it was securely latched. A few minutes later, she had both beds made and had changed into her jeans. This time, she only put one shirt on, instead of seven.

Her teeth felt fuzzy, and the fullness of her bladder pinched. Opening the door, she peeked into the hallway, looking toward the living room. Male voices echoed down the hall, originating from the kitchen; the deep laughter of two men who knew each other well rumbled through the house, warming it from the inside out.

She tiptoed to the bathroom, relieved herself, and then finger-scrubbed the fuzz away from her teeth. She checked herself in the mirror, paying special attention to her ears, nose, and even her cheeks. Despite her ordeal, she'd made it through the night without permanent damage.

But she'd stalled long enough.

Drake's voice bounced off the walls, deep and resonating, it tunneled beneath her skin and slammed into her gut, twisting and knotting into a tangled mess. When she entered the kitchen, both men turned. Drake held a spatula and stood in front of the cast iron stove. A skillet sizzled and popped as bacon crisped in the grease. Bert stood at the counter, a white and blue striped ceramic bowl cradled in his arm. He beat at the contents with a wire whisk.

"Well, good morning," Bert said with a smile. "Sleep well?"

"I did, thank you."

Drake's gaze raked over her body, speeding her heart and deepening her breaths. He wore a faded pair of jeans and a t-shirt stretched across a rippling terrace of muscle. Her gaze dipped, following the narrowing of his waist and the V-cut indentations she knew were hidden under the fabric. His pants outlined just enough of a bulge to fire up her pulse again. No man had a right to look that good.

He turned back to the stove. "How do you like your eggs, city girl?"

Her veins hummed with a flickering heat, but she tried to sound nonchalant as if his presence wasn't doing strange things to her body. "Over medium, please." Her gut simmered with the low grunt he returned.

"Breakfast will be done shortly," he said. "Why don't you relax in the living room? We'll call you."

Having two men labor over her breakfast was a decadence she gladly enjoyed, even if she felt a little guilty snuggling into the warm leather of Bert's couch. A few minutes later, Bert called her in. The round kitchen table had been set, and she joined them for the best eggs, bacon, and pancakes she'd ever had.

Her voice cracked, but then she cleared it. "Thank you, that was delicious."

Bert cleaned up the dishes. "You're welcome, little lady. Now, why don't you help Drake with the chores. Henry won't be around for another hour." He walked over to a closet and pulled out a coat. "Here, you can borrow this."

Like the loaned pajamas, the coat was decidedly feminine, and likely also belonged to his late wife, Bethany. There was a definite lack of feminine presence in the home, and she wondered how long ago she had passed. It was a shame because Bert looked like a man who would be desperately in love with his wife. She bet he missed her terribly but didn't voice her thoughts.

"Thank you," she said.

Drake unfolded his long, lean frame from the chair, and her eyes cut to the flex of his ass. She touched her fingers to her neck where her pulse raced beneath the pad of her finger. Reluctantly, she dragged her attention from his perfect ass. He shrugged on his jacket and turned back around.

A smile worked at the corners of his eyes. "You ready to see llamas?"

His raven black hair fell across his brow, and he finger-combed it back into place. The scar drew her attention, the ragged line extending over the left side of his face. It must have been a painful injury, and she wondered how he'd gotten it. His eyes pinched, perhaps noticing her focus on the disfigurement.

She cleared her throat. "I'd love to."

His eyes locked with hers. Strange how much power radiated from those depths. She wished she could see his pupils, but they were indistinguishable from the dark rims of his irises. Drake dipped his head and opened the back door, sweeping his arm outward. She took his lead and stepped into the chilly morning air.

Overhead, the deepest blue greeted the day. And over the ridge, the sun began its steady climb skyward. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. Not a

single speck from the storm of the previous evening. And it was warmer than she'd expected.

Her breath wasn't visible, and her hands didn't ache from the cold. Beneath her feet, wet snow crunched. She'd found her sneakers drying by the fire in the living room. Bert's hospitality was beyond thoughtful. They'd be wet again soon with the melting snow, but Abby no longer feared hypothermia. As far as her eye could see, a blanket of white covered the ground. It sparkled under the morning sun, glittering with the light of a million gems, and took her breath away.

"It's beautiful here." She fought against the urge to spin in a circle, arms stretched wide, taking in the scene.

Drake's hard gaze locked on her face. "Beyond gorgeous."

Her cheeks heated. He wasn't talking about the farm.

"Come." He turned toward the barn.

She followed him in companionable silence broken only by the crunching of snow beneath their feet. At the barn, he unlatched the massive doors, then put his back into sliding them on their rails until a narrow opening appeared. As she passed beside him, the heat of his breath seared her skin and made her shiver. Her breath fled as she pried her gaze from his eyes to take in the dimly lit interior of the barn.

Musk. A deep, animal smell. The pungent aroma of dirt, hay, and what had to be llamas assaulted her nostrils. A low hum vibrated the air. Abby cast her gaze left and right until she realized the sound was coming from a pen to her left.

"What is that?" she asked.

Drake chuckled. "Llamas humming."

"They hum?"

"Yes, and you should hear the males orgle."

Had he made up that word?

"I hate to ask what an orgle is," she said.

"Llamas hum when they're happy. The males have a unique alarm call when they perceive danger, but when they breed, they orgle."

"Orgle?"

"Yes, but it's not breeding season, just the humming for right now." His eyes crinkled at the corners. "I bet you're dying to hear a llama orgle now aren't you?"

He stepped close, towering over her, causing a tingle to spark in her chest and an ache to build lower down. Her entire body was painfully aware of his overwhelming presence. The timbre of his voice was both smooth and hypnotic, drugging even, because she found herself tipping back her head, her mind slipping, and her eyes closing as he leaned down.

His breath disturbed the air above her cheek, and she held still, paralyzed by what might happen next.

He touched a knuckle to her chin, tilting her head back. His voice grew tight, hoarse, and needy as he searched her face. “What are you doing to me, city girl?”

“I’m not...” But her heart lifted at this unexpected turn of events.

“Shh,” he hushed, as he brushed a finger over the fullness of her lips.

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted in breathless anticipation when he caged her in, backing her up against the barn wall.

“I’m not a gentle man,” he said with a growl. “When I see something I want, there’s very little to stop me. Tell me no.”

Her heart sputtered as his brick-hard body moved closer. He was everywhere all at once. The press of his body. The heat of his breath. The low rumble of his voice. Caging her in.

His breath rustled her hair as he dipped his head, not for the kiss she desired, but to nuzzle her neck. He hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her against his body. She let her gaze flit, bouncing from the ceiling, to the dark depths of the interior of the barn, until it finally settled on the stubble of his jaw.

He threaded his fingers through the length of her hair, grasping the strands, as his lips lowered to hover, a kiss away. His need whispered through her, potent, powerful, and raw. Then he shifted, touching their foreheads together as if he had all the time in the world to let this moment hang between them. His fingers glided to her neck, as he rocked his hips forward.

“You need to say no.” His gruff tone caught her off guard. “Because I don’t think I can stop if you don’t.”

What did she want? She didn’t know anything about Drake, except their connection grew stronger with each beat of her heart. The seconds lengthened. He had saved her from certain death, but was she ready to hop in bed with another man so soon?

One of her reasons for coming to Peace Springs had been to make a fresh start. To leave the pain of broken promises and flying fists behind her, where they couldn't hurt her anymore. She had no intention of jumping into another relationship.

Her answer hovered on the next breath. And she didn't know what she would say.

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Welcome

A groan rumbled through Drake's chest, a low, warbling sound full of frustrated need echoing in the hammering of Abby's pulse. This connection didn't make sense. They barely knew each other. Had met less than twelve hours ago, but whatever this was, it wasn't something she wanted to stop.

She licked her lips, wetting them in preparation for the heat of his mouth upon her. With a shuddering inhale, she glided her fingers across the swell of his biceps and swept across the hardened planes of his chest. Her fingers explored every ridge and valley of his sharply cut muscle. She stroked the back of his neck and twined her fingers in the hair at his nape. His size dominated her personal space, but she welcomed the intrusion.

Her lungs seethed with her answer, hanging on the precipice of saying, if not *yes*, then definitely not the *no* he'd demanded. She didn't want him to stop. As reckless as this was, being with Drake felt like coming home. Or maybe, it felt more like closing the door on her past.

With her lips parted, she rose on tiptoe, closing that final distance and brushing their lips together. "Don't stop."

Simple, raw desire flared in him as he seized her mouth with a guttural groan. There was nothing coy or teasing in his assault. No gentle glide or exploration. But then, he'd warned her he wouldn't be gentle.

His kiss wasn't the tender exploration of a first time between lovers. There was no hesitancy. He was primal, primitive even, frenzied in his need to take and claim. She opened for him, inviting him in, accepting the brutality of his desire with an answering need of her own. He took from her

with bruising aggression, his tongue demanding entrance, while she parted her lips for him.

Once he breached her defenses, his tongue chased hers, his lips fortifying his attack with firm, combative strength against her yielding acquiescence. His reckless hunger surprised her, but that was nothing compared to her response. Feral in her need, a hunger woke within her, demanding and raw. Or maybe she simply needed one man to replace the pain of another? Whatever her motivation, Drake was here, and her ex was quickly becoming nothing more than a painful past.

His hand palmed her ass and lifted her against his hips where he ground against her, thrusting his erection against her belly and showing her the depth of his arousal. A groan drove his hips harder, while his mouth punished her swollen lips. Her blood warmed, the liquid heat coursing through her veins, melting her from the inside out. She squirmed against him, as her hot, itchy nerves demanded more. More heat. More friction. More of him and his touch.

Her nipples tightened and her inner thighs pulsed, awakening a needful ache in her core. And this was just a kiss! The punishing rhythm didn't give her time to think or agonize over thoughts of what she wanted to come next. She surrendered herself to the moment, content to let it last forever.

And while she lost herself under the torment of his kiss, her heart sputtered as it awakened from a self-imposed slumber, shell-shocked to silence after the ordeal she'd left in the past.

His mouth floated over hers. His hot breath fanned her face. Placing both hands on her ass, he pulled her close while she wrapped her legs around his hips. Her tongue darted out, seeking his, as her head slanted for more, giving him full access to what he needed. He tightened his grip and rocked her against his hardness.

Friction.

She needed more of that friction. His razored teeth gripped her lower lip, biting down until she gasped with the pinch of pain.

"I told you, I'm not gentle, city girl. You've been warned," he growled.

His mouth glided against hers, his tongue lashing, furious and determined. She cracked open her lids and peeked at the pinch of his dark brows. His expression tightened with the urgency of his need, and while he cupped her face, he drove her to combustion. Then his words sunk in.

Heart racing, she paused. Was this what she wanted? A one-night stand with a stranger?

Her nerves rioted, sparking with warring desire. Her palm drifted to his chest, crushed between the press of their bodies. The terrace of his muscles rippled beneath her fingers, and with each breath, his chest expanded. A fever spread through her, the need to feel all of him battling against her rational mind.

He pulled back, his strong arms holding her firmly in place. Only the fabric of their jeans separated them from a more carnal union. What terrified her most was how much her body ached to make that happen.

The rumble of a truck sounded outside, something big and heavy, with a rattling of chains and steel grating on steel.

“Damn,” he said with a growl. “Henry’s early.” A smile curved his lips, “City girl, you know how to make a man ache in the best possible way.”

He lifted her off his hips and placed her on the ground, holding her steady until she found her balance. His head canted to the side, studying her. “You’re not what I expected.”

A horn honked outside.

She wanted to ask what he had expected, but the horn sounded again.

“Henry has the worst possible timing,” she agreed.

Drake tossed his head back and roared with a deep laugh. “It’s probably good that he’s here.”

“Why is that?”

His smirk softened the jagged scar. “Another few minutes and I would’ve impaled you on my cock.”

The heat of their kiss lingered on her lips, and a flush crept up her skin. His bold statement left her speechless.

He leaned down and kissed her brow, a slow sensual press of his lips and a promise for more. “You’ve been warned. Consider this your reprieve, because next time there’s no way I’m stopping at a simple kiss.”

Only there had been nothing simple about that kiss.

“Bert!” A deep voice yelled outside. “Drake!” Snow crunched under the weight of heavy boots. “You guys around?”

Drake pressed his lips against hers, a soft, gentle caress, more damaging than their first kiss because at that moment, he cemented his promise to make her his.

“In here,” he called out. “Henry, we’re in here.”

Grasping her hand in his, he pulled her outside. The blaze of the morning sun beat down on the snow, melting it, and warming the air. It had to be a few degrees above freezing, nothing like the nearly sub-zero temperatures of last night.

The corners of her lips turned up when she spied Henry. She'd had no preconceived notions about the tow truck driver like she had the llama rancher. But she giggled at his grease-stained overalls, blue and white plaid shirt, and heavy boots. He even had a stem of hay firmly planted between his teeth. The only thing he didn't have was the cowboy hat. Instead, he wore a knit beanie. His expression brightened when he caught sight of her, and he gave a long, low, whistle.

Drake squeezed her hand and pulled her close to his side.

"Henry Watkins meet Abby Knight."

Her heart stumbled to a halt. That had been the first time he'd said her name, and the low rumble of possession faltered her step.

Ignoring the odd range of emotions flowing through her mind, Abby focused on Henry. "Hi. Thank you for coming out to help me."

Henry pulled off his cap, revealing a bald, tanned head. "Pleasure's all mine. Heard you ran into a ditch."

She nodded. "It seemed better than running into the moose."

"Oh, glad you didn't do that. Deer are bad enough. Plenty of them around here. A deer can take out your bumper, maybe your hood, but a moose? Them suckers can crack a block. Kill you and them both. I'm surprised, to be honest. We don't usually get moose around here. Must've been driven out of the mountains by the storm."

"Oh." She hadn't realized they were that dangerous.

"You ready to get your car?" Henry asked.

Abby glanced at Drake. She wanted to head back into that barn and see what might happen. Then she gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth.

"Oh, I can't believe I forgot to call my uncle." She told him to expect her late last night, and now she felt horrible because it had never occurred to her to call. Had Drake affected her that strongly? Uncle Pete was probably worried sick. "Yes, please. And if you don't mind, I need to call my uncle and let him know I'm okay."

Henry opened the door to his tow rig. She turned when it looked like Drake wasn't going to join her.

"Aren't you coming?"

Drake shook his head. "I'd love too, but llamas don't feed themselves. I need to get them out of the barn and into the field. Besides, Henry will take good care of you."

"That's right." Henry spat the chewed-up piece of straw on the ground. "You visiting town?"

"I'm moving here," she answered.

The smile on Drake's face widened. "Now that is good news. I look forward to seeing you around, city girl. We can finish our... discussion another time."

"Our discussion?"

"The one in the barn." He gave her a wink.

Abby prayed Henry didn't notice the flush in her cheeks.

"Um, y-y-yes," she stammered, "that would be nice."

"Well, seeing as you're new," Henry said, completely missing the undercurrent of Drake's comments, "you'll probably want to stop in at Shelly's Diner after we get your car sorted. It's a great place if you're looking for home-cooked food. Taylor's grocery is the only place to grab your groceries, but it's closed on Sundays. If you're just wanting something quick, you can take a gander at Eddie's Soda Shoppe."

"Thank you," she said to Henry. "I'm new, but not a stranger to Peace Springs. I spent my summers here as a girl."

Drake stood behind Henry, his eyes sparkling with mirth and his face splitting into a wide grin.

"Really?" Drake's smile widened.

"Yeah, but I haven't been here in about eight years."

"Well," he said, scratching his chin. "Eddie's is still a great place. A lot of the kids hang out there. Though, if you're looking for quiet, you probably want to go to Shelly's Diner. I usually pop in there myself for Sunday dinners."

Had that been an oblique invitation tonight? Dinner would lead to an evening she wasn't sure she wanted, despite the ache from moments ago. As the new town doctor, she might need to rethink getting involved with the first man she met. She couldn't help herself though. Drake seemed to have worked his way under her skin.

"I might just do that," she said. Uncle Pete probably had dinner plans, but she would find a way to get out of them if it meant spending the evening with Drake.

“Take care of my girl.” Drake closed the distance with Henry, and the two men shook.

She climbed into Henry’s truck, disappointed Drake wasn’t able to come, but excited he wanted to see her later.

The two men exchanged a few words. It looked like Drake was giving directions, which was a good thing. She had no idea where her car might be. Would they even be able to see it?

Henry joined her in the cab and cranked over the diesel engine. “Let’s go snag your car out of a ditch, pretty lady.”

Abby rubbed her lips, remembering the press of Drake’s mouth against hers. She waved to him as Henry pulled around. Drake stared back, the intensity of his gaze dangerous with the unspoken promise lingering between them.

Peonies

Two hours later, she pulled up at her uncle's house. Henry had been able to drag her Jeep out of the ditch without a problem. He inspected her vehicle, checked the wheels and made sure the rims hadn't been bent. The bumper would need to be replaced, but there wasn't any other damage. He stayed while she turned the motor over, and had her pop the hood to make sure everything worked as it should. He even followed behind her, making sure she made it into town safe.

Henry refused to charge her for the service, gave her a business card for his shop, and told her to bring the car around when she wanted to get the bumper fixed. She gave him a peck on the cheek and waved as he pulled away.

With a deep breath, she stared at her temporary home. Until she could find a place to live, Uncle Pete had opened his house. It felt a little like coming home and finding a piece of herself. She'd always been close to her aunt and uncle and had spent many summers in this small town growing up.

She'd tried calling her uncle, but he hadn't picked up the phone. The country house lacked the white picket fence out front, but had the cobbled walk up to the door, a covered porch with the requisite porch swing and rocking chairs, and despite the snow covering the front lawn, the flower beds boasted a riot of peonies in bloom. The doormat was one of those thick fiber mats. Instead of *Welcome*, it said, *Peace*.

She knocked on the white-washed door of the little one-story home.

A tribute to the town perhaps, but Aunt Martha had said a home should not only welcome visitors but strive for peace and tranquility for those who lived inside.

There was no answer at the door.

She knocked harder, and then peeked through the windows.

Maybe he was out back, working in the shed?

She stepped off the porch and picked her way across the melting snow. Late morning, the sun climbed high. The temperature had steadily risen from the chill of morning, and it was above freezing. At this rate, all the snow would be melted and gone within the day.

The door to the shed was locked. He always said a doctor needed a hobby, something to engage the creative side of the brain and give the scientific one a break. She had yet to find her creative side, too engaged with learning how to be the best doctor possible.

She missed sitting with him in the shed. He used to give her a blade and taught her to whittle. Never any good at it, all she'd ever managed was sharpening sticks, but it wasn't about making anything. It was about his stories. Because of his stories, she'd decided to pursue medicine.

Her visits to Peace Springs had stopped eight years ago when her focus shifted from kicking back to getting good grades and preparing for college. Little did she know that would be the year everyone's lives changed. Uncle Pete diagnosed Aunt Martha's breast cancer that Fall. Four years later, Aunt Martha lost her fight with cancer, and Abby's parents died in a car accident on the way to the funeral. Pete stayed in Peace Springs with his medical practice, and she'd returned to Redlands to bury her parents and pick up the pieces of her life. She hadn't been back.

Not much had changed in the town. Her uncle's house looked the same as it had when Aunt Martha had been alive.

She looked forward to working with him and reconnecting. In his late fifties, he kept talking about how much he looked forward to retiring and had been thrilled when she pursued a family medicine residency because his dream had been to pass his practice on to his goddaughter. Pete and Martha never had children of their own.

She walked to the back door, opened the screen, and knocked.

No answer.

It was Sunday. He kept crazy hours, made house calls at all hours of the day, but he didn't usually work on the day of the Lord, as Aunt Martha used to call it. Abby's fist banged against the door, and she called out.

"Uncle Pete? Are you home?"

What she should do was try calling again, but in the excitement of last night, she'd forgotten to charge her phone. Henry had been kind enough to let her borrow his, but she wouldn't be calling anyone until hers recharged. The poor thing had been at five percent when her ordeal in the snow had begun. It was way past dead now and needed a deep recharge.

Where was her uncle?

Something acrid tickled her nostrils. A burning smell, not wood, floated on the air. Something pungent. And it was coming from inside.

Abby banged on the door, harder and more insistent this time.

Nothing.

Even though her aunt and uncle lived in a small town, considered by many as one of the safest communities, Aunt Martha insisted on gardening for safety. That meant planting the thorniest bushes beneath every window to keep burglars out.

Abby climbed over the holly bush, desperate to peek through the window because whatever was burning, it was coming from inside.

Barbs of pointed stems and holly leaves poked through her jeans and scratched her skin. She bit back a squeal as a thorny branch sliced her upper arm.

The kitchen window perched a tad too high. She gripped the window sill and leveraged herself up by bracing against the trunk of the offending bush. Branches broke. She fell. And then scurried up again.

Peering into the house, thick black smoke curled up from a skillet on the stove. Bacon grease and the putrid smell of burned eggs created the horrendous smell.

Where was Uncle Pete?

She twisted left and right, trying to see inside.

There. On the floor. His feet poked out from the hallway.

Abby dropped to the ground and raced to the back door. Her palm slammed against the door.

"Uncle Pete!" Her shrill cry rang through the air.

The neighbor next door stepped out onto her back porch. "What's all the hollering about?"

Abby recognized Mrs. Leesum and ran to her. "Mrs. Leesum, it's me, Abigail Knight, Doctor Bateman's niece. Something's wrong. Can you call 9-1-1?"

“Is Doctor Bateman okay?” Mrs. Leesum’s face paled, and she clutched at her chest.

“I don’t know. Can you please call?”

Mrs. Leesum turned to duck back inside her house, but Abby called out. “Do you have a key?”

Her aunt never believed in leaving a spare key outside. Too risky. Dangerous even. But maybe she’d given a copy to the neighbors.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Leesum said. “Let me grab it.”

“Please, and then call 9-1-1.”

Mrs. Leesum disappeared inside and reappeared a few moments later with a key in her hand, and a cell phone pressed to her ear. Abby ran back to the house as Mrs. Leesum spoke to whoever was on the other end of the line.

Abby shoved the key in the lock. Her pulse pounded with adrenaline, making her hands shake. It took three tries before the lock turned. She barged in. Her eyes cut to Uncle Pete’s unmoving form. Acrid smoke filled the kitchen and burned her lungs. Why hadn’t the fire alarms gone off?

She turned off the gas to the stovetop, and put a lid on the pan, then rushed to her uncle. He’d fallen and lay face first on the floor. Her fingers trembled as she felt for a pulse, terrified because she couldn’t find one.

Where were the emergency response vehicles?

Then she paused, remembering who and what she was. She took a steady breath. She’d been trained for this.

She rolled him over, placing him in the recovery position. She forced her emotions to the background and focused on being the doctor she’d trained to become.

Placing her fingers over his neck, she felt again for his carotid pulse. Faint, but steady, his pulse thumped against her index finger. His chest moved with the slow rhythm of breath. So, why had he fallen?

As far as she knew, he wasn’t diabetic. There’d never been a reason for him to disclose his medical history, but low blood sugar was something she could fix. She left him in the recovery position and rushed to the kitchen.

Sugar. What kind of sugar did he have on hand?

Opening the fridge, she found what she needed. Strawberry preserves. Perfect.

Returning to her uncle, she dipped her finger in the jam, took a big scoop, and rubbed it inside his cheek. If his fall was the result of low blood

sugar, that would raise it quickly enough.

Sirens sounded. She ran to the front door, unbolted the latch, and threw open the door. Walking onto the porch, she waved to the paramedics, urging them to move faster.

Two men jumped out of the rig. One came toward her, orange bag slung over his shoulder, while the other pulled a stretcher out of the back of the rig.

“Ma’am,” the lead man said. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s my uncle. He passed out.”

She followed him inside. “I gave him sugar, but I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

The man crouched beside her uncle and felt for a pulse. “Don’t worry, Ma’am, we’ll take good care of the doc.” He scrunched his eyes at her. “Hey, wait. You’re Doctor Knight aren’t you?”

She nodded. “That’s me.”

He breathed out a deep sigh. “Glad to meet you.”

“Um,” she said. “You know me?”

He rolled up her uncle’s sleeve and looked for a vein to place an IV. “Whole town has been waiting on you to arrive.”

“You have?”

“Don’t worry about Doc Bateman. He’s given us instructions.”

“Instructions?” What the hell was this guy talking about?

“We’ll make sure he’s comfortable. He’s got a doctor in Billings and hospice has been arranged.”

“Wait,” she said. “What do you mean hospice?”

He paused. “Um...he didn’t tell you?”

Inheritance

Pancreatic cancer.

Those two words filled Abby's world with an ache so deep, she couldn't form a coherent thought.

The EMTs allowed her in the ambulance for the ninety-minute ride to Billings. The driver's name was Fred Cavanaugh, and the one who sat in the back with her and her uncle was Tom Jenkins. Tom worked with a quiet efficiency, placing an IV into her uncle's hand and taping it securely in place. He hung fluids, took vitals, and scratched on a flowsheet.

"I'm sorry," he said after a prolonged silence. "You didn't know?"

She shook her head. "He didn't tell me."

Tom flicked his sandy blond bangs back from his freckled face and blew out a deep breath. "Well, it's not common knowledge. I don't think anyone really knows."

"You knew," she said.

"Well, he had to tell us."

"How long?" How long had her uncle been dying? That was the question she wanted to ask. "When was he diagnosed?"

Tom crinkled his nose, his brows pinching together. "A month or two at most. Maybe he was waiting to tell you in person?"

"Maybe."

Would it have changed things? If she'd known, would she have agreed to take over his practice one year out of residency? She'd planned on years, learning by his side. She wasn't ready to practice alone.

The only reason she'd agreed was because she had needed an excuse to leave Redlands. It had been too easy to slip into an unhealthy relationship,

and even harder to leave it behind. Her Uncle had given her the perfect out because she sure as hell hadn't been able to walk away on her own.

She'd wasted a year trying to establish herself as a new graduate, failing more often than not alongside a man who felt with his fists more than his heart.

Her Uncle's call had saved her life, and the idea of working beside him filled her with pride. Never in a million years had she envisioned she'd be a small-town doc, but he loved his job, and she'd been excited to return to the town which had filled her summers with love and cherished childhood memories.

Now?

Pancreatic cancer?

All cancers were bad, but none swept into a person's life with the same speed and devastation as pancreatic cancer. There was palliative treatment, but no cure, and once diagnosed, the relentless course of the disease could rarely be slowed. Some people lived a few years, but most died within months. If she understood what Tom had said, her uncle had found out a couple of months ago.

They didn't have enough time.

The ambulance raced down the small highway and soon pulled up outside St. Vincent's emergency department in Billings.

"Thank you." She said her goodbyes to Tom and Fred.

"Our pleasure," Tom said. "Listen, if you need anything, give us a call." He handed her a business card. "I'm sorry we had to meet under these circumstances. Doc Bateman has said nothing but good things about you. I look forward to working with you."

Fred shook her hand. "Seriously, anything you need, you call us."

Abby gave a nod, the lump in her throat was the only thing holding back a flood of tears. These were men she would soon be working with, and she didn't want them to see her break down. Perhaps they understood because they didn't pressure her for more conversation. They jumped inside the ambulance and waved goodbye.

The staff of St. Vincent's placed her uncle on the cancer ward for observation overnight. The doctors told her he was dehydrated and attributed his fall and subsequent disorientation to that, but they were thorough and examined him for any injury to his head from the fall. They

fully expected a short stay, and had hopes he might be released in the morning.

Visiting hours ended and she made reservations at a local motel. As she snuggled under the scratchy covers, her thoughts turned to the soft flannel of Bert's twin bed and to the magnanimous stranger who'd saved her life and kissed her senseless.



When she arrived at the hospital the next morning, Uncle Pete sat in bed, picking at the food on his breakfast tray.

"Uncle Pete!" Abby raced through the door and gave him a hug.

He reached up, returning a much weaker hug. "Abigail! Honey, it's so good to see you."

Leaning back, she looked him over, unsure what to say. Her eyes brimmed with tears and her heart ached. "I was so scared."

He bit at his lower lip. "They told me what happened." His shaky fingers brushed back a lock of hair and his eyes pinched. "I'm sorry, hun. I'd wanted to tell you myself. I didn't expect..."

"Tom told me."

Uncle Pete nodded. "He's a smart kid and dedicated." He pulled in a deep breath and blew it out in a rush.

"How advanced is it?"

He pursed his lips. "Advanced enough."

"Tom mentioned hospice?"

"We're not quite there yet, but I expect it'll be soon."

She couldn't hold back the tears any longer.

"Hey," he said. "It's going to be okay."

"I just thought we'd have time."

"I'm okay," he said. "I've found my peace, and Martha's been waiting long enough for me to join her."

He missed his wife. Abby couldn't fault him for that. Nearly eight years after her parents' deaths, the pain of their loss hit hard most days. He'd lost his wife, his soulmate, and maybe living without her hurt more than dying. At least he didn't look scared confronting his death. Perhaps he truly was at

peace with it, and if he was, then she would be too. Even if it made her heart break.

“How was your drive?” he asked. “I thought you were supposed to get in last night?”

“I was.”

“I worried about you on the roads, and figured you’d stopped for the night.”

She laughed. “Oh, Uncle Pete, do I have a story to tell you.”

He scooted over, and she snuggled beside him. Telling him about her late-night adventures didn’t sound as scary in the comfort of his arms. He gasped when she told him about the moose and driving into the ditch. He barely believed her about the wolves or the overland hike. She didn’t get to tell him much about Drake because his team of doctors came in for rounds.

“Good news,” Doctor Blount said. “We’re cutting you loose.”

“Oh, good,” her uncle said. “I’m ready to go.”

“We just have a bit of paperwork to take care of, and then you’re cleared to go home.”

When the team left, Abby kissed her uncle on the cheek. “Hey, I need to figure out how we’re getting home.” Her Jeep was still sitting outside his house.

Briefly, she considered calling Tom, but he was probably working. Drake or Bert would’ve been good choices, except she didn’t have either of their numbers. She thumbed on her phone and searched local car rentals. Hopefully, this wouldn’t hold up getting home.

After a bit of internet searching, she rented a car from a local rental agency. They made it easy and picked her up at the hospital. By the time she’d completed the required paperwork, her uncle had been discharged. She met him in his room and then walked with him down to the hospital lobby. The whole way, she paid close attention to his balance, his stamina, everything really.

During the hour drive back, they talked about his wishes, both for end-of-life care and his funeral. The sobering discussion wasn't easy, but he had thought about all the details. All she would have to do was take care of a few loose ends.

"There's something else," he said.

"What's that?"

"It has to do with your inheritance."

"Oh, I don't need anything."

"I appreciate that, but this comes from your Aunt Martha's side of the family, and in many ways from your mother as well."

"Really?"

An odd turn in the conversation, but she listened. She'd received a healthy inheritance from her parents. She'd invested most of the money in stocks, but the rest had paid for medical school. Abby wasn't rich, but she had comfortable reserves stashed away. It had never occurred to her to presume an inheritance from her aunt and uncle. It was one of those delicate topics not easily addressed.

"You're the last daughter in a long line of remarkable women."

She knew a little of her family's legacy. One of her ancestors had immigrated from Ireland during the potato blight, and after a few years moved out west. Abby had grown up with the stories about the women in her family making a home for themselves in the Wild West.

While he talked, she stole a glance at the odometer and tried to gauge where she'd had her accident. She estimated she'd been five miles or less from town when she'd run off the road. Drake said she'd walked away from town. It had felt well over an hour's worth of walking, which meant she'd covered a few miles. But as they closed in on Peace Springs, there was no evidence of skid marks. It was almost as if her accident had never happened.

Somewhere out there, a few miles from the road, Bert's llama farm spread across the land. Her mind drifted to the tall stranger and his passionate kiss. Was there a chance for more? Or, had that been merely the precursor to a one-night stand?

Her uncle coughed. "There's a trust which has passed from generation to generation. To avoid splitting the homestead, it has passed through the firstborn daughters. Since Martha and I never had children, she intended for you to inherit the trust. On your thirtieth birthday, you'll gain control. And we need to talk about a few things."

"What are you talking about? What homestead?"

He tugged on the shoulder strap of his seat belt and shifted to a more comfortable position. "You've been there. Martha and your mom took you there when you came to visit."

She remembered trips out of town. Long drives and even longer days playing in the eddies of a slow-moving river, learning to skip stones, and fly

fish. It had never occurred to her to ask about who owned the land.

“We had fun. I remember hot summer days, swimming and hiking. Mom would build a fire, and Aunt Martha brought stuff to make s’mores. We’d stay past dark and watch shooting stars.” Those were some of her fondest memories.

“That’s the place.”

“It would be fun to go back and explore.”

He coughed again. “There’s a lot to explore.”

“Do you think there’s enough place to build?” Her childhood memories included a longish ride in the back of the car, but she couldn’t remember how far from town the land might be.

“Abby,” he said, his voice turning serious. “I don’t think you understand.”

“Understand what?”

“It’s more than a place to plop a house on.”

“Well, a few acres will be harder to maintain, but I’m sure I can handle it.”

He laughed. “Honey, the parcel is over ten thousand acres. You’re a landowner now, and there are things you need to know about that land.”

“Excuse me?”

Chocolate Chip Pancakes

Back at Uncle Pete's house, Abby made sure he was comfortable and then cleaned the mess in the kitchen. The pan went into the garbage. There was no way to salvage it. She'd buy him a new one.

A glance around the house eased her mind. She'd equated cancer with disability, and had assumed her uncle had fallen behind in his chores, but there wasn't any reason to be worried. What concerned her was why he'd passed out. She had a feeling he was sicker than he was letting on and he'd already lost a lot of weight. That worried her more than anything else.

She put a cartridge in the coffee maker and grabbed two mugs from the cupboard. Like her, he took his coffee black. It was a much easier and cheaper alternative for those used to long days and even longer nights on call.

"Here you go." She handed him his cup and settled on the couch, tucking her legs beneath her. "Is there anything you need to be doing work-wise?" Being that it was Monday, she worried about any patients scheduled to see him. "Do you need me to check in on your patients?"

He waved off her questions. "Don't worry, Angie will see to the appointments. She's the receptionist."

"What about the urgent care patients? If you're not there, where do they go?"

"A lot of urgent visits aren't that urgent at all. I have two nurse practitioners who help run urgent care."

"Well," she said. "I can see them if you want."

They'd discussed giving her a couple of weeks to get settled after her move, but she preferred staying busy. The sum total of her possessions was

packed inside three suitcases. Jacob refused to let her take anything out of what he claimed was *his* apartment, even though she'd purchased most of the furniture. She didn't mind. Most of what she'd bought had been ugly stuff he'd picked out, full of hard lines and missing the coziness of home. Glancing around the living room gave her pause. Maybe she didn't need to rush house hunting.

"If you're feeling up to it," she said, "I'd like to check out the clinic."

He smiled. "I'm happy you decided to take a chance on Peace Springs." Rising from his chair, he gathered her empty coffee cup. "I think you're going to find it's a great place to live. Let me shower, and I'll introduce you to the clinic staff."

She stood and pressed the wrinkles out of her jeans. "I think I'm the one who needs to get cleaned up." She was still wearing the same clothes from her accident Saturday night. "I'm going to get my things from outside. Am I staying in the library?"

During her summer visits, her aunt and uncle put her in the library. They had a Murphy bed she'd thought was cool as a kid, but as an adult, she wasn't excited to sleep on the overly firm mattress.

"No, hun, the guest room is yours." That had been the room her parents had stayed in.

"Thanks."

"Do you need help with your bags?"

The thought of him carrying the heavy luggage made her pause, but he didn't want to be treated any differently.

"Um, yeah. Thanks."

She'd give him the dilapidated fern and the smaller suitcase. Time would tell, but it didn't look like the freezing temperatures had killed it. At least not yet. A few minutes later, they had her bags in the guest room. It was almost eleven.

"Let me change, and maybe we can grab lunch before we head to the clinic?" she suggested.

"Sounds like a plan." He glanced around the room. "You know where everything is. Towels, soap, and shampoo are in the bathroom closet."

She ushered him out. "I got it. You take a shower and freshen up. We'll make it a day on the town."

A crooked smile lit up his face. "You have a hankering for milkshakes?"

Abby shook her head. "Actually, I was thinking of hitting up Shelly's Diner."

"Ah, yes, best pancakes in town. It'll be lunchtime, but I bet we can convince her to whip some up."

"Do you think you can sweet talk her into adding in chocolate chips?"

"I delivered all of Shelly's kids. I can talk her into a few chocolate chips."

Abby would've preferred the shake. As a kid, she would've begged to go to Eddie's retro-themed soda shop. Maybe it was silly heading to Shelly's, and foolish to think she'd run into Drake. Maybe she'd confused that kiss for something more. But she wanted to know if that kiss had been all in her head.

There were a lot of maybe's in her life, but one thing was certain. She needed a shower. It took a little digging to find her makeup. Normally, she wouldn't have bothered, but this would be the first time meeting the clinic staff. She wanted to make a good first impression, especially since she'd soon be their boss. What she really wished was that she had Drake's number.

Wait!

Henry had given her his card. Her car needed repairs, and Henry knew Drake. Maybe she could work around to a reintroduction to Drake.

Her uncle was waiting in the living room when she finally emerged. Her long hair had been pulled back into a ponytail. She didn't like how it accentuated the angles of her face or drew attention to what she considered to be overly large green eyes. Given a choice, she preferred her hair loose, but she hadn't had time to dry it and was eager to poke around town, not to mention she was starving.

"You ready?" Her uncle had dressed for comfort, jeans and a button-down shirt.

She would've preferred jeans and cotton, but had dressed in black slacks and a pale- yellow blouse, professional, but not stuffy. "You clean up well," she teased.

They piled into her Jeep and headed into town. During the drive, childhood memories bubbled to the surface, hitting her, not in the gut, but in her heart. Her parents moved frequently during her childhood. She'd been to three elementary schools, two junior highs, and two high schools. She'd never had a place she called home. When she came to Peace Springs, she'd

envied the children who grew up together in grade school, still knew each other through junior high, and matured into adults in high school. The kids had been friendly, but she'd always been an outsider. Despite that, Peace Springs felt comfortable. Not home yet, but maybe someday soon.

She turned the Jeep onto Main Street and passed Underhill trailer park. An assortment of single and doublewides filled up the spots. She'd never been inside Underhill. Her parents had steered her away from visiting her few summer friends there, encouraging them instead to meet at Eddie's Soda Shoppe. She stopped at the gas station and filled the tank, and then they were rolling past Gretta's B&B.

When she'd agreed to move, she'd been excited to finally have an opportunity to stay in the grand house until she found a place to live. When her uncle insisted she live with him until she found a place, it had been an offer she couldn't refuse. Perhaps it was the imagination of a child, one of those wild fantasies, but she'd always wanted to see what was inside the gracious painted lady.

Maybe another day.

It didn't take long to drive through town. Nor was it difficult to find a parking spot. She pulled up right outside Shelly's Diner. Town teens tended to hang out at Eddie's Soda Shoppe. Shelly's Diner catered to a more sedate group who enjoyed the companionship of a meal as much as the rich food.

Abby walked into the busy diner and inhaled the mouthwatering aromas coming from the open kitchen. The clinking of silverware and glass slowed somewhat as Uncle Pete entered. Several people gave him a nod, a polite acknowledgment of respect.

He guided her to an empty booth by the window. When their waitress arrived, he told her to keep the menus, then ordered two short stacks with chocolate chips and a pot of coffee. The girl didn't bat an eye, making Abby think his order wasn't as unusual as she'd thought.

"It looks exactly the same as I remembered." She leaned back and peered out the window.

"Not much changes here. Of course, there's town politics and such, the never-ending feud, the occasional scandal, who's sleeping with whom. You're going to learn way more than you ever wanted about the residents. People in this town seem to think their doctor is a stand in for their confessional."

"Really?"

They talked about his practice, touching on the business aspects, but when their food arrived, Abby broached something which had been bugging her since their conversation about the family land.

"Uncle Pete," she began, "how did Aunt Martha get ten thousand acres?" More importantly, how did she manage a ranch that size? The real estate taxes had to be fierce.

"Accumulated through the generations," he said. "As a matter of fact, it was your namesake who homesteaded the very first parcel." His eyes brightened. "Oh, and you're in for a treat."

"How's that?"

He took in a deep breath. "Well, Abigale McFearson's journal is waiting for you. I don't know how much your mother told you about her, but Abigale immigrated to the United States during the great potato blight in Ireland when she was a teenager."

"I remember a little bit about that." Abby took a sip of the rich dark-roast coffee, closing her eyes at the decadent flavor. "I couldn't imagine picking up your whole life and leaving everything behind."

He laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Says the woman whose entire life is packed into three suitcases and moved practically every other year."

She rolled her eyes. "Tell me about my great, great, great, whatever grandmother."

"I'll do better than that. Remind me when we get home, and I'll give you the journal."

"Wow, thanks. What's in it?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. Martha said it was a McFearson-women-eyes-only kind of thing." He shoved a bite of pancake into his mouth.

Abby watched the lazy traffic outside, citizens of Peace Springs going about their daily routines.

He wiped his chin with a napkin. "Abigale was the first to settle down here. Back then, women weren't allowed to own land in most states, but we've always been progressive. As long as someone was the head of household, they could apply for a homestead. She moved out west and put down roots. Her daughter and her daughter's twins homesteaded as well, doubling the size of the homestead parcels."

"Twins?" She knew little about her family's history.

He nodded. "Yes, can you imagine delivering twins in the late 1800s?" He pushed his food around his plate, his appetite seeming to have disappeared. "Anyway, they added to the homestead and later filed the deeds to own the land. They raised cattle and bought up the surrounding homesteads as they were abandoned. Soon, they turned a thousand acres into two, and then more. Every generation continued the tradition. The land went into trust somewhere along the way. It can't be broken down and sold off. It was one of Abigale's wishes for the land to stay in the family. Martha mentioned something about it being spelled out in the diary."

"But you said there were issues? I'm assuming it has to do with money? Maintenance and taxes?"

He shook his head. "Yes and no. The arable plots are leased out to farmers who grow feed for cattle. Cattle ranchers lease out the pastureland for grazing. It's practically self-sustaining and makes more than enough to pay the taxes."

"I remember playing in a river. It was always so cold, even in summer."

"That river is the problem."

"What problem?"

"It's complicated, too complicated for a discussion over pancakes, but it's the headwaters for the whole area. There's always been pressure to sell."

"Well, if it's supposed to stay in the family, I won't sell it."

"You have a lot to learn about local politics, and unfortunately, I don't have much time to fill you in."

Porch Swing

They spent the afternoon at the clinic where Uncle Pete introduced her to the staff. He fatigued as the afternoon wore down and Abby took him home, concerned by his lack of stamina. He didn't talk any more about the trust, or her inheritance, except to say he'd scheduled a meeting with his lawyer. He brought Abigale McFearson's leather journal out, presenting it to Abby with reverence, then excused himself for the night.

Over a hundred years old, the journal had weathered the decades with amazing grace. The pages had yellowed with age, but remained supple, not cracking as she'd expected.

He said the contents were meant for McFearson women's eyes only, but she had to wonder if he'd ever stolen a peek through the years. Knowing her uncle's character, he probably never even considered it, respecting the family tradition. She settled in Aunt Martha's recliner, excited to read her namesake's words. The first pages included a family tree and the passing of the journal through the first-born daughters. Aunt Martha's name was the last entry with a penned line for the first-born daughter she'd never had.

Abby rubbed her finger over that empty space. She would have to add her name, but how to annotate it correctly? Then it hit her. She was the last female in the McFearson line. Before she finished tracing Martha's lineage back through the decades, a knock sounded at the front door.

"Coming," she called out.

Opening the door, her breath caught. Drake stood, hand raised, ready to knock on the door again.

"Drake?" The quickening of her pulse caught her off guard. There was just so much of *him* to take in. From the devastation of his dark eyes to the jagged scar on his cheek, his presence quickened her breath and heated her cheeks.

Devastatingly handsome didn't cover the presence that was Drake.

There really were no other words to describe him. Drake stood with purpose, his feet spread on a wide base, completely unaware of how his overwhelming presence made her heart flutter.

A storm brewed in his eyes, not of anger, but of a more pressing need. Cotton strained over the broad expanse of his chest, every ripple of muscle outlined underneath. With his height, her attention focused firmly on the cut definition of his chest and the bulge of his biceps. She caught herself staring, and dragged her attention up to take in the rugged features of his face.

He winged up a dark eyebrow, perhaps aware of how she'd been checking him out. Heat built in her cheeks and the curve of his lips bowed into a grin. Broad shouldered, his long torso narrowed to a slim waist, one that arched down and drew her attention lower to the prominent bulge hidden beneath the zipper of his jeans.

"City girl," he said with a mischievous smirk. "Bert told me I could find you at Doc Bateman's house. I've never been stood up by a girl before, must be something you city folk do all the time. You owe me a dinner date."

"I'm sorry about last night," she said. "Something came up."

The breeze blowing in through the doorway had warmed from the chill of yesterday morning when she'd last seen him. The unseasonably cold weather from two days ago seemed to be on its way out. She was happy to say goodbye to the frigid temperatures.

"I was just—"

"You were *just* getting ready to tell me how you're going to make it up to me." He palmed the door jamb and dared her to deny his demand.

Speechless, her ribs expanded with a sharp rush of breath while she stared at him like a fool.

A devilish grin took control of his face, softening the jagged line of his scar. The stubble across his hard jaw had her itching to run her fingers across the coarse whiskers and steal another taste of him. They regarded each other for a minute until he leaned in to whisper in her ear.

"Yes, I'd love another kiss, but let me take you out on a date first."

Her breath rushed out as the whisper light press of his lips against her throat made her muscles tense and her heart race. Her fingernails bit into her palms with the struggle to not lose all control.

He let out a strained laugh, his lips hovering over her ear again. “An odd thing we’ve got going, isn’t it?”

Her voice wavered with her response. “What?”

“The air is crackling with the energy flowing between us. Tell me you’re not interested in exploring that further?”

Interested? That word didn’t even begin to describe the need burning within her, but she hadn’t left a bad relationship to jump blindly into another. And she certainly wasn’t ready to land in any man’s bed after knowing him for only one night, even if he’d saved her life. She stepped back, breaking the electrical connection supercharging the air. She needed a breath without his overwhelming *Drake-ness* muddling her thoughts.

She bit down on her cheek. “Um, give me a second.”

The polite thing would have been to invite him in, but she had a feeling things would rapidly escalate if they were in a room alone together. When Drake didn’t budge, she made a big deal of closing the door. If he wanted to play the city-country angle, then he would wait on the porch like a proper country gentleman.

As soon as she shut the door, she brought her hands to her mouth to suppress a girly squeal, then she pressed her shoulders back, and tried to gain some semblance of control. He’d tracked her down, the same way she’d planned on finding him.

A glance at her slacks and blouse had her mind spinning. What to wear? She ran to her room and rummaged through her suitcases until she found a black knit skirt. The fabric didn’t need ironing and was perfect for an emergency outfit change. Shimmying out of her pants, she pulled on the skirt, hoping Drake would appreciate the tight fit. Since it was still cool outside, she opted for a dark sweater and layered a dressy tank top underneath. She had no idea what he intended—there were few bars in Peace Springs—but if they were anything like the ones in Redlands, a sweater would be too hot if there was a crowd heating up the inside.

She grabbed her purse and draped the coat Bert lent her over her arm. She wanted Drake to get the full impact of her outfit and would endure the discomfort of the chilly night air. A quick peek at the mirror beside the front door, and she took in a deep breath. Her uncle was in bed, and while she

didn't want to leave without letting him know she was going out, she didn't want to disturb him either. Instead, she scratched out a note and left it on the door of the fridge.

Whatever happened with Drake tonight, she would approach it with an open mind. One-night stands weren't her thing, but maybe it would do some good to put her ex-boyfriend firmly in the past. When she stepped out onto the porch, Drake was sitting on the porch swing. His long legs rocked him forward and back, but when she arrived, his body stilled, and his eyes latched on to her. She shut the door quietly, taking care not to wake her uncle.

"Holy hell," he said.

"What's wrong?"

Between one breath and the next, he closed the distance and pressed her against the door.

There was no preamble. No slow exhale as their lips waited to meet. Aggressive and powerful, he leaned against her, the weight of his body blanketing her with his commanding presence. He wrapped an arm around her waist, claiming her with his strength as his powerful lips took her mouth prisoner.

Her gasp parted her lips and granted him the entry he was determined to claim. His tongue pressed against hers, licking and pressing with a desperate hunger.

She wrapped her hands around his neck and surrendered to the kiss. Her rational mind told her to think this through. It was too fast. Too soon. She needed to get settled before attaching herself to a man, or worse, sleeping with a stranger. What would the town think of their new doctor? But her heart refused to listen and chased those thoughts aside. For now, she was willing to live on the edge a little and deal with the consequences later. If something took root between her and Drake, she would tend to that potential.

He flattened his palm against the small of her back, and the kiss softened with the kneading of his fingertips against her spine. A lick. A nip. A final press of his lips and he broke off the kiss.

With his forehead pressed against hers, they shared an intimate moment. His breath spilled out and swirled into her lungs. His scent, a mixture of woodsmoke, earth, and musk, had her eyes closing and her head tipping

back against the door. He followed her, pressing his forehead to hers, keeping their connection intact.

“What the hell,” he said with a weighted sigh. “Please tell me something really important came up last night.”

Her eyes had drifted shut. The press of his lips faded from her mouth, but the taste of him lingered, making her need more. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Hardly any distance separated them. And while she couldn’t focus on his eyes, she didn’t need to see them to feel the darkness swirling inside.

“Something came up. I’m sorry I didn’t call, but I didn’t have your number.”

“Where is it?”

“Where’s what?”

He thrust out his hand. “Your phone. Where is it?”

“In my purse.”

“Give it to me,” he demanded.

“Why?”

“Because you need my number.”

She undid the clasp of her purse and fished out her phone. Unlocking the screen, she dutifully handed it over. With a few quick taps, he entered his number and handed the phone back.

“There, now no more excuses for not calling.”

The bossiness of his tone took her back. Her ex-boyfriend had been nearly as pushy. It had started with one demand, followed by another. When she made a mistake, his disappointment flared. Within a month of moving in together, he hit her the first time.

Drake had only asked for her phone, but it made her cautious.

She ducked out from beneath him, surprising herself nearly as much as him. The sizzling energy which had been charging the air fizzled and died.

“Um, maybe we should slow down a bit?”

His eyes pinched. “Did I do something wrong?”

Yes and no, but how to explain that without exposing the details of an abusive past?

“No.” It wasn’t a complete lie, but neither was it the truth. “It’s just, being new, I don’t want people to get the wrong idea—”

“Meaning you don’t want me to get the wrong idea.” He brushed aside the fringe of his dark bangs and straightened to his full height.

She placed her palm against his chest. Warmth pulsed from him to her fingertips, their connection strong enough to travel up her arm and swirl around her heart. Hesitant not to ruin the evening before it even began, she bit at her lower lip. “That kiss was...”

“Hot,” he said with a smirk.

She placed her hands on his shoulders and balanced on tiptoe until she could brush her lips against his. “It was amazing, but faster than I’m used to.”

Socially reserved, it generally took her forever to warm up to anyone. It had taken five dates before she let Jacob kiss her the first time, and she hadn’t slept with him for months after they’d started dating.

If Henry hadn’t arrived with his tow truck and interrupted what had been happening in that barn, she was certain Drake would’ve followed through on his promise. And the strangest thing? She wanted to know how it felt to be led by nothing other than the flame of passion, because she’d never allowed herself the freedom to find out.

His finger lifted her chin and forced her to look him in the eyes. “I swear, city girl, sometimes I can see your mind churning its gears.” He gripped her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Now, how about we see to dinner? Maybe hit a bar? Monday nights there’s not much happening around here, but we can find a bar with a jukebox, and I bet I can clear the floor and take you for a twirl.”

Dancing?

Oh no! Anything but that.

“How about dinner and a couple of drinks? We can leave the dancing to the kids.”

He wrapped his hands around her waist, picked her up, and twirled her in the air. “Fuck that, you’re dancing with me.”

She squealed as he spun her around. When he stopped, a banked heat smoldered in his eyes. At first, she stared down at him, and then he lowered her slowly. Their eyes met. He pressed his lips against hers, this time giving a slow, gentle caress. Then he lowered her still until she had to crane her neck. A breath in, and his dark, heady musk filled her nasal passages. Her feet had yet to reach the ground, but she didn’t care. She never cared if she ever walked again. Laying her cheek against the expanse of his chest, she breathed out a sigh, feeling content for the first time in years.

“No dancing,” she said.

“You let me decide,” he placed a kiss on her forehead. “I won’t steer you wrong.”

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King Ranch

A small town of a few thousand, Peace Springs barely supported the need for a doctor. Which meant, there wasn't much in town to do on a Monday night, but Drake promised her a good time.

"What do you have in mind for dinner?" Abby was interested to find out what constituted a good time in such a small town.

Her visits growing up had been the adventures of a child. A night on the town included a burger and shake at Eddie's Soda Shoppe and being allowed to stay out past nine. In June, during the Summer festival, nights out included exploring the fairgrounds, taking a spin on the rides, and watching the competitions at the rodeo. If she were really lucky, her parents would let her stay for the evening concerts.

But what did adults do in the quiet town of Peace Springs?

He held her hand, supporting her as she took the steps leading off the porch. Sitting beside her Jeep, a black F250 heavy duty King Ranch chirped and flashed its lights.

"It's a surprise," he answered with a wink. "I'm thinking something special for a city girl."

"I wish you'd stop calling me that."

"Why?"

"I don't know, maybe because it sounds a bit derogatory?"

Except she loved the way the words rolled off his tongue, and how his eyes simmered when he spoke those words.

"I could call you *pumpkin*?"

"Pumpkin!" She turned to face him. "You're not serious?"

"Well, if I have to pick something else, that's what I'm going with."

“How about Abby? It *is* my name.”

His head tilted to the side, and he pulled at his chin. “Everyone else will be calling you that. I want something that’s all mine.” He shrugged. “Your pick, *pumpkin* or *city girl*?”

“I’m not a damn pumpkin.”

“I know. You taste sweeter than a pumpkin...city girl.”

It looked like the name was going to stick.

“You haven’t answered my question,” she said.

“About where we’re going?”

“Yes.”

“Because I’m planning to surprise you.”

Well, it wasn’t going to be much of a surprise. There were really only two places to eat, and a handful of bars. He wouldn’t take her to Bar 21, it catered to a seedier crowd, which left Sammy’s and Top Bar. The only one she knew which had music and anything resembling a dance floor was Top Bar. Her father had taken her there a few times when he’d had a late afternoon beer. First, he grabbed her a shake at Eddie’s. Then she spent the afternoon reading or coloring, sipping her milkshake, while he talked with the men.

“How’s that going to happen?” She arched a brow. “I’ve been to Peace Springs. Spent my summers here. There aren’t that many choices.”

“How much do you trust me?”

That answer was way more complicated than it should be.

They reached his truck and when he opened the passenger door, a length of black silk was laying on the seat.

“What’s that for?” She claimed to be open minded, but when it came to kinky sex games, she couldn’t be more—what did they call it?—oh, vanilla. She was as vanilla as they came. “You’re not tying—”

He laughed as she backed away and was stopped by the brace of his arm.

Reaching over her shoulder, he grabbed the silky fabric. “It’s a blindfold, silly.” He gave another of his knee-knocking winks. “Let’s get beyond the first kiss or two before we spice things up with knots.”

Her mouth gaped. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Wait! You want to be tied up?” His smile curved into a wide grin. “Kinky city girl, I’m intrigued.”

“I didn’t say that.” She stamped her foot.

“But you’re not against it?”

Her cheeks heated. “I didn’t say that either.”

He laughed so hard, he bent over and slapped his thigh. “Oh, if you could see the color of your cheeks. Hell, instead of pumpkin, I should’ve gone with *sugar beet*. Now those are sweet and beet red.”

She punched him in the arm and shook out her fist. “Ow!”

“Hey, don’t be hollering. You punched me.” Drake grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to look at him. “Calm down, I’m not planning on tying you up. It’s a blindfold. I have something special planned, and I don’t want to spoil it.”

She slowed her breathing and blushed again. This time for letting his teasing get under her skin.

“Promise you’ll stop making fun of me.”

“Sorry, but I can’t make a promise I know I can’t keep.” He lifted the fabric. “Now, do you trust me enough to play along?”

Trust shouldn’t be such a complicated thing, but she hesitated. The look on his face was what finally had her saying yes. There was no malice in his expression. Instead, a desperate hope hungered in his gaze.

He’d saved her from wolves. Force marched her through the cold. She’d gone over and over those few hours, how he’d refused to slow the pace, and barely helped her through the worst spots. He’d done it on purpose to ensure she kept her body temperature up by keeping her moving. The moment she’d been out of danger, he’d been nothing but gentle. Teasing her more often than not, but he’d never been gruff, and certainly not disinterested.

Jacob and his physical abuse had scared her, but she refused to let him influence how she responded to every other man in her life.

“I trust you.”

“Good.” He twirled his finger in the air.

She dutifully spun around and faced away from him.

His strong fingers placed the fabric over her eyes. The touch ignited a banked heat slumbering in her core, making her gasp.

“Here, hold that while I tie you up.”

She held the silk in place and laughed. “You said no tying up.”

“Well, not yet, but I have to warn you, I’m a rancher. I’m good with rope.”

“A llama rancher. I know.”

“Oh, no. Burt raises llamas. I run cattle, which means I’m really good with rope.”

“Oh!” Her insides squirmed with the promise laced in his words. Vanilla was good, but maybe a few chocolate sprinkles might be nice from time to time. While she focused on soothing her racing heart, his deft fingers tied the blindfold in place. He gripped her shoulders and spun her around.

“Can you see anything?”

“Nope.”

“You peeking?”

“No,” she said with a laugh. “I’m not peeking. I can’t see anything.”

“Good.” The moment the word was out of his mouth, the searing heat of his kiss was back.

All the hotter for how unexpected it had been, she gasped. Then he was lifting her up and settling her on the seat of the truck.

“Can you buckle in on your own, or do you need help?” He handed her the shoulder strap, and she felt at her left hip for the seatbelt latch.

“I’ve got it.”

“Good, buckle up city girl. I’ve got a treat for you.”

The door shut with a solid sound, and she heard nothing but the step of his boots as he rounded the truck. The driver’s door opened, and the truck shifted under his weight.

“You a country, pop, or hard rock kind of gal?”

She took in a deep breath. “Your choice. I like them all.”

The engine cranked over and classical music spilled from the radio.

“Is that what you like?” she asked.

“Depends on my mood. I’m kind of in a disturbed state of mind. Do you mind?”

She paused and then smiled when she realized he meant the rock group. “I love Disturbed.”

“Well, settle in and get comfortable. Tell me if the music gets too loud.”

He cranked the sound as the first notes of a new song raced out of the speakers. Conversation came to an end with the full-bodied sound, leaving her to wonder if Drake was head banging, or banging his hand on the steering wheel. Either way, the music allowed her to sink into her thoughts. And while his woody scent permeated the cab of the truck, at least she wasn’t subjected to his primal beauty during the drive.

She needed time alone with her thoughts and wanted to prepare for what might come next. She was as equally terrified of moving too slow as she was of moving too fast. So far, she hadn't done very well when it came to picking men.

Keeping track of where he was driving proved impossible, although she did try. Her memory of Peace Springs was that of a ten-year-old girl riding a bicycle. She followed the drive down the lane from her uncle's house, the turn left which brought them past the elementary school. The rough road smoothed out, telling her they'd reached the center of town, but that's as far as her misguided directional sense got.

"Where are you taking me?"

"What part of surprise do you not understand?"

"Just wondering how long we're going to be driving around. Surely we're on Main Street by now."

He huffed a laugh. "Just sit back and enjoy the ride. We'll get there when we get there."

Was he deliberately trying to get her lost?

She tapped the armrest, her fingers drumming out her frustration. When she lifted her hand to yank the blindfold off, his fingers curled around her wrist, tugging it down.

"Uh-uh, city girl. Just a bit longer and we'll be there."

"Where?"

"Dinner and dancing of course."

Ugh. Maybe they'd built someplace new in town. It would make sense. A lot of small towns expanded their borders by incorporating surrounding lands. Old farms were taken over and barns turned into dance halls. Maybe that's what he had in mind. Sure felt that way. The truck had moved from the easy ride of asphalt to a bumpier ride. Rock and gravel ground beneath the tires indicated they'd moved onto one of the many unimproved roads surrounding the center of town, except a few minutes turned to ten, and then a few more.

"Almost there," he said. "Promise you'll sit tight for a second. I need to open the gate."

Open the gate? Must be a renovated farm. This town had more head of cattle than it did people. Cattle gates were as ubiquitous as blades of grass in the fields.

“I promise,” she said. And while the temptation to peek was overpowering, she didn’t want to ruin his surprise. Not after he seemed to have gone to so much trouble.

The driver’s door opened and the truck rocked as he exited. When he returned, he settled into his seat and gripped her hand.

“Tell me,” he said, “favorite movie genre.”

“Um, I don’t know.”

The one thing about medical school and the even more rigorous residency training had been a distinct lack of free time. Working eighty hours a week, and studying on top of that, left her with precious little free time. She couldn’t even remember the last time she’d watched a movie, let alone seen one in a movie theater.

“I guess action movies. I like a good science fiction piece, but they don’t really make those anymore.”

“Star Wars geek or Trekkie?”

“Both I guess.” Both franchises had released movies recently. She wasn’t a complete mushroom, and had managed to watch the movies when they came out online. “I like the one with the mutants, too.”

“Ah, great. Perfect even.” His long fingers stroked the back of her hand. “Do you have to be anywhere tomorrow? Need to check in with work?”

“Not yet. I’m still settling in.” Not a complete lie, but the practice could wait another day.

“Good,” he whispered. “I plan to have you out all night.”

All night? Her stomach fluttered with what that might entail.

Main Feature

Abby never thought she would ever say a blindfold was comfortable. But it was. The silk rested comfortably over her eyes. Drake helped her out of the truck. She could have climbed out herself, but he seemed intent on using the maneuver to sneak another kiss.

"When are you going to let me remove the blindfold?" she asked, after catching her breath from his kiss.

"Soon, city girl." He whispered the endearment into her ear, nuzzling her neck before grasping her hand and leading her forward. "The ground is a bit uneven, but you should be okay."

"I'm not going to trip, am I?"

"If you do, I'll catch you."

They weren't in town. Or, if they were, they weren't on Main Street. The ground beneath her feet was uneven and crunched with dirt and gravel. Maybe her thoughts about a renovated barn hadn't been that far off base.

His fingers tightened, telegraphing his excitement.

"Almost there." He pulled up short and released her hand. "Don't move."

The air held an earthy scent, full of loamy dirt, pine, and woodsmoke. A fire? The crackling of wood drifted to her ears.

Gravel crunched under Drake's boots, and another set of footsteps joined his. She lifted her hands to the blindfold, curious as to who else was there. But keeping the blindfold in place seemed important to Drake.

Low tones of a conversation drifted to her ears. Male voices. The deep rumble of Drake's and another vaguely familiar one.

"Thanks," Drake said.

"No problem. Have fun."

Was that Bert?

Crickets chirped all around her, and the gentle calls of songbirds filled the air. A light gusting of the wind brought other scents to her nose, deeper pungent aromas of animals and the sizzling of...steak?

The roar of an engine sounded, the deep throaty rumble of a diesel truck. Tires crunched over gravel and faded.

Drake returned. "You doing okay?"

"You've got my attention," she said. "Was that Bert?"

He snickered. "Yeah, I asked him to get a few things set up."

The clatter of a generator sputtered and hummed. The only reason she had any familiarity with that sound was from summer camping trips. Her uncle always had a generator on hand, especially in the heat of the summer. While they roughed it on the land, their tents had been cooled by portable air conditioning units at night. There was roughing it and not roughing it.

"Please," she begged. "Can I take the blindfold off?" It was killing her wondering what Drake was up to.

Drake had a way of filling up space, even when she couldn't see him, his palpable presence tingled her skin and hitched her breath. He was in every inhale and beat of her heart, enveloping her in a world of what if and what may be.

He cupped her cheek. "God, you're beautiful." His fingers traced a path over her skin, skimming over her lips.

Compliments made her self-conscious, and she turned away. "Drake..."

The heat of his lips brushed over her mouth. "You're amazing." His fingers slid under the silk at her temples. "Keep your eyes closed. I'm going to remove the blindfold, but don't look just yet."

"Okay." She pressed her hands against the hard ridge of his abdomen, dropped them to her sides, and fiddled with the hem of her skirt. The overwhelming nearness of him had her knees weak and her legs unsteady.

The silk lifted.

Strong hands gripped her shoulders, and Drake spun her to face the other way.

"You ready?"

"As I'll ever be," she said.

The tip of his nose pressed against the side of her neck. "Open your eyes, city girl."

Abby blinked to clear her vision, and she stumbled back against his chest. A fire-pit crackled with burning wood. Two wooden chairs stood before it. A generator hummed somewhere off to her left, black electrical wires snaking to a table placed on the far side of the fire where a projector flickered in the waning light of dusk. Strung between two massive oak trees, a white sheet stretched between the branches. Rope passed through corner grommets and looped around the branches, pulling the fabric taut. The lower corners were fixed in place, tied to two large rocks.

"A movie screen?"

A Star Wars movie trailer scrolled across the makeshift screen.

"I thought a night at the movies would be a treat. The drive-in isn't open during the week."

"So, you made one?"

Her mouth watered with the aroma of whatever was cooking on that grill. She approached the fire-pit, leaving Drake where he was.

"What is this?"

"Well, my first thought was to cook steak. But it's a bit of a production."

Four skewers of meat had been propped over the fire. Drops of fat and other juices fell from the meat to spatter on the fire below.

She spun around. "I can't believe you did all of this."

"I'm full of surprises."

"Well, this is one hell of a surprise." She pointed to the screen.

"You said you were a Star Wars and Trekkie fan. I've got all of them loaded up and ready to play."

"All of them?"

"Yup," he said.

"What kind of movies do you like? I don't want you watching something you hate."

"Oh, those are good."

"But not great," she said.

"Well, great is relative. I mean, great would be the *Terminator* or *Resident Evil*."

She shivered. "Oh, I'm not a zombie fan."

"Not a zombie fan or afraid of horror movies?"

"Both, I suppose."

The sun had dipped below the rim of the valley walls. Dusk ushered in the coming of night, and as the light faded, the sky blossomed with the fire

of one of the most remarkable sunsets she'd ever seen. They would have to wait until it got a little darker before they could see the picture on the screen.

Abby breathed in the crisp night air. "What happens if I get cold?"

The corner of his mouth turned up. "We snuggle."

Snuggling sounded like fun.

The long lowing of a cow broke the silence. She turned toward the setting sun and looked upon a grouping of cattle who'd wandered up to a fence-line some distance away.

"Gotta love this place," she said.

"Why's that?"

"Open sky. Rolling hills. And cattle. This place is full of them."

"But it's not full of people. I guarantee we're the only humans within fifty acres."

"Do you have something against people?"

There was no sign of a tent. Other than the fire, the chairs, the generator, and screen, it didn't look as if he intended to spend the night. And that's when she realized all the snow from the blizzard was missing.

Green grass waved in the evening breeze.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"The snow. What happened to it?"

He shook his head. "It melted."

"That fast?"

"It was barely a dusting."

A dusting? The snow had been several inches thick, but then, there hadn't been much snow on the highway when she'd driven her uncle home from the hospital either. And she didn't remember any snow. This town had to be one of the strangest places in the world.

Drake took the seat closest to the fire. He turned the spit holding the skewers of meat.

"Dinner will be done in a few." He fished around in a bag next to the chair and brought out a bottle of wine. "You said you liked wine? Bert promises this is a good Merlot."

This man had thought of everything.

Paper plates, plastic wine glasses, and a roll of paper towels completed their tableware. They sat together, watching the sunset, and feasted on steak, grilled onions, tomatoes, and peppers. She would have to remember

to thank Bert, but for now, all she could think of was how much she loved this place.

The symphony of crickets and birds, the long lowing of the distant cows, even the whispering of the wind in the trees, lulled her into a state of deep relaxation.

Drake poured her wine, took a sip, and screwed his face up with distaste. She laughed at his expression and giggled when he stomped back to the truck to get his flask of whiskey.

They finished their meal, trading conversation with ease. He asked about the moose and her accident, warning her to be careful on the roads. She thanked him for helping her and avoided mentioning the wolves. While he had done what was necessary, it still bothered her that the wolves had been killed.

“How often do you have blizzards like that?”

“Blizzard? That was just a little snow.” He poked at a log on the fire. “I don’t even think we got a foot.”

“If that wasn’t a blizzard, then what does one look like?”

“I think you’re going to be in for a shock once winter hits. We need to put together an emergency kit for you. You’ll want to keep it in your car year-round. You should never trust our weather, and we can have snow in the higher elevations year-round.”

She didn’t believe him about the other night not being a blizzard. It had sure seemed like a lot of snow. “That sounds like a plan.”

“You need to be ready for anything. Flares would be a good thing, too. People need to be able to see you if that ever happens again.”

“Well, I wasn’t expecting snow. I spent my summers here until the last couple years of high school. It never snowed.”

“Ah,” he said with a knowing wink. “That explains it.”

“What’s that?”

“Why you were layered up in all those clothes. That’s probably what saved your life.”

She emptied her wine and leaned back with a sigh. “You tell me what to put in this emergency kit, and I’ll get it done. I never want to go through that again.”

Firelight flickered over his face. The sun had set. Dusk had given way to the depth of night.

He lifted a remote. “Now, what will it be? *Star Wars* marathon or *Star Trek*?”

“Surprise me.”

She leaned back, content and happy for the first time in years. The opening lines of ‘*In a galaxy far far away*’ scrolled across the screen.

Drake stroked the back of her hand. “I’m glad we met, city girl.”

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Shooting Stars

While the Empire was busy being saved by rebels, Drake's caresses moved from Abby's hand, up her arm, sending tingles skating across her skin. He stood and stretched, then added another log to the fire. Before she knew what he was doing, he'd moved behind her chair. His deft fingers kneaded the muscles of her neck, making her moan when he hit a sore spot.

She closed her eyes. "That feels so good."

"Shh! No talking during the movie."

She laughed. "You think the cattle will be upset if I talk?"

The soft lows of the nearby herd carried across the field in response to her comment.

"You never know. They've probably never seen it before."

"Whereas you know every line?"

He'd been saying the key lines under his breath.

She tilted her head back and glanced up. Stars filled the night sky, and the sweep of the Milky Way glowed. So bright! Back home, she'd be lucky to see a single star with all the light pollution and smog. But this! Here, the stars flickered with an otherworldly light, shimmering with hope and happiness like portals into another world. Breathtaking.

The twinkling of the stars brought back memories of her parents and all the nights they'd slept under them. A lump formed in her throat. At some point, the pain was supposed to ease, but she missed them now more than ever.

He moved and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He tugged her close. "Are you okay?" He wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "What's

wrong?"

Her vision zoomed in on his face, latching onto the ragged edge of his scar. She scrubbed at her cheeks. The memory of her parents was too raw to share, and soon she'd be adding her uncle's passing to that grief. Once he was gone, she'd have no one left.

"I'm good."

"Liar." He dipped his head, bringing the intensity of his gaze full bore on her lie. The caress of his lips against her brow brought a sigh to her lips. "You don't have to talk about it, but I'm here." He pulled her to him where she could lean against his chest.

"Sorry, I don't mean to be a downer. It's just; I found out my uncle is sick. I thought we'd have more time, and I'm not ready. I'm just not ready." She wasn't ready to be alone. Swiping at a tear, she gave a deep sigh. "Sorry, didn't mean to get serious."

"No sorry about it. Girls always cry at the movies."

She thumped his chest. "This isn't a cry worthy movie."

Her attention turned to the makeshift screen. The planet-killing moon had been destroyed, and celebrations were underway.

"I've probably got a chick flick if you need the excuse to cry." His chest rumbled with his words. Full of woodsmoke and a deeper powerful scent, his overwhelming presence promised he'd make everything all right. "Or, if you just need a shoulder to cry on?"

She sniffed away her tears and glanced at the scrolling credits. "Thank you for the movie. It was perfect. I may take you up on that shoulder, but not now. Tonight, I just want to have fun."

"Well, don't be in a rush to get in my pants, city girl. The night's barely begun, and you should woo a guy first."

"Woo you?"

"Sure thing, like offer to watch another movie with me before getting all handsy and stuff."

She laughed at his teasing. "Double feature, then?"

"Or triple, I'm thinking I'll make it to second or third base by the middle of the second movie."

His talk about making out had her stomach flipping and her pulse quickening. All thoughts of her uncle's illness faded beneath Drake's indomitable will. She pulled in a ragged breath as the air crackled with the energy flowing between them.

“You’re that confident of hitting the bases?” she teased.

She could guarantee he'd make it to second base. And was pretty certain third was on the table. But this game wouldn't be any fun if she didn't play hard to get. Now a home run? It took months with Jacob, and he'd pursued her with a relentless determination. If something was happening between her and Drake, she didn't want to rush and ruin it. Even if the passion brewing in his eyes made her blood boil and her inhibitions disappear.

"I'm a pretty confident kind of guy. If I see something I want—"

"You go after it," she said.

"Don't be stealing my thunder, city girl," he scoffed. "If I see something I want, I'm not shy about taking it."

She nibbled at her lower lip. "How about we make things interesting?"

His brow arched. "What do you have in mind?"

A glance around their campsite had her mind whirling. She actually had no idea, but he'd accepted her challenge with heated interest.

"I know," she said, tapping a finger against her chin. "How about a game of hide and go seek?"

Drake slapped his thigh and laughed. "You want to play hide and go seek?" He gestured to the pitch black beyond the light of the fire. Unlike the snow which had reflected the faint light of the moon, the inky black swallowed the light of the fire. "Aren't you afraid of the dark?"

Where was the moon? It had been full less than two nights ago. A glance eastward and she had her answer. The faintest line of black on darker black outlined the nearby hills. Rising behind the ridge, a silvery glow stretched toward the sky.

"I've been camping before. I told you, I'm not a city girl."

"Well, that may be." He closed the distance between them, wrapped an arm around her waist, and pulled her tight against his chest. "But, there are wolves out there."

She'd forgotten about the wolves. "I haven't heard any."

Dark nights had never scared her as a child. Her father had to bribe her to come inside the tent at night. Otherwise, she would spend the entire evening stretched out on their picnic blanket, counting stars, tracing out the constellations, or watching shooting stars.

"Shooting stars!"

"Excuse me?"

“Let’s see who can catch the most shooting stars.” She could almost feel her father’s presence smiling down at her, as if approving her move.

“And what does the winner get?” His eyes crinkled at the corners, but they fixated on her mouth.

She reflexively licked her lips, eliciting a groan from Drake.

“How about we snuggle?” she offered.

With a growl, he flung her over his shoulder. “Not sure about snuggling.”

“Drake!”

“Shh,” he said with a light slap to her ass.

“What are you doing?” she squealed, enjoying being draped over his brick-hard body more than she should.

“Hunting stars.” He brought her to the back of the truck, lowered the tailgate, and set her down. A devilish grin took control of his face. “Don’t move.” He dipped his head and nuzzled the soft spot of her neck while his breath rustled her hair.

“Or what?” She slammed her palm against the firmness of his abdomen.

He stroked his thumb against his bottom lip, a mischievous glint dancing in his eyes. “I don’t think you could run fast enough.” His voice rumbled through her, potent and destructive in the most pleasurable way. The way it rasped, all low and gravely, had her body coming alive and her veins humming with anticipation.

His fingers raked back clumps of his jet-black hair, shoving them back and off his face. She itched to run her fingers across his stubble and cup the strength of his jaw. They regarded each other, and her nerves rioted beneath that stare. All that electricity surging in the air between them sparked tingles under her skin, and a rush of sensation flowed directly to her core, building to a fevered heat. If a simple look from him could do that what would the rest of it feel like?

His hair fell back across his brows, darkening his eyes and banking the heat swirling within their depths. He licked his smiling lips and dragged a hand down his face.

“You’re staring, city girl.”

“I’m not staring,” she argued. “I’m debating.”

“Debating what?” His head canted as he studied her, perhaps wondering where she was going with that comment.

Hell, she really had no idea what she had been about to say. She pursed her lips and swept out an arm, indicating the dark shadows beyond the fire-pit.

“What if you gave me a head start?”

“Hm.” His eyes twinkled as he considered her offer, then he shifted forward until he hovered kissably close. Despite how much she wanted that kiss, she refused to close the distance.

Her blood heated and the warmth radiating from his skin filled her with arousal. She considered a retreat but wanted to see where the rest of the evening would go.

His fingers gripped above her knee as his eyes locked on hers. Her breath fled with the heat of his exhales searing her skin, making her shiver and raising goose bumps on her arms. She inched closer to him, lips parted, begging for the kiss he promised.

“I’ll give you a choice,” he said as he worked his fingers up her leg, straying dangerously close to the apex of her thighs. He leaned to the side, his mouth brushing against her ear.

The ripple of his breath triggered an awakening throb between her legs. That need pulsed with each breath, and every heartbeat made it harder to sit still. The deep timbre of his voice flowed through her, smooth as a drug and intoxicating with the sensual high until her entire body was painfully aware of him, and she wanted more.

“Drake...”

“Shh.” He ran his free hand through her hair and inched his fingers higher up her leg.

Her mind slipped into a sensual haze as her body awakened beneath his touch. Disturbed by nothing more than the depth of his breaths, the stillness of the night air was interrupted by the chirping of crickets and the long lowing calls of the nearby cattle. She held her breath and listened to the night sounds, realizing how very alone they were.

Her skin heated under his hungry gaze, and her chest tightened. Heart racing, she scooted backward, suddenly unsure. But he grabbed her hips and pulled her to the edge of the tailgate.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

She couldn’t answer because he seized her lips with his mouth. His raw desire obliterated her thoughts, rendering her speechless. He had a way of taking, even while giving at the same time. While not tender, his

exploration of her mouth was restrained, even if his lips remained firm, combative even, determined to take and claim. The frenzy of his need, raw and primal, incited a reckless hunger within her body, one she couldn't control. She answered by shifting forward and spreading her legs.

He stepped into the gap, allowing her to wrap her legs around his hips, their position similar to the one from that stolen kiss in the barn. Only this time, he wasn't holding her in his arms. His head slanted, fingers digging into her scalp as he took control of the kiss.

She followed his lead, tongue chasing his as they rocked together, obliterating any space between their bodies. His sharp teeth gripped her lips, and his mouth glided against hers, his tongue furious and raw. He cupped her face and growled with his growing arousal.

His powerful shoulders bunched and she traced every ridge and valley of the sharply-defined muscles of his pecs, biceps, and hell, she'd lost control of her hands. They moved on their own, memorizing the cut definition of his arms, his chest, even the washboard definition of his abs. And since his lips claimed hers with firm, combative urgency, she dropped the coy act. No nips, pecks, or licks. She pursued him, her tongue chasing his with a reckless hunger.

When his palm gripped her ass, she ground against the steel of his erection, looking for more. More friction. More heat. More of him. And while he punished her swollen lips with bruising aggression, she locked her ankles around his hips and pulled him close.

He groaned as he thrust his hips harder and faster against her opened thighs. Every thrust turned her blood to molten heat and her breaths to needy cries. She squirmed against him, aching for his fingers on her nipples, his hands on her inner thighs, and most importantly, him deep inside.

But there was one problem.

Her voice croaked. "Drake, please..." She choked on a breathless gasp as he slid his hands inside her shirt, popped the clasp of her bra, and rolled her nipple until it peaked into a hard nub. When she thought she would pass out from a lack of oxygen due to holding her breath, he pinched down... hard.

Her back arched and her scream split the air. Molten heat spread from her nipple to her heart and surged through her veins. She felt the swelling in

his jeans and rocked against him, cursing the thick denim separating their bodies.

He grabbed her hair, wrenched her head back, and devoured her lips with the press of his mouth. He cupped her face, his voice thick with arousal, while he caged her in with the thrusting of his hips. “If you don’t want this to go any further, Abby, I need you to say so right now.”

The use of her name caught her by surprise. Not city girl. Not darling. No, that had been the desperate plea of a man caught up in his passion, teetering on the edge with the same frenzied need she felt.

She gripped his shirt, and took a leap of faith, hoping this turned into something more than a one-night stand. “Kiss me,” she said, “and don’t stop.”



The night flowed from one passionate kiss to other more sensuous caresses. The second movie played on the makeshift screen, but neither of them paid it any mind. Her attention remained locked on the stranger who infiltrated her life, perhaps even her heart, and who was quickly becoming something more. With their bodies joined in a sensuous dance, she allowed Drake into her heart, and most importantly, firmly kicked Jacob out. That man belonged in her past.

Coming to Peace Springs meant many things. She’d run from an abusive boyfriend and toward an uncertain future. Moving inspired fear. Fear of leaving the comfort of the Inland Empire. Fear of walking away from one medical practice to another. Fear of starting over with nothing but three suitcases to her name.

And loss.

She’d been forced to leave pieces of her past behind. Her parents’ graves, for one thing. And while they weren’t abandoned, their gravesite no longer represented an obsession of grief over what she’d lost. Her parents’ memory lingered in Peace Springs, and in her heart. Their laughter tickled her mind. Their constant praise filtered through every bold step forward. She kept a piece of them with her no matter where she might live, but here in Peace Springs, she felt them the strongest.

Peace Springs brought many challenges. She thought she'd have years to hone her craft, learning from Uncle Pete's decades of experience. All that would now be crammed into the months they had left, perhaps only weeks until his death. She didn't want to think about her uncle's passing. Even if he was at peace with his approaching death, the news was still too raw, too scary, and too heartbreaking to bear. He was her last link to family, and with him gone, she would be alone.

Except for the man whose arms sheltered her through the night with the promise of something more. Drake kissed her as if she were life itself. His passion drowned her in the most exquisite sensations, leaving her wanting more. The ache of her heart eased with each lick, nip, and swirl of his tongue. And somewhere beneath the punishing demands of his kisses, her body awakened and came alive.

And she had a legacy to fulfill. The McFearson lineage was seeped in the soil. She had land handed down to her through the generations, and the story of her namesake to unravel. She had a future here, and a promise for so much more.

Time would tell with Drake, and like the country gentleman he was, they made a night of watching *Star Wars*, laughing and learning more about each other, as they traded famous lines from the films.

With the rising of the sun, he drove her home, their passion banked and simmering, but not fulfilled. He promised further exploration—perhaps even with that blindfold and the rope he claimed to be so proficient at handling. The idea excited her instead of making her draw away.

She came to this small town running from a complicated past. In finding Peace Springs, she may have discovered the home she'd never had. Except, it had been there all the time, simply waiting for her to come home.

Abigale McFearson had come to this place full of the same hopes and desires for a brighter future over a hundred years ago. She'd become one of the first female homesteaders in American history, and her daughter, and her daughter's daughters, and their daughters followed in her footsteps. Abigale's legacy threaded through Abby's veins, a female doctor forging her own future and who was now the sole caretaker of the family's homestead trust.

Abby vowed to build upon that legacy. In finding Peace Springs, she'd found much more than a home.



THE END!



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As a special thank you, feel free to click this [Instafreebie link](#) and claim a complementary copy of Ashes to New.



Off Duty

Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC

Released July 2017

Books2read.com/OffDuty

A Hot BDSM read...

ALL PROCEEDS ARE BEING DONATED TO THE MAKE A WISH FOUNDATION!

Laura Peters is at the top of her game, a trauma surgeon known far and wide for her skills. But she's lonesome, unable to connect with people, and married to her career. She especially hates the cocky and arrogant Keith, a top notch paramedic, but in too many ways, an arrogant cock-of-the-walk sort. That man stars in her dreams far too many times to be safe. In her position, she can't afford a schoolgirl crush, let alone the dark and twisted things she wants him to do.

Keith Evans is a paramedic, a former Navy corpsman, combat-decorated, cocksure and arrogant, but also lonely with only his demons to keep him company. The ice queen, Laura Peters, MD has caught his eye. He acknowledges her beauty, and admires her medical skills, but dislikes her frostiness, finding her heartless and cold, even robotic, not at all likeable. But her appeal as a woman keeps drawing him back, and he imagines all kinds of dark and delicious things he wants to do.

He can't stand her, and she sure as hell hates him. One thing's for certain: the fur is about to fly when these two are off-duty. Can they move beyond the hate and anger to explore the passions they can no longer deny?



Learning to Breathe: A Collective Novel

Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC

Released May 2017

Books2read.com/LearningtoBreathe

An Erotic BDSM romance...
Murder! Mystery! Romance!
Deliciously Dark and Daring...

WORK. EAT. SLEEP. REPEAT.

Since her husband's death, Sally Levenson's life has become dull and monotonous. She's the county Coroner, and while the dead reveal their

secrets on the exam table, she hides from the living. But hiding isn't working anymore. Sally is trapped in a bland, colorless existence. She can't breathe! She's suffocating and wants more, whatever that might be.

When the dark and mysterious Derek LeMark enters her world, he opens doors to new possibilities, reveals dark desires, and challenges her to take a second chance on life. He dares her to breathe again, and promises...more. But what he offers comes at a price.

Sally must choose: take the next step, or speak the one word which will end everything before it even begins.



Becoming His: A Collective Novel
Learning to Breathe (part II)
Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC
Released July 2017
Books2read.com/BecomingHis

An Erotic BDSM romance...
Murder! Mystery! Romance!
Deliciously Dark and Daring...

County Coroner, Sally Levenson, hasn't dated since the death of her husband five years ago. Intelligent but shy, she's hidden herself from the world. Her days are a never-ending cycle of eat, work, sleep, and repeat. She's suffocating in the monotony of her life, until she meets Derek Lemark, a man whose money makes money, and who controls every aspect of his life.

Derek finds Sally captivating, intelligent, but shy. He opens doors to new possibilities and forbidden desires, but what he offers comes with a price. He's given Sally a choice. Green opens doors to hidden desires, while Red ends everything.

Red or Green?



Twist of Fate
Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC
Released February 2017
Books2read.com/TwistofFate

A Contemporary Romantic Suspense/Thriller...
Where Romance meets Silence of the Lambs

Melissa is a victim, capable of attracting only the worst kind of man. She seeks redemption for crimes she did not commit.

CJ struggles to absolve himself of an unforgivable act. He seeks salvation through heroism, but fails every day.

Our prince, a man with the blackest of hearts and an endless capacity to inflict pain, seeks validation for his work. His corruption is absolute, but even he will sacrifice for love.

Meanwhile, a man of pure evil invades their lives, weaving his sinister threads and binding their futures.

But Fate has different plans for them all. As tornados tear through the town, their lives will be uprooted, twisted, and tangled beyond what any of them could foresee.



Sensual Secrets: Not Your Mother's Coffee Table Book

Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC

Released November 2016

Available in paperback and hardback:

<http://www.blurb.com/b/7438139>

And as an ebook:

Books2read.com/SensualSecrets

This isn't a novel...it's not a book of poems...it's something
MAGNIFICENT!

Enter a world of luscious thoughts and decadent desires. Within these pages you will find a momentary escape from the real world as you sink into a sensuous reality, where fact and fiction combine to sweep you away in an unadulterated fantasy.

Why is it called "Not Your Mother's Coffee Table Book?"

Because, the stories and images inside this book are not fit for younger eyes. They are however, meant to inspire your imagination; to take you on a sensual journey into "what if" and "what may be." It's a key to the discovery of the soul, a path less taken, a road you will want to travel again and again. It's something to share with your lover. You'll want to keep it close at hand. Under your pillow might just be the perfect place!

The concept for SENSUAL SECRETS: Not Your Mother's Coffee Table Book came to me in the Fall of 2016. I enjoy writing erotic shorts, snippets of stories, kernels of revelation, simple moments where we can dip our toes into another place, a sensual realm where we can dream and play. Sensual Secrets is a compilation of my sinful shorts, passionate poems, and sexy short stories written this past year, all bundled into a visual feast for your enjoyment.



Ashes to New: an Angel Fire Rock Romance Prequel

Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC

Released October 2016

books2read.com/AshestoNew

A contemporary YA tale of survival

Ashes to New, prequel to Heart's Insanity: An Angel Fire Rock Romance, is not a romance. It's a story about the fiercest kind of love. It's about enduring. Surviving. And never giving up.

Elsbeth and Forest are two teenagers trapped within an abusive foster home. They endure horrible abuse, but find there is light in the darkest places. And hope is as limitless as the summer sky. All they need is the love of one another to survive.



Heart's Insanity: An Angel Fire Rock Romance

Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC

Released August 2016

books2read.com/HeartsInsanity

A contemporary Rock Romance

Skye Summers endured a tragic past. She wants what the past stole, and despite lingering scars, she's surviving and thriving. Now she cures the sick, heals the wounded, and takes care of those clinging to life. The only person she can't heal is herself, because Skye is too broken for love.

Ash Dean has it all: Fame, fortune, and the adoration of screaming fans. The constant parties, drugs, alcohol, and an endless string of one-night stands are taking their toll. He gives and his fans take, until he's lost within the crowd. He wants someone to see him for the man he wishes to be rather than the one he's become.

One fate...

Two lives...

Three Days...

No sex.

That's the proposition...

It would be insane to accept and Skye's a fool to agree, but she's tired of playing it safe.

It's time to take a leap of faith, besides what could go wrong?



Changing Roles
Publisher: Loose Id
Released March 2016
Books2read.com/ChangingRoles

A BDSM murder/mystery...

Kate Summers's career on the Police Force came to an implosive end when the Mayor's wife exposed her secret life as the Mistress of Pain. Kate lost not only her detective's badge, but something much more valuable. She lost her confidence as a Mistress of men.

She now scrapes by as a private investigator, feeding off the misery of others. When the Mayor and his wife ask her to investigate the murder of their daughter, Kate faces a difficult decision. To follow the leads, she must reenter the world that destroyed her career and go undercover as a submissive to a noted Dom. Only Kate swore she'd never endure the submissive role again.

Yet Jake Davenport is the one dominant fearless enough to not only challenge her rules, but break them. While accepting her new role and the erotic thrill it brings her is difficult enough, Jake's complicated past raises many questions. As her investigation progresses, the man she's fallen in love with might just be her number one suspect.



Sample Chapters follow...

OceanofPDF.com

Ashes to New

EXCERPT

Chapter One

With a heavy sigh, Elsbeth followed her fellow students into the embrace of summer. To them, it represented freedom, but for Elsbeth, the endless days would be nothing but a stretch of time to endure.

The halls of Carl Sandburg High School were filled with the shouts and raucous cheers of her classmates. A generalized mayhem celebrated the end of another year of school. Students emptied lockers of books, folders, and laptops. Old spiral-bound notebooks, along with mounds of papers no one cared about anymore, filled trash cans lining the halls.

While Elsbeth's classmates rushed to say their good-byes, she walked in a cocoon of silence, gripping the contents of her locker tight to her chest, as she kept her gaze set three feet forward, avoiding any and all eye contact with her peers.

But she couldn't avoid all attention.

Mr. Peterson leaned against the doorframe leading into his chemistry lab. He was talking with Scott Masterson, a junior, like Elsbeth. Scott was wildly popular, a jock with a brain, who got straight A's and was working toward a football scholarship, the ticket to his future. She envied him for his freedom to pursue his goals.

"You'd better behave this summer." Mr. Peterson's voice was stern but caring. "We need our star player to make it to State next year."

"Yes, sir," Scott said, combing his fingers through the mop of bangs covering his forehead. He noticed her then. "Hey, Elz," he called out. "Got

plans for tonight? A bunch of us are going to the movies. You want to come?”

Scott had been trying to get her to go on a date for the better half of the last semester. She'd always been too busy—not a complete lie, but other things filled her evenings and weekends. It simply wasn't cheering or band or volleyball team or dating.

With a shake of her head, she declined...again. “Sorry, but I've got plans, and my foster father isn't keen on the whole dating scene.”

“Ah, it doesn't have to be a date. It's just a bunch of us hanging out.”

Hugging her books, she stamped down the wave of anxiety building in her chest. “I'm sorry. I'd love to, but...” But she simply couldn't.

The hopefulness of his expression fell. “Maybe another time?”

She gave a fractional nod. “Sounds good.”

Moving to the center of the crowded hall, she made a move to escape the awkward exchange, but Mr. Peterson stopped her in her tracks.

“Elsbeth.” His words hit her in the chest and stopped the trudge of her feet.

“Yes, Mr. Peterson?”

The softness of his gaze tunneled straight to her heart, destabilizing her shields.

“You weren't going to leave without saying good-bye to your favorite chemistry teacher, were you?” Mr. Peterson spread his arms out wide, welcoming her into his personal space.

Elsbeth curled her lower lip inward, biting hard. While she adored Mr. Peterson and he was, without a doubt, her favorite teacher, to be that close to a man had her insides churning. But, with his arms outstretched, she couldn't refuse, not without raising eyebrows—or worse.

“Be safe this summer.” He folded her into the briefest and most platonic of hugs. “Do you have anything special planned? Did you enroll in that summer program at the university I mentioned?”

The observership? No. Definitely not on the allowed list of summer activities.

She loved how he encouraged her and adored him even more for slipping the list of colleges with undergraduate pre-med programs inside her lab notebook. He was the one who'd told her about the highly competitive six-year medical school programs as well.

“Good-bye, Mr. Peterson,” she said.

He finally released her. Perfect timing, too, since her breathing had already accelerated.

She glanced at the clock hanging over the doors leading outside as it counted down her fate. Less than an hour remained. She should stay and linger within the halls to memorize every detail. Those images would serve her well in the months to come, but staying meant risking unwanted conversation.

Although she remained a frustrating mystery to her peers, she didn't care. She had brushed off the advances of boys and kept those rare girls interested in befriending the geek girl an arm's length away for years. Friends were liabilities. A pretty girl, Elsbeth made certain she remained too school for cool. Her brain would determine her future, not her standing within the social hierarchy of an average high school.



Chapter Two

HOME.

The word conjured many images. A home should be a place of light. A place of love. A place of sanctuary and hope. Home was where weary souls rested their heads as day deepened to night and slumber brought peaceful dreams. Home was a place to recharge and recuperate from the toils of a difficult day.

Elsbeth's home was located at a crossroads where reason fled and insanity took root.

The Tudor monstrosity, which the state foster care system assigned as her place of residence, dominated the middle of a three-lot spread at the end of a long cul-de-sac. The owner had purchased the lots on either side for the privilege of setting his home apart. Not that Clark Preston needed more space. It was the status that came with the message. He had not only wealth, but the power to flaunt it.

Despite everything the house embodied, Elsbeth looked forward to coming home for only one reason.

Her foster brother, Forest, was bouncing a soccer ball from knee to knee, his tall, lanky form a mess of spindly limbs too long for his growing frame. She called him her little Beanpole for good reason, but this last year, he'd truly started to sprout into the nickname. An odd bird, he had a quirky personality that hid a brilliant mind. She wasn't the only one with too few friends.

Forest glanced up, his shock of blond hair glowing in the afternoon sun. He let the ball drop where he kicked it back and forth in a blinding array of footwork. "Hey, Elz." He stopped his fancy footwork. The ball rolled a few short feet away until it came to a stop against the azaleas. He turned his gaze upon her, an old soul looking out from behind the palest blue she'd ever seen. "Guess it's officially summertime."

With a deep breath, she clutched her schoolbooks against her chest. Yes, it was summer, but she had the classics to keep her company. Melville, Shakespeare, and Austen would smooth out the dark times ahead.

"What are you doing outside?"

Forest was more of a computer geek than a jock. He was happiest with the glow of a Retina display lighting his room and stimulating his mind. Her foster brother didn't play video games. He made them. Self-taught in the language of code, Forest would tinker and create his escape while she read herself into one.

Forest jerked a thumb toward the house. "He called the maids," he said with a grimace. "We're having company."

Her stomach turned in knots. "Tonight?"

"Yeah, told me to let the maids in and then said to stay out of their way."

"Did he say who was coming?" *Please don't let it be the slobbery fat judge.*

With a shake of his head, Forest retrieved the ball and then drew her into a hug. He was tall enough for her to rest her head against his bony chest. When Forest had first entered her life five years ago, he'd been shorter than her, small and fragile. He was slowly becoming a man.

She leaned into his embrace, shaking.

He kissed the top of her head. "Elz, we'll get through it. We always do."

A tear leaked from the corner of her eye. She brushed it away. "But you know what he's like with company." She was supposed to be strong for

Forest, but the mention of visitors on the first night of summer had her trembling.

Pressing his lips against her forehead, he tugged her in tight. “It’s a moment in time, my sweet Elz, but only a moment, and like everything else, it will pass.”

Clark Preston was a demon she understood. She’d learned how to survive his trials and tests, but when he invited others to share in his appetites, her coping skills would struggle to keep up with the demands he placed upon her. And, while it would be easiest to lose herself within the insanity, she had Forest to protect—and one other.

Still naive, Forest believed in the possibility of a brighter future. He would be eighteen soon, and she would follow a few weeks later. Freedom beckoned, but first, she would have to endure senior year. She worried what would happen when faced with the possibility of graduation and a man who would refuse to let them go.

An accident had stolen her parents and separated her from a baby brother. Clark Preston held the knowledge of what happened to her brother. He used that power to command her obedience. Forest had lost his family to something much worse. Somewhere within their tragedies, they had found each other. Forest’s resilience astounded her because he believed they would be delivered from the evil that filled their lives. Even when she’d held him on that very first night, when he’d been broken, battered, and left bleeding on the basement floor, Forest had believed. She hadn’t had the heart to tell him the truth.

Neither of them would be escaping this hell.

The front door opened, and two cleaning ladies exited.

The older one walked over, her black-and-white maid uniform impressively immaculate after her labors. “We’re all done,” she said. “We couldn’t get into the basement to clean. If your father wants us to clean down there next time, he’ll need to remove the lock.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Forest said with a gulp, his grip around Elsbeth’s shoulders tightening. “I’ll be sure to tell him.”

The women secured their gear in the cleaning van and pulled out of the driveway, waving as they drove off.

With a sigh, Elsbeth walled off her mind from what her body would soon face. That’s the only way she survived. Forest said it all the time. *It’s*

just a body, Elz. It's not you. And she would believe that. To do otherwise meant facing insanity.

"Come on, Beanpole."

It was half past four. Clark Preston would be home within the hour.

"We have to prepare."

Forest followed Elsbeth inside.

The house had been dusted and polished to perfection. The marble floor of the foyer gleamed in the light from the chandelier. To the left, the wooden floor of the library glistened with fresh polish, and the line of Persian rugs leading down the main hall had been vacuumed and aligned to form a straight path.

A grimace pulled at Elsbeth's face as she stepped around the first rug in line. In less than an hour, she'd be kneeling in that spot.

Forest rushed ahead, heading to his bedroom in the back of the house. "Come, I want to show you a new game."

Hugging her books tight, Elsbeth picked her way down the hall. "I don't have time." Indeed, she would barely make it back to the foyer.

"It'll only take a second," Forest urged.

The eagerness in his eyes pulled at her heart, but with company coming over, she couldn't afford to make a mistake.

"I promise, I'll check it out tomorrow."

Forest understood even if he didn't like the answer. The oddity of his mind would allow him to switch on and off with much greater ease than she'd ever accomplished. For that small gift, she envied him. She would need all of the remaining time to get in the right headspace to make it through the night.

"Okay," he said.

"And you need to make sure you're prepared, too."

His mind might be strong, but of the two of them, his body would break before hers.

"Ugh, okay," he said with a dejected slump of his shoulders. "I'll get ready."

"Good." Elsbeth headed to her room.

With over six thousand feet of living space, conversations would echo and tumble through the house, bouncing off cathedral ceilings, amplifying whispers. The house was composed of three levels. The main floor held the usual suspects—a marble entry foyer, wood-paneled library, formal dining

room, and a modern kitchen that opened up to the great room. There was the basement of course, a place where she and Forest spent far too much time. And of course, there was the second floor.

Her room occupied the left wing—a spacious second master living suite with a sitting room adjoining her bedroom, including a walk-in closet and a bathroom with a jetted tub and steam shower.

Forest's rooms were on the opposite side of the house. He'd been allowed to take over two bedrooms joined by a Jack and Jill bathroom. He would sleep in one bedroom while the other glowed with light from multiple computer monitors.

Neither of them ventured upstairs. In five years, she'd never set foot on the bottom step of the staircase leading up to Clark Preston's bedroom.

Quickly, she set about the task of removing unwanted leg, pubic, and underarm hair, using a brand-new razor to ensure the smoothest finish. With plenty of time to spare, she made a pass of her room, straightening up. Then, she returned to the foyer and knelt on the first prayer rug.

Forest joined her a few minutes later, taking position behind and to the right of her. "Hey, Elz, you forgot your collar."

She grabbed at her neck, a moment of panic overtaking her. A quick glance at the clock had her heart thumping.

"I'll get it," he said.

She rose and took off down the hall. "No, I'll get it."

Was that the throaty roar of the Porsche?

She sprinted back to her room. *And where was the collar?* It wasn't in the tray beside her bed or attached to the chain hanging from the headboard. *Shit, where had he left it last night?* Her search turned frantic as the seconds ticked by, and that was most definitely the garage door rising on its tracks. The rumbly sound transmitted through her wall. *Shit!*

Elsbeth gave up the search and raced back down the hall. Her bare foot twisted on the corner of the rug, flipping the woven wool over. Crashing to her knees, she assumed the position of greeting moments before the door leading from the garage opened. Forest widened his stance, clasping his hands behind his back and lowering his head, as required. She pressed her palms to the ground and bowed, touching her forehead to her knuckles.

Clark Preston's dark force rolled across the gap separating her from him and settled with a heavy presence on her shoulders. A dark gray Armani

suit brushed the tops of his Salvatore Ferragamo dress shoes, and the firmness of his steps echoed in the expanse of the foyer.

Eleven steps—that was how many it took. Not ten, not twelve, but eleven. The number was precise and had been ingrained in her mind since she the age of twelve.

One...two...three...

Each thunderous sound snapped with the beating of her heart.

“Congratulations,” he said.

Four...five...six...

Her heart beat against the cage of her chest, pumping adrenaline through her veins.

Elsbeth squeezed her eyes shut, packaging up the fragile pieces of her mind and locking them away. She eased her breathing, not daring to show any signs of fear. He would seize upon her weakness and exploit it, and she didn't need to give him an advantage, not when he held all the cards. This was a war she could not win. A battle of attrition, however, that she would endure.

Eleven came much too quickly, and the polished leather of his shoe brushed her forehead. “Give your daddy a kiss, little one.”

Lifting her head, she brushed the top of his shoe with her lips. The ritual disgusted her, but as Forest had said, this was nothing but a channel of time. She would have to get from this moment to the next and through the one following that. That was the path they would take until morning came.

Survive. That was the goal.

Eventually, Clark Preston would tire and take to his rooms upstairs, and as he retired for the night, she would unlock those parts of herself she'd jealously guarded. All would be right.

If only she could find a way to make Clark Preston disappear forever and not merely for the span of a day...

Revulsion rippled through Elsbeth's body with the press of her lips against the fine Italian leather of Clark Preston's shoes. Everything about the man screamed power, control, domination, and terror, especially when he aimed his sick desires upon her and Forest. A rich man, he was deemed a perfect foster father, and the social workers loved that he preferred fostering older children. They saw his firmness as a strength to help troubled teens find their way through the system and into independent living.

In many ways, Forest's arrival had been both a blessing and a curse. He took pressure off the demands that had been placed upon her, but Clark Preston's carefully crafted threats would turn her hesitation to eagerness. Whatever it took to draw attention away from the scrawny little boy with perpetual tears in his eyes, she would manage.

And, with those memories swirling to the forefront of her mind, Clark Preston lowered himself into a crouch. As she suppressed a shiver, Elsbeth's breathing hitched. This wasn't the usual sequence of events. His slender but unforgiving index finger dug into the soft tissue beneath her jaw, forcing her head up. She lifted her eyes to meet the steel shimmering in his gaze while willing her body not to tremble at his touch.

"Little one," he said, "you forgot your collar. Tsk, tsk." The angle of his gaze cut over her shoulder, latching on to Forest standing at rigid attention. "Did you tell Elsbeth that we were having company?"

"Yes, sir." There was no hesitation in Forest's voice.

He couldn't protect her from the mistake. They both knew this, and to lie to Clark Preston was to invite punishment. Enough pain would come without either of them asking for more.

Clark Preston swept the hair off her nape. The flowing long strands brushed the expensive wool of the carpet. His fingers scraped against her skin, pebbling her flesh. "I am not pleased, little one."

She gritted her teeth. He was never pleased. Perfection was impossible. And forgetting her collar was a nearly unforgivable sin. Begging forgiveness would excite him, and for that reason, she said nothing, not that he'd granted her the right to speak. Her mouth had only one purpose, as far as he was concerned, and it wasn't to waste time with unnecessary words.

"It's a shame," he said with a sigh.

With her vision glittering behind a veil of unshed tears, the crystal of his watch flashed in her periphery.

"Our guests will be here at any moment. Now, my pets, where do you think we should entertain them?"

"I prepared the basement for you and your guests, sir," Forest said.

They had assigned tasks. Hers was to turn her body into a flawless tableau for Clark Preston's amusement. Forest's preparations weren't as extensive, but he was charged with setting up the basement each night. They would clean up afterward while Clark Preston stumbled upstairs to retire in his rooms.

The one saving grace in both their lives lay within the sanctuary of their rooms. For some reason, that space was inviolate. Not that Clark Preston couldn't call her out on a whim, but he never violated that space. When she was in her room, Elsbeth could relax.

He stood, towering over her, the gravity of his gaze suffocating. She couldn't look away, not until he gave permission.

His fingers tugged at his belt, loosening the buckle. "Well, my dear, I think ten strikes shall suffice, and then you will find your collar. In fact, just so you don't lose it again, you won't remove it for the rest of summer."

A whimper escaped her, and she nearly did beg. Wearing the collar wasn't an issue. It was a piece of leather, expensive as hell, and despite what it was used for, the collar was comfortable. It had been the words following his pronouncement that were the most damaging. *For the rest of summer*—those words sealed her fate. If he intended her to never take it off, there was no way she would be allowed outside.

The things that happened inside these walls never left them, and now, she'd be trapped without escape until the school year began again.

She'd tried once to reach out for help. The first week, when her caseworker had come for the obligatory checkup appointment for the newly placed child, Elsbeth had confided in the woman.

But the woman hadn't believed.

Instead of removing Elsbeth from the house, the social worker had expressed concerns to Clark Preston. The man was a lawyer with a silky tongue that could charm a snake. He'd convinced the woman that Elsbeth had fabricated the story because the new house intimidated her, and he'd asked if he could have another day to help Elsbeth work through her fears. That was the first time Elsbeth had spent a day immobilized in bed. Needless to say, when the social worker had returned, Elsbeth had retracted her wild story. Her voice had been contrite as she sealed her future.

Ten strikes?

He was letting her off easy, which served to heighten her fear.

What was he saving her for? Who was he saving her for?



End of sample chapters...Grab your copy
www.books2read.com/AshestoNew

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Heart's Insanity

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

The cool December wind whipped through the air, piercing the thin cotton of Skye Summers's scrubs. Spencer McAdams's Queen Anne townhouse stood before her as she twisted the diamond ring he had placed on her finger last night.

Funny, how she found herself here. Her complicated life could have headed in any number of directions, but the broken foster girl of her past was finally seeing all her dreams come true. Skye was *almost* normal.

With her stomach fluttering, she searched for her key. The day Spencer had given it to her, she'd nearly toppled over, but she rarely came here without him. Within a year, it would be *their* key.

Today, she planned on surprising him.

His favorite music played through the surround sound speakers, drowning out her grand entrance. A smile ghosted her lips. She would greet him with a kiss and finish with something more.

His shoes littered the marble entryway, and she placed her backpack beside the mess. Spencer had perfected the disorganized clutter of the quintessential bachelor. The tie he had worn last night dangled over the back of a chair, and his dress shirt was draped over the couch. It lay precisely where she'd tossed it last night after ripping it off his body. His

tailored pants were still sprawled across the hall, exactly where he'd kicked them off in his rush to get her to bed. The man was such a gorgeous mess.

She snuck down the hall and twisted her ankle as she stumbled over something. *A red stiletto?* Her stride faltered, and her gaze cut to a silk blouse lying in a crumpled heap. She grabbed the wall for support and stepped over a lacy bra. Another scrap of fabric was bunched on the floor not two feet away. It was a flimsy thong she would never wear.

She fisted her hand against her belly, her palm slick with sweat. With her heart banging against the cage of her chest, beating so feverishly she thought it would explode, she tiptoed. Discordant notes blared through the house, covering the sound of her footsteps. With each step forward, she feared what she would find, but she had to see for herself.

The cries of a woman spilled out of Spencer's master suite. She peeked inside. Spencer had his back to the door, his naked ass gyrating in a primal rhythm as he plunged into the woman sprawled on the bed. Skye's nails bit into the flesh of her palms as she curled her fingers into impotent fists.

He panted while the woman's staccato cries rose in counterpoint to his guttural moans. Long, slender legs were wrapped around Spencer's waist, and the woman writhed in orgasmic ecstasy.

Skye wanted to claw the bitch's eyes out. She wanted to scream, kick Spencer in the ass, stomp on his nuts, or cut off his dick. But she did nothing, not until Spencer looked over his shoulder. Only then did she gasp, mortified that she'd been caught spying.

He didn't stop fucking, but he did slow his pace. "What are you doing here?" His voice was filled with accusation, as if she had no right to be in his home.

She should have picked up one of those stilettos. Then she could have thrown one at his head. Instead she backed away.

"Don't you dare leave!" Spencer called out.

He had his dick buried in another woman, the cheating ass, and he wanted her to stay?

The trail of discarded clothing mocked her as she staggered through a veil of blurred tears toward the front door. She grabbed her backpack and slung it over her shoulder, desperate to escape. Her hands shook so hard that she could barely open the front door, but she made it outside where she stopped cold. Her emotions billowed in a turbulent flow. A normal person

would have been filled with rage, but humiliation and resignation were much more familiar emotions. She embraced those.

As she stood on Spencer's front stoop, she pulled the diamond ring off her finger. She had half a mind to leave it inside, but she wasn't setting foot back in that house. *Maybe she should toss it in the bushes?*

The ring wasn't hers. Not anymore.

For now, she placed it in the deepest pocket of her scrub pants. She'd give it back later.

Wasn't it enough that Spencer had shredded her heart? Now, the biting cold was also stealing her warmth. Icy tendrils pierced her flesh and delved deep to brush against her heart. She adjusted her backpack and snuggled deep into her heavy winter coat. The frigid wind clawed at her and then moved on in search of other victims. She was too numb to care, but she was determined to make it through the day, albeit mechanically and in an emotional fog.

To survive her upcoming twelve-hour shift in the emergency department, Skye made a list of things she needed to do. It was a coping mechanism she'd mastered years ago.

Hot cocoa.

Ride Metro.

Work.

Finish her shift.

Home.

Collapse with a movie and a gallon of coffee ice cream.

Pack for trip.

Shit. Spencer was supposed to join her on her mini vacation. Now, she'd have to go alone, and she hated traveling by herself. Like the ring, she'd deal with that later, too.

First, she had to make it to the coffee shop.

She slipped her hand into her pocket and clutched two carats of broken dreams. A symbol of love and trust, the ring was now nothing more than a shattered promise.

Recessed in the corner of her mind, a lingering doubt remained. Maybe Spencer had been right. Was it possible she was too damaged for love?

Enough!

Up ahead, the coffee house beckoned. Skye quickened her steps. Her breath coalesced in the frigid air and drifted away in the swirl of a passing

breeze, disintegrating, like her relationship and the future it had promised.

The small coffee shop had been her refuge during a grueling residency and still was today. It was a place where she had gathered with a small group of fellow residents who were coffee lovers. Leading up to their board exams, they'd crammed everything they needed to know about medicine while indulging in their favorite addiction—caffeine. With her residency finished, she still stopped in every day to get her favorite piping hot beverage.

Of course, she'd met Spencer there, too.

Maybe she needed new dreams and a new future?



CHAPTER 2

As Skye approached the coffee shop, two black Hummers pulled up alongside the curb. The drivers jumped out and rushed around their respective vehicles to open the passenger doors. Five men spilled out, two from the lead vehicle and three from the rear, laughing and joking, shoving one another toward the entrance. Despite the frigid temperature, they wore nothing but T-shirts and beat-up blue jeans.

Two ladies with snow-white hair approached the shop as well. Unlike the men, the women were hunched in their heavy jackets with scarves wrapped tightly around their necks as they shivered against the cold. The men scampered around the women, yanked on the door, and filed inside. The last man, tall and slender, kept the door from slamming shut while the women ducked under his arm.

Skye hurried to catch the door and snagged her toe on the uneven sidewalk. The man steadied her, gripping her arm. He stared down, his eyes a piercing forest green.

“Well, hello, beautiful.” A cocksure smile brought a mischievous twinkle to those eyes.

Skye shrugged herself free. Spencer's betrayal was too fresh, and her emotions were too raw for her to engage in any sort of flirtation.

With an unfriendly glare, she said, “Thank you.”

Skye gripped her backpack and moved quickly over the threshold to the back of the line. The invigorating aroma of brewed coffee washed over her, and she breathed deep. The welcoming warmth dispelled her chill, and she shrugged off her backpack, unzipped her heavy coat, and draped it over her arm.

The men from the Hummers had taken over her favorite corner by the fire, filling the plush leather couches with their large frames as well as the one chair she generally claimed as her own. They sprawled out, like they owned the entire store, taking up more room than they needed, despite the morning rush.

The place was packed with a standing-room-only crowd. Couples and singles buried their noses in their cell phones and tablets. A few people worked on laptops. And, sprinkled here and there, the rare newspaper or book found itself clutched in the hands of a reader engrossed in the magic of the printed word.

Skye basked in the normalcy of the pleasant atmosphere and let her shoulders drop as she exhaled in a desperate effort to keep herself together.

She glanced at the clock hanging behind the barista station. If she got her cocoa and left immediately, she could take the early train. Her boss would appreciate her relieving him a few minutes early.

Boisterous laughter exploded from the corner by the fire. By their casual postures and open expressions the men were more than simply good friends. They teased one another in a nonstop barrage of verbal put-downs and animated conversation, acting like frat boys but appearing a few years older than the standard college crowd. The decibel level of that part of the room rose at least ten points.

They sported a variety of hairstyles from a close-cut buzz to rocker-style long hair. One with curly dark hair caught her staring and winked. She couldn't see the one who had held the door.

The elderly women moved to the front of the line, and Skye shuffled behind them.

One of the women spoke, and her jowls wobbled with her shaky enunciation. “Frieda, can you see the menu? I don't want any of that fancy stuff.”

Her friend obliged and read the drink choices out loud.

Skye waited for the women to navigate the menu, and her thoughts turned to Spencer's clenching ass while he pumped into the unknown woman sprawled on his bed, the same bed where he'd made love to Skye the night before. An upwelling of indignation surged forth, seeking an outlet, but she found none.

The barista called out a name, something Skye didn't catch, and placed a cup on the counter. The man who'd held the door claimed the steaming beverage and returned to his friends as the two older women completed their order. They settled the bill after arguing over whose turn it was to pay.

Skye took a step forward as they moved off, still twittering about the bill.

The barista called out, "Bent, Bash, Spike, and Noodles," and placed four cups on the counter.

Odd names. Maybe they were in a fraternity?

Skye ordered and paid for her cocoa with the remaining balance left on a gift card Spencer had given her six months ago on her birthday. She wasn't sad to see the card go. She was eager to rid herself of all things Spencer. She stepped back to wait.

While the men lounged, the elderly women wobbled, bracing themselves against a counter behind one of the couches. The men propped their legs on the coffee tables, laughing and joking. Not one of them offered their seats.

Maybe it was the rock sitting in her pocket or the men's rude behavior, but an acute hatred of all things male burst forth, finally finding that outlet. Skye rolled her shoulders and stiffened her spine. She marched to the corner, dropped her backpack on the floor, and slapped the closest asshole on the back of his head.

"Get up," she said with more fury than intended. "Since when was it okay to run over old ladies and make them stand while you sit? Give up your damn seat!"

"What the fuck?" The tall one who'd held the door for her glanced up.

Skye jutted her chin forward and met the intensity of his gaze. Emerald green sparked and then shifted to follow her finger pointing toward the women. Frieda struggled to sip her coffee, fine tremors shaking her hand. Liquid sloshed over the rim, covering her hand and spilling onto the counter.

Skye poked his shoulder, a growl growing in her throat. “Get your sorry ass off the couch, and let them sit.”

The buff one with curly hair, who’d winked at her, gave an indignant snort. “Pretty girl, do you have any idea who you’re talking to?”

She put fists to her hips and lifted her chin. “Five men without a brain between them. Does it matter?” His mouth opened, but before he could speak, she held up a hand. “Seems to me you think being somebody is more important than good manners.”

She turned her attention back to the one who’d held the door. The tattoo on his neck, a web with a dragon, distracted her. She shook her head and refocused her anger. “Do you even realize your friends practically knocked down those poor ladies in their rush to get inside?”

A beefy man with piercings in his brows, nose, and lips shifted on the couch. “It’s fucking cold outside.”

“And you think those ladies were warm and toasty?” She lifted her jacket. “Newfangled invention, wiseass. It’s called a jacket. You’ll be surprised at the amazing warming properties it has.”

The green-eyed hunk snorted a laugh.

She pointed at each of the men in turn. “Did your mothers fail to teach you common courtesy? How would you feel if someone made your grandmother stand? Were you assholes raised by wolves?”

Green eyes huffed another laugh. He unfolded a lean body full of muscle to tower over her diminutive frame. He had the trim body of a swimmer with broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist. He stood entirely too close for her comfort, but she held her ground, which forced her to look up into his handsome and somehow familiar face. Her pulse jumped, but she refused to be intimidated by his size.

“Wolves? Not exactly. My mother did, however, teach me that a true lady never swore.” He laughed, filling the air with a soft, velvety thrum.

Damn, what a voice. Male, deep. Nice. Really nice and layered with tonal qualities she’d never experienced before.

Her broken heart stirred in the strangest way, probably latching on to the wrong thing.

Her cheeks burned with the insult, and she readied herself to give him another piece of her mind. But, first, she had to meet the power of his impossibly green eyes. They barely looked real, but she’d peeled enough

cosmetic contacts out of other people's eyes to know a natural green when she saw it.

And, now, she was staring. She lowered her gaze to the tattoo covering the entirety of his neck—a spiderweb with a dragon perched in the center, clutching a blackbird in its claw.

She endured the full force of his intoxicating scent—woody spice mingled with the aroma of coffee—and paused to admire him. The man was a potent combination of sight, smell, and sound.

A smirk tilted the corner of his lips, and a twinkle danced in his eyes. The cocky bastard knew the effect he was having on her. His stance broadened, and he puffed out his chest. She took a step back and regrouped, clearing her throat, before pointing again to the women.

He lifted his chin at his friend with all the piercings. “Get up, Spike.”

“Damn it, Ash.” Spike sipped from his cup. “Just when I was getting cozy, too.” But the big man rose and stepped over to the opposite couch. He took a seat on the armrest.

Spike's hard gaze latched on to Skye. She shifted her attention back to Ash and his stunning eyes.

Ash called out to Frieda and her friend, gesturing to the vacated seats, “Ladies, it has come to my attention that we have been exceedingly rude. Please, have a seat.” His mouth twitched into a smile as he glanced at Skye. Taking the women's cups, he stepped out of the way while they settled themselves.

The barista called out Skye's name and set her hot cocoa on the counter. What a perfect opportunity to make an exit. Skye collected her drink and left the coffee shop in a daze. Although trained in defense, she hated altercations, yet she'd faced down five strangers because Spencer had stirred her anger.

An icy gust beat at her as she headed to the Metro. A few blocks later, stairs led down into the subway and welcomed the morning commuters. She clutched her drink as she hurried down the steps to merge into the crowd.

Something felt off, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She patted her scrubs and felt the diamond safe in her pocket. Her lanyard with her badge swung around her neck. She tucked it back inside her heavy coat, but she sensed she had forgotten something. It was probably just her nerves.

Someone behind her called out, “Miss!”

Skye pivoted, surprised to see Ash jogging in her direction. His white T-shirt was pulled taut across the muscles of his chest.

What was he doing? Whatever it was, she wasn't in the mood to engage in a conversation with the arrogant bastard.

Turning back, she ignored him and followed the flow of the crowd.

"Hey!" His voice resonated down the escalator.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw he'd quickened his stride.

"What the fuck?" Annoyance salted the deep timbre of his voice, so like an arrogant prick.

Very much like Spencer.

"Come back here," he called out.

His feet pounded atop the concrete floor, and Skye did what she always did when a man confronted her.

She ran.



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Twist of Fate

EXCERPT

Chapter 1
Melissa

CONTRACTS

Melissa Patterson's ten-year wedding anniversary should have been a happy occasion, a milestone of marital bliss, not this soul-shattering death. She stood in her kitchen, gripping the stack of papers, and held back the tears as she stared at the top page.

Two simple scratches of ink were all it had taken to negate ten long years of marital terror.

Ten years ago, she'd been the proverbial blushing bride. The fairytale wedding had been the social event of the season. A perfect start to her first day in hell.

The divorce had been her lawyer's idea, as if she could ever separate herself from Scott Patterson's name. The world believed she'd been complicit in his crimes. Her lawyer said she deserved to be free.

Her shaky hand had scrawled a much less elegant mark than her husband's. Even on death row, Scott lost none of his confidence. The elegance of his signature mocked her hurried scratches, precise and

controlled like the killer inside. What had gone through his mind as he'd penned his name? She'd never know, and he'd die with his arrogance fully intact. Maybe then, she'd be free.

Melissa scrubbed the tears from her cheeks, glanced at the dirty dishes on the counter, the dried food needing to be scraped, the silverware cluttering the sink, and made the conscious decision to leave the mess for later. Scott would have never allowed such a thing, but this wasn't his house, and she didn't need to obey his rules. Not anymore.

A run would clear her mind. Melissa tossed the divorce papers onto the counter next to the dirty dishes and went to change into her running gear. Her pink and purple barefoot running shoes didn't match the blue and yellow of her outfit, but she had long since abandoned the need to maintain a perfect appearance. Scott's punishments were no longer something to fear, and after today, he would be gone for good. Her greatest fear was whether his harsh voice would still whisper admonishments in her head after his death. He'd done it from prison for the past three years, and she had no reason to believe that would change.

She yanked her hair into a lopsided scrunchy, and could almost hear Scott scolding her sloppiness. Gritting her teeth, she silenced his reprimand with a yank on her messy bun. Melissa grabbed her keys and locked the front door.

On the front porch, the headline of the morning newspaper screamed the top news:

Stay of Execution Denied for Fairytale Killer

With a swift kick, she sent the paper flying off her front porch where it splashed in a muddy puddle on the lawn, then she placed the key under the mat.

Gray clouds threatened. Maybe the rain would wash away the memories, drown out Scott's incessant nattering in her head, or cleanse the ache in her heart. A storm would be a perfect match to her mood.

A 10K run should do the trick.

Two kilometers in, the acidic burn of a fast-paced run heated her muscles. Her chest expanded, pulling in air with every third strike of her foot. She'd taken up running during Scott's trial, a long drawn out process lasting more than a year. Beating up her body had been exactly the therapy she had needed to endure the media circus imposed on her life. Every day

of that year was a living hell. The two years with him on death row had been little better.

By the halfway mark, her legs ached and her breathing deepened. Endorphins flooded her body, the famous runner's high achieved, and she relaxed into her stride.

Overhead, the gloomy sky darkened and dumped rain. One kilometer left. She welcomed the fat drops. The musty smell of the downpour invigorated her, even if the rain soaked her clothes. A thunderclap sounded overhead, a sharp sound, followed by a low, throaty rumble she felt more than heard.

Hail followed the thunder. A glance at the darkening clouds rewarded her with a bolt of lightning shattering the sky. The answering thunderclap followed a second later. The lightning was closer than was safe. She needed to get out of the weather.

The moist air ahead of the storm gave way to cooler temperatures, chilling her to the bone. Time to find shelter. Except for the trees, there was none to be found, and under a tree was the last place that was safe. Lightning crackled through the air, striking a tree across the park. Smoke spiraled into the sky as the tree sizzled.

Definitely, no trees!

Pea-sized pellets rained down from the heavily laden sky. Lightning flashed, syncing to the beat of a memory. Blinding pain when Scott struck with his belt. PTSD the therapist said. It would fade with time, he'd said. Her therapist said a lot of things Melissa didn't believe.

Five bolts of lightning struck in quick succession accompanied by resounding peals of thunder, and reminded her of the *whoosh* that preceded the strike of Scott's belt. Her heart skipped a beat, and the massive blast had her tripping over her feet.

Ten years of her life wasted. She screamed her frustration into the clouds, and ran as the force of Mother Nature answered her cry.

The jogging path met with a road a quarter mile down where the neighborhood park ended. She needed to get to one of the businesses on Main Street where she could wait out the storm. Time to pick up the pace.

The sky took on a greenish cast. Clouds dipped low, roiling as the storm whipped them to a froth. Wind beat at her, slamming hail into her from the right, then the left, swirling around as if unsure how to best launch its attack on her delicate flesh. Her heart rate spiked, not from running, but from the

sickening hue cast in the sky. Tornados, while rare, weren't unheard of in the small town of Fort Walton.

Melissa had never seen a tornado and didn't want to start now.

She quickened her pace, muscles protesting and lungs burning. The storm raged, building around her as if feeding off her turbulent emotions. Like Scott had done too many times to count, the storm lashed out at her, furious and raw, beating her until her skin stung. She stumbled, afraid for her safety, and angry she'd been so foolish to go running during a storm.

She turned onto the sidewalk that edged the tree-lined Main Street. Down the road, through the sheets of driving rain, a coffee shop's "Open" sign flashed a welcome beacon. She ducked her head and sprinted for safety.

Electricity filled the air and the tiny hairs on her arms lifted against her rain-drenched skin. A flash of molten light burned to her left. Her skin tingled. A concussive force slammed into her as she ran. She tumbled from the sidewalk into the street, arms and legs spinning in a wild tangle of limbs. Before her head hit the blacktop, twin headlights of a black SUV blazed in her eyes. The screech of tires had Melissa cringing for an impact which never came. Her vision dimmed, and she lost her fight to stay conscious.



Chapter 2
CJ

TWISTER

A petite brunette launched herself into the street. CJ slammed the brakes of his rented SUV, tires squealing over the wet pavement. The windows of the

car rattled with the storm, and his vision sparked with afterimages from a lightning strike.

He swerved, turning the wheel to avoid a spin. Steering through it, he tapped the brakes to regain traction. A large piece of hail landed on the front windshield, splintering the safety glass into a spider web of cracks.

“Fuck, fuck, and double fuck!”

He came to a stop and jammed the transmission into park. The woman was sprawled across the pavement. Had she been hit by that lightning? Was she dead? No way to know unless he got out of the car, but she wasn't moving. Shit, what was that noise? Sounded like a freight train.

He glanced left, peering through the sleeting rain. A funnel cloud snaked toward the ground less than half a mile away.

“Shit!” He unbuckled and vaulted out of the car. Every nerve in his body came alive. Fear over whether the tornado would touch ground, and concern for the lifeless woman, spiked through his veins.

Thank God he'd stopped.

Sprinting to the unconscious woman, he knelt at her side and felt for a pulse. A faint beat trembled against the pad of his finger. Still alive then.

After he had checked for obvious injuries, CJ pulled her over his shoulder, praying she didn't have a neck injury. He didn't have time to stabilize her cervical spine, not with a whirling beast trying to touch down.

Time to move.

Racing back to the car, he opened the hatch, thinking there'd be more room there, and set her down with as much care as possible. With another curse, he shut the back hatch as the growl of the tornado approached. Dirt and debris spun in the air.

Too damn close.

He scrambled to the driver's side and jumped inside. A roar filled the air as the tornado touched down and churned toward him.

With the windshield cracked into a thousand pieces, he couldn't see shit. He leaned back and kicked at the window until the sheet of safety glass crumpled outward.

Debris lifted by the wind hit him in the face. They had little time. He slammed his foot down on the gas. The tires screeched on the wet blacktop, slipping for a heart-breaking moment before launching him and his unconscious passenger forward through the thickening cloud of grass, dirt, and other debris.

Across the street, most of the local businesses were closed. A face peered out the window of a coffee shop. He prayed the person in the coffee shop sought shelter somewhere in the interior of the brick and mortar façade. He was headed to a garage he'd passed a hundred yards back. It should provide more protection against a tornado than a building.

If memory served, the ramp angled down, going below ground. He shifted his foot, tapping the brake to spin the car in a 180-degree arc. The tornado ripped up the ground behind him, destroying the manicured park. It rumbled down the street, chasing him.

"Fuck!"

Rain blinded him through the missing windshield and twigs slapped at his face. He blew through a red light. Everyone except him, and the crazy lady out for a jog, had taken shelter.

Something big slammed into the back of the car, lifting the rear wheels and making him swerve.

He regained control, thankful he'd been hit in the back instead of on the side or front. If the airbags had deployed, he would've been toast.

The parking garage came into view. He skidded, drifting the curve, and pulled into the entrance.

Sticks turned into branches and tree trunks. An awning from a local business cartwheeled in the air.

He barely heard the squeal of the tires over the freight train of destruction hurtling down the street. Turning the corner, he headed down to the next level; his ears popped with a sudden pressure drop. He had only a passing glimpse of the funnel as it brushed past the entrance, sucking parked cars up into its vortex.

He stopped another level down, pulling into a vacant space. His breathing was ragged, and his pulse thrummed along at a steady clip.

Behind him, the woman moaned.

He sighed. On leave, and he was still saving lives.

At least this one had survived. The same couldn't be said about his last mission. What a colossal cluster-fuck that had been. The paperwork still clogged his desk.

The storm continued to rage, but the tornado had moved on to play with other victims. CJ exited the vehicle to check on the woman's injuries.

The rental was ruined. In addition to the missing windshield, dents littered the roof and hood, and flying objects had gouged scores into the

quarter panels. Oh, and the rear bumper was missing.

He yanked on the back hatch, trying to open it. Whatever hit the car had twisted the frame. He tugged a few times, but it wouldn't budge. Thank God he'd purchased the extra insurance the rental agency strong-armed him into buying.

He'd have to drop the back seat and pull her out of the car through the back door. Since he didn't know how severe her injuries might be, he was a little reluctant to move her again. He fished out a flashlight from his luggage and climbed in the back.

Airway, breathing, and circulation intact, CJ moved to the secondary survey looking for other injuries. He ran his fingers through her matted hair. There was a lump beside the messiest ponytail he'd ever seen. Her hair was wet from the rain, but there didn't seem to be any blood. Her relaxed features made her seem so fragile. Fuck, but she was breathtaking.

What the hell was he thinking? The woman was hurt and unconscious. And he was supposed to be a professional, but damn, he wasn't dead.

She had a strong, steady pulse, and her chest rose and fell with an easy rhythm, both reassuring signs. The tight exercise clothes she wore distracted him. They clung too tight to her curves and pulled his eyes away from his professional assessment. Goosebumps prickled the skin of her arms.

Shit, the poor thing had to be freezing.

Her pained moan snapped him back to business.

Her left arm was bruised. No more lumps and no obvious broken bones. A medic by trade, he was suspicious of internal injuries. He continued with his assessment, lifting her shirt and lowering the waistband of her running pants. He grimaced at the deep bruising over the left side of her chest extending down to her hip. She might have cracked her ribs, but since her breathing wasn't labored, he wasn't concerned about damage to her lungs. Her abdomen, on the other hand, worried him.

He needed to call 911 but didn't have reception. The chance ambulances were running was low, and to complicate matters, he didn't know where the local hospitals were located. He needed to get to the street to make the call, maybe even Google hospital locations and take her himself.

She didn't appear to be in immediate danger although the bruising on her side suggested internal injuries. He'd feel better if she woke up.

He pulled off his jacket and covered her to keep her warm. Sharing body heat would be more efficient, but he could only imagine what she'd think waking up in a stranger's arms.

Instead, he made her as comfortable as possible. He crawled back over the folded rear seat and grabbed his duffle. He was cold too, drenched to the bone by the rain. The adrenaline coursing through his veins was fading, leaving him with shaky hands and chills.

Damn, the sleepy little town of Fort Walton was full of surprises. He came for an execution and now he'd survived his first tornado.

CJ stripped and changed into something dry.

While he waited, he pulled out the local daily paper and re-read the headline for the hundredth time:

Stay of Execution Denied for Fairytale Killer

He planned to watch a monster be put down. His sister would finally have justice, and he'd find peace.



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Off Duty

EXCERPT

OFF DUTY

By Ellie Masters and Lucas X Black

Chapter I

Laura

The call came in two hours before my shift ended. The situation sounded bad, a five-year-old fell from a climber at a local playground. Keith and Tom, our best critical care transport team, took the call. It was wrong that I looked forward to their arrival. I'd snuck glances at Keith since I'd been hired into this position. But I was the attending trauma doctor and Keith was a paramedic. In our line of work, we were worlds apart.

Years of experience told me what to expect. I pushed thoughts of Keith aside, and grabbed Tim Sanders, one of the pediatric emergency fellows, to join me. When I had been in his shoes, no one had taken the time to teach me this part of the job. Books taught about disease and how to cure it. Clerkships, residencies, and fellowships honed our skills in patching together the worst the world threw at hapless victims. But this? No one taught us how to deal with what was about to come through that door.

Two minutes out and my trauma team was ready. Tim looked too eager, bouncing on the balls of his feet, probably thinking about all the procedures he'd get to do.

Time to reel him in. "Tim!" My sharp voice cut through the ordered chaos of a waiting trauma bay.

"Yes, Dr. Peters?"

"Five-year-old, witnessed fall. Top priorities? Go!"

The bouncing stopped. Every case was a learning opportunity in my world. "Airway, breathing, circulation."

"Obvious. Then what?"

"Secondary injuries." He ran through our standard barrage of tests.

"The kid fell. What do we need to be most concerned about?"

My first year fellow stared blankly. The wheels in his head were spinning.

"You don't have time to think," I snapped. He flinched at the bite of my words, but I had no patience for those not at the top of their game.

Nancy, our senior trauma nurse pointed at her head, pantomiming head trauma, trying to give the poor guy a clue.

"Cervical spine immobilization?" Tim asked.

In the world of trauma there was no room to question the next move. "Wrong," I snapped again, losing my patience. "Head CT. Think subdural, epidural bleeds, and brain swelling. Call your specialists the moment you get this kind of call. Think about the mechanism of trauma and pre-plan the next step." I'd alerted the neurosurgeons to be on standby. Radiology already had the CT scanner waiting. This wasn't my first rodeo.

Sirens sounded outside, announcing the arrival of our patient. My team surged forward.

Keith and Tom off-loaded the stretcher, a tiny body lay on the adult-sized bed. Tom squeezed a self-inflating bag, breathing for the child and rattled off vital signs to Tim.

My mouth gaped as Keith straddled the small form, squatting on the stretcher while he pushed on the child's tiny chest, performing CPR. We'd never really spoken, but his eyes cut to mine, a simmering sadness reaching out to me. In that look, he told me all I needed to know. This wasn't one we'd be saving. I stepped aside, my gaze zeroing in on the mother climbing out of the ambulance looking scared, lost, and traumatized.

I gave Nancy a jerk of my chin, and without words she understood. Nancy flagged down Janice, a junior nurse, to join me.

I offered my hand to the mother. “Hello, my name is Dr. Peters, I’m the trauma attending and I am going to do everything I can for your child.”

The woman sobbed. “Thank you. My husband will be here soon.”

I put a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “What’s your son’s name?” First lesson, knowing patient’s names showed the family I cared, their loved one wasn’t some nameless diagnosis to me. Names had immense power.

She looked at me, red-rimmed eyes swelling. “Caleb. His name is Caleb.”

“This is Janice,” I introduced Janice. “She will explain what is happening. I’m going to take care of Caleb. Janice will take you where you can see everything we’re doing for Caleb.”

Except everything wasn’t possible. Caleb returned from the CT scanner, the results the worst I’d ever seen, a large bleed and his brain was swelling. The neurosurgeons didn’t have any options. Caleb’s heart stopped beating coming out of radiology. We brought him back, stabilizing him, but his heart showed signs of slowing again. It was time.

“Tim, we need to talk with them.”

I explained my process. How I set up the room, the words I used. How I looked parents in the eye to deliver bad news, telling the truth. I told him the importance of using names, of not using too much medical lingo, but speaking clearly, allowing for silence to stretch—sometimes for as long as it needed to. I told him not to forget to bring in tissues. I even admitted I usually cried, and to expect I would this time too.

“Um...Dr. Peters,” he said, “I’m not really comfortable talking to parents.”

“No one is, but we’re going to go in there and do it as best we can. This is their son.”

Caleb’s father looked at the clock. “There’s nothing you can do?” He hadn’t taken his eyes from the clock since I delivered the bad news. He couldn’t look me in the eye.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, no.”

His mother stroked Caleb’s head, her crying stopped for now. “Is he in pain?”

Another shake of my head. “No.”

“Can I hold him?” Her voice pulled at me, a mother needing to provide comfort.

“Of course you can.”

“I don’t want him hooked up to tubes.” The man hugged his wife, who gave him a nod, some deep communication passed between them.

I sensed something happening.

Tears pooled at the corners of his eyes. “Do you think there’s any possibility he’ll survive?”

For the third time, I shook my head.

Her husband stood, pulling his gaze from the clock. “We want to take him off life support...to die a natural death. We discussed...” He cleared his throat, then continued. “If possible, we’d like to donate Caleb’s organs so another child can live. Can we do this?”

They both looked expectantly at me.

I grabbed the box of Kleenex and pulled out a wad, dabbing at the tears in my eyes. “Yes, yes of course. And you can definitely hold Caleb.”

“Thank you,” the wife said. She grabbed a piece of paper from her purse and scribbled a note. Her hands shook. “Is it possible to give this to—to...” She pulled Caleb into her arms and broke down crying.



I found Dr. Sheldon, the transplant surgeon, at the end of my shift, staying over to find out if they’d found a recipient for Caleb’s organs. To my surprise, a child in our hospital was a match.

I handed him the note Caleb’s mother had written. “The mother of the donor wanted the parents to have this.”

He took it from me. “I’m headed to speak with them now. Do you want to give it to them yourself?”

Did I? I wanted to know what a mother would say.

“Yes.”

Dr. Sheldon led me to the waiting room where Josie and Mark Peterson waited.

“Their daughter’s name is Kelly,” he said.

“What organ is she getting?”

“Kelly is in kidney failure. She’s been on dialysis a long time.”

I walked into a waiting room and picked out the couple on sight. These were old timers, parents used to the rhythms of hospital life.

Dr. Sheldon introduced me.

I handed over the note. “I was asked to give this to you.”

The woman took it from me, her lips moving as she read the words. When she was done she held it to her chest.

Her husband, Mark, asked, “What does it say?”

Josie read the note out loud. “It’s from his mother, she says, ‘It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I wasn’t supposed to lose my son, but if his death means your child might live, then his life had meaning. He was my little hero.’”

Mark reached over and took my hand in his. “Please tell her, he’s ours as well.”

I never found the mother. Never relayed that message. Instead, I finished out my shift, my thoughts turning to the loneliness of my bed. The life of a trauma surgeon left little time for forming relationships, dating, or finding love. Hell, I hadn’t been laid in years. The closest I came were the dreams of Keith struggling to save a life. I imagined him crouching over me, breathing life into my dead lungs, and kickstarting my frozen heart. I hadn’t felt the excitement of anything beyond the cold words of a medical textbook, or the adrenaline rush of a trauma code, in nearly a decade. I needed more than a fuck. I needed someone else to make the life and death decisions in my world. My life sucked.



Chapter 2

Keith

I sat in the report room, drinking coffee and wishing it was tequila, and one hell of a lot of it. My report was electronically filed, and I swear I could almost taste the tequila. But I was on duty through the night until 7:00 in the morning. It was always tough with kids. In fifteen years working a 911

truck, I'd seen more carnage and horror than any decent man should be forced to face.

That kid Caleb ... shit like that was burning me out. And there was nobody to blame, for Pete's sake. A careless kid and an oops, and now he was dead. From the medical standpoint, I was glad Dr. Peters was there. She's the brightest star in one hell of a constellation of doctors here. Fair being fair, she's also the coldest and bitchiest of them. I'm close with a few of the doctors here, and with many of the nurses, and we can unburden to one another. But whatever humanity the woman has was reserved for her patients and their families. To the staff, she was all business, and zero emotion. I think she'd have been happier if patient care was entirely done by fucking robots. Sometimes, I think I'd be happier that way as well, and should get a job as a bank teller or some shit like that.

My thoughts returned again to Dr. Laura Peters, MD. She had a string of other letters following her name, embroidered in blue against her starched bright-white lab coat, which to me looked like a steaming pot of alphabet soup. She's an ice queen. She's also drop-dead beautiful, if the truth be known, long and slender, really even elegant. If she showed a bit of humanity, I could even have a crush on her. But that wasn't going to happen. I'd been through five girlfriends over the past two years. They were a good match in my dungeon and in my bed, but ultimately, four of them said I was simply too cold for them. The other simply couldn't handle the hours I worked. Working 48-hours on-duty, and then 96-hours off-duty, had good and bad points, but meant I seldom had an entire weekend off work. *Who knows, I considered. Maybe I've become a robot, but if so, why am I sitting here fighting crying about Caleb and his parents who looked destroyed?*

I guess the reverie could've lasted all day and into the night, but my walkie-talkie toned, a man-down call at Marson Park. Tom and I trotted to the ambulance, then drove to Marson Park, where we found a wino passed out drunk, reeking of things I didn't want to consider. Jimmy Fletcher, a frequent flyer who needed to dry out. Again. We ran him to the VA, my third time to transport him in the past year, and God alone knew who else ran him how many times.

I wasn't hungry, but needed to eat, so we went out of service and found a burger joint near the VA hospital, where I ate a burger and fries, washing it down with a Coke, barely tasting any of it while brooding about poor

Caleb. Tom was a good guy, I guess, but he was pretty much a basic EMT driver, eight months out of school, twenty-one or maybe twenty-two years old, green as a gourd ... he simply didn't understand yet. One way or another, I wasn't fond of him and we certainly hadn't bonded. But I was patient. What the hell, I had been much the same way when I'd been a greenhorn like him, a total trauma junkie with very little empathy. But I'm older now. Maybe I'm even wiser.

Fortunately, the rest of the night went quietly. There was one COPD patient who called around 10:00 that night and was a routine transport on oxygen and an IV of D5W. The lieutenant asked if I was willing to work to 11:00 AM for comp time, and I declined. Actually, I think my exact words were "fuck off and die," if I'm going to be brutally honest here. I had four days off and meant to spend them blitzed on booze. I was home at 7:30 and drunk as fuck by 8:30 before I dropped onto my couch to find a movie on HBO. I woke up at noon, hung over and needing to piss. After, I built a ham sandwich, I noted I'd need to hit the grocery store before long.

I ate the sandwich, brooding while I watched TV and slowly sobered up. Already, I knew I'd be drinking myself to sleep. But I had to get the fuck out of my house for a while. It was too lonesome and too depressing. I was still brooding about that poor kid Caleb. And for reasons I couldn't explain, my thoughts also kept circling to Laura Peters, M.D. and a whole pot of alphabet soup.

At 6:00, I fired up my pickup truck to drive into town. It was an ancient 1980 GMC K-15 that I kept in immaculate condition. It had belonged to my father, who'd died when I was 17. Mom bumped it down to me and I'd kept it ever since. It was a relic. It even had an 8-track stereo system. The original red paint had grown dull, and a hell of a lot of it had flaked away, but I spent a small fortune having it restored into an enviable glittering candy-apple red. I'd even won blue ribbons for it at three antique auto shows held hither and yon.

I drove to Louie's, a steak place out on Highway 11, and went in, then ordered a huge porterhouse and a pitcher of Budweiser. Like a cop, I sat at a table with my back to the corner, facing the crowd and the door. Life had made me a bit paranoid, I guess. I was surprised to see Dr. Peters alone at a table thirty feet from me, with a bottle of wine before her, eating what looked to be a piece of baked chicken. I pondered saying hello to her, but decided against. I drank my beer and reflected on her beauty as opposed to

my feelings about her. I kept circling the fact that I don't like her and sure the hell didn't want to socialize with her. My steak dinner arrived and I attacked the 24-ounce Porterhouse. But my eyes remained on Dr. Laura Peters, M.D. and a pot of alphabet soup.



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Learning to Breathe

EXCERPT

Why were dead people so much better at revealing their secrets than the living? Sally Levenson covered the woman with the starched sheet, and then pushed the body back into the freezer. The metallic door closed with a solid *thunk*, and she peeled off her surgical gloves with a *snap!*

She tossed them into the waste bucket, wrinkling her nose at the smell. Not only were her hands tacky after a long day encased in nitrile, but they reeked of stale rubber mixed with the stench of sweat.

Her back ached from the long hours on her feet, and the beginnings of a headache throbbed behind her eyes. Normally, an autopsy lasted no more than a few hours. This one? She'd been at it all day and still wasn't done.

What had seemed like yet another junkie overdose had turned into something else. The pretty brunette had been found in a back alley with a needle stuck in her arm and puncture wounds in her thigh.

A massive heroin overdose had killed the girl, but that wasn't the end of her story. She had secrets to tell, and Sally was listening. One needle had been inserted into a vein, but the woman had been stabbed with several others. That's when the dead girl had started to spill the mystery of her death.

Junkies were beyond good at finding veins. Freakishly good, they invariably found their *Highways to Heaven*, but sometimes even dedicated addicts ran out of places to poke. Never had she seen them inject into muscle. Absorption was erratic and the high blunted. The girl's body was one endless track of needle marks, but she still had several usable veins left. There was no reason to jab needles into the muscles of her thigh.

There'd been bruising around the neck too. Another secret revealed. People thought she was odd when she said the dead spoke, but everybody's story was written on their body, and inside as well. Sally happened to be an expert in getting to the root of those secrets.

For example, the bruising around the neck was not the cause of death. There were no signs of a struggle either. No defensive wounds. Nothing under the fingernails but dirt and grime. No clumps of missing hair. The girl hadn't died from strangulation. She'd barely been conscious enough to fight whoever had done it. Which meant the choking was either consensual, perhaps the girl was trading favors in kink to supply her habit, or, she'd been too out of it to realize her life was in danger.

Either way, whoever had choked her had stopped before the girl died. Maybe they'd chickened out? Maybe the girl was already well on her way to oblivion at the end of an overdose? Except that didn't make sense either. Someone administered a lethal overdose to make it look like the girl OD'd. Of that, she was certain.

Which brought her to the weirdest thing about this case. Whole cloves, not the ground up spice people used in cooking, were in the girl's mouth. They'd been there when the girl was alive because a couple of the woody stems had been aspirated into her lungs.

It was time to call Detective Mackenzie and let him make sense of this. Her job was to collect the evidence. The questions of how and why belonged to the detectives.

She dialed Mac's cellphone, but it went straight to voicemail.

"Detective Mac, it's Doctor Levenson. I need you to call me as soon as you get this. I'm pretty sure this heroin overdose wasn't self-inflicted. I'll be finishing up my report tomorrow, but please call me as soon as you get this. Reid was asking about this earlier. I assume he's consulting with you again, so I'm going to call him too."

Her news wasn't necessarily urgent. The body would wait until the morning, but important evidence at the crime scene might be lost. With Mac not answering, she dialed Reid's number. Unfortunately, his cellphone went to voicemail as well. She repeated the message she'd given Mac.

A slow, ponderous *tick tock* pulled her attention to the industrial no-frills clock hanging above the two swinging doors. Ten minutes until six, and if she didn't hurry, she was going to miss Derek's call. Oddly peculiar

about calling precisely at six, she found herself becoming conditioned to expect the call...and eager.

Life had become stale, tasteless, and dull, about as exciting as the corpses she talked to during the day. Work filled her days. Books and television shows spanned the hours from getting home to falling asleep. There had been no joy. Nothing to look forward too. No giddy, stomach flipping excitement. Just dull, tasteless life.

Then Derek LeMark showed up. He stole her breath, and, along with a kiss, made her laugh and smile again. He had her looking forward to every evening with his promised call. The air felt different too; charged with an energy she didn't understand. Fresher and brighter, it smelled different. Tasted better, richer, if that were possible. And instead of plodding along, her days raced by. No longer aching alone, he'd formed a connection with those nightly calls.

Excitement vibrated in her chest with her rush to her locker. Her fingers trembled spinning the dials of the combination lock. What the two of them were building wasn't clear, but his interest mirrored hers. The daily calls confirmed that, even if they hadn't had a chance for a second date, yet.

Her phone bounced in her hand while she waited. The sultry tones of Derek's deep baritone would soon be caressing her soul. With the exhaustion of the day, she took a seat on the bench between the rows of lockers and hoped they would be able to find time for that second date.

It was time to get away from the corpses who whispered the story of their deaths and spend time with the living. Not that she was complaining. Long days were a part of the job, as was the lack of conversation.

Six pm and the phone rang. Her heart jumped. Sally cleared her throat to find her voice and steady the excitement racing in her veins. "Hello?"

"Sally," the deep rumbling of Derek's voice made her insides quiver. "How was your day?"

A glance toward the doors to the autopsy room had her wanting to talk about anything other than what had kept her occupied all day long.

"Busy. Had a routine case which turned complicated. How was your day?" Her fingers clutched the phone, desperate for more contact from this enigmatic man. The urge to ask if he was back in town barreled down on her, but she held herself in check. Being too needy had never been her thing.

"I need to see you."

Goosebumps pebbled her flesh with the thread of desire tunneling through his voice. Love had filled her marriage. She'd been happy and content, but then Thomas had died. She wanted her heart to flutter, the butterflies to dance, and her blood to heat with desire again. She'd lived too quiet of a life since becoming a widow.

"You do?" Her voice wavered, exposing her emotions. She hated that transparency, as if her entire existence hinged on what he might say next. Sadly, it did.

"Are you available tomorrow night?"

The automatic *yes* to his request stopped at her lips. She waited for an appropriate span of time before blubbering her eagerness through the phone. Of course she was available. She had no life. Holding back that one word, that one syllable, took every ounce of her will. It killed her not to rush into that silence, but she held herself in check, playing it *cool* like some love-struck sixteen-year-old.

He had that effect on her; really it was everyone. She'd watched him at the ballet. Derek LeMark was a man women felt before they laid eyes on him. He'd done that to her. From that first evening at the ballet, and through that very first dinner, she'd felt every bit of him.

"I understand if you're busy," he said, perhaps trying to give her an out, "but I'd love if you joined me tomorrow night. *Giselle* is playing."

He knew her passion for the ballet. Was it possible for a heart to flip for joy?

"I'd love to," she finally blurted out, trying not to sound too eager, but incapable of hiding her excitement.

"Great. Do you think it would be possible to take Thursday off? I'm planning a late night."

The caution in his tone pulled her up short. "How late?"

"Late enough that you won't want to head in to work. Will that be a problem?"

"I can't take the whole day, but I can arrange to come in late." And work even later. The thing about being the Medical Examiner for the county was she had no set hours. People died all the time, and dead people didn't care how long they waited on her table before she began her exam.

"Perfect," he said. "I was hoping you could meet me like last time. I'm flying in late so won't be able to pick you up."

"I'd love too."

“And I wanted to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“My friends will be joining us in my box. I didn’t want it to be a surprise.”

His friends would be there? Her stomach tightened. A date with Derek was one thing, but a group of strangers? Hello, social phobia.

She choked out the words. “I’d love to meet your friends.”

His throaty rumble eased her fears. “I’m happy to hear that, and don’t worry, I won’t leave your side.”

People scared her. It’s one of the reasons she worked with the dead, but the pull of his voice said to trust him. He didn’t know her well enough to understand her social awkwardness could be crippling. Her husband had been the life of the party. She was used to hovering beside Thomas and distancing herself from the attention of others. But as long as she had someone to gravitate toward, she would be fine. Derek would have to provide that anchor now, whether he knew it or not.

“We’re having dinner after the show, and I have a surprise.”

Surprises made her anxious, but for him, she would play along. “What kind of a surprise?”

His low chuckle made her squirm, like liquid heat that sound fluttered against her nerves. “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise...but Sally...”

“Yes?”

“I’m serious about being out late.”

“Okay.” She’d make arrangements.

“I’ll leave your ticket at will-call and meet you in my box.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“As am I,” he said. “I’ve missed the taste of your lips.”

Her fingers pressed against her lips, remembering the passion of that kiss.

“Good night, Sally,” he said. “Until tomorrow.”

The connection ended, leaving her gripping the phone and tracing the seam of her lips. She missed the taste of him, too. His potent and enticing scent, sandalwood and something darker, had filled her dreams for weeks. She wanted to feel his touch, perhaps somewhere more than simply holding hands.

“Good night, Derek,” she whispered to the empty room.



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Becoming His

EXCERPT

What if I can't give you red or green?

That had been Sally's response to Derek's question about becoming his submissive. He ordered her to make a choice. One opened doors. The other ended everything before it even began. She'd never know if she belonged in Derek's world unless she took a leap of faith, but she was smart enough to appreciate the inherent dangers of moving too fast.

Red or Green. She needed a middle ground. A *yellow* would have been nice, but he'd only offered *red* or *green*. Had that been intentional?

Make a choice, he'd said.

Her decision hung somewhere between yes and no. She'd inadvertently found something worth living for in Derek, or rather had been surprised he'd brought such a richness of flavor back into her dull existence. He'd promised her a taste of something more, and she wanted to savor it, explore it, and perhaps live it, too.

The force of his personality intrigued her, and he had an uncanny ability to delve deep inside her mind and know exactly what she would do, sometimes before she even knew which way she would jump. What he offered promised to spice up an otherwise bland and flavorless existence. *Red or green?*

However, as tantalizing as that night on his yacht had been, his ultimatum gave her pause.

You know what I want, he said. *You need to decide two things.*

His words repeated in her mind, turning over and over, twisting around and around, generating more questions than she had answers.

She'd tried to give Derek a knee-jerk response at Del Mar's diner. Beating on the window of the town car, she'd ordered the driver, Dan, to take her back. Again, Derek had read her mind, knowing what she would do before she'd even formulated the thoughts. Perhaps in ordering Dan to ignore her, Derek had forced a pause on what they were becoming.

Dan, however, turned mute on her, ignoring her demand to turn around and take her back to Derek. Adhering to Derek's orders, Dan kept driving. He didn't take her to the garage where she'd left her car after last night's ballet but drove her to the Medical Examiner's office, where a dead body and a long afternoon of work waited.

It didn't matter that she understood the why behind Derek's actions. His decision to overrule her choice was a difficult pill to swallow. Nevertheless, there was nothing she could do about it.

Dan drove, parked, and opened her door.

"Miss Sally..." Dan was all brusque and business-like, except for the odd address: not Doctor Levenson, but Miss Sally, which implied he, too, was involved in the lifestyle. "Your car will be delivered in a few hours."

Was that a smirk on his face? Yes? No? Great, now she was imagining things. But damn if that didn't look like amusement twitching at the corners of his eyes. It didn't escape her notice that by not having her car, Derek had effectively trapped her at work.

"You do realize you basically kidnapped me?" Crossing her arms over her chest, she straightened to her full height, falling far short of Dan's six-foot-plus frame. Her attempt to stare him down failed.

That twitching turned into a full-bodied smirk. Yeah, he was having fun with this. "I'm not in the business of kidnapping unwilling women."

"Take me back." At least her voice held firm. This man had an undeniable presence about him, too, but she refused to be bullied by him. Dan lacked the overwhelming-ness of Derek but still exuded a gentle power. It felt very different, softer than Derek, more of a caregiver than a master.

He shut the back door of the town car and placed a hand on top of the roof. "Master Derek has instructed me to remind you about the case you have waiting."

Of course she had a case waiting. The panicked tone of her office assistant, Bruce, had her itching to see what it was about this body that had him on edge. He'd been at the office for five years. Mostly clerical in

nature, his duties extended to the care and maintenance of the lab's equipment, body preparation and disposition once she completed her exams, and whatever odd jobs required attention.

Dead bodies were a part of the job. As they came and went, he'd seen his share of mutilations, stabbings, gunshots, and worse. Why this particular body had him on edge had her concerned.

Derek and Dan were correct on that front. She did have a job to do, and it wasn't something she'd walk away from. Actually, right now, she could use the distraction.

Derek's words whispered in her head. *You need to decide...Are you willing to surrender your will?* That question tunneled straight to her gut, twisting into a tangled mess, but that was nothing compared to what it had done to her heart. He'd burrowed deep with those words and lodged his presence firmly in her life. However, it was the second question that gave her the greatest pause.

And why?

Hell if she knew. Maybe Derek had been on to something? That second question needed to be answered before she answered the first. Until she discovered the answer to *why*, there wouldn't be a way to answer about surrendering to him.

A gust of wind tickled her cheek, blew hair into her mouth, and flicked at her eyes. She gathered the long length of her hair and secured it into a ponytail. Maybe her subconscious would stew over Derek's questions while she lost herself in work.

Tugging in a deep breath, she blew it out in a huff. "Fine," she said, "but don't think this is over."

"Miss Sally..." Dan's brows tugged together, a deep furrow creasing his forehead, "I'm supposed to remind you to look over the websites Master Derek assigned." Dan seemed to know a great deal about Derek's plans.

"I'm well aware of his assignments," she snapped, then turned, leaving Dan at the curb.

Breezing into the front office, she was surprised to find it empty. She headed to the locker room to change and grabbed a pair of scrubs from the rack of clean laundry. A few minutes later, she'd changed and tied her ponytail into a messy bun. That was the only drawback of this job. She had to keep her hair up.

Grabbing a cap and mask, she headed into the exam room, startling poor Bruce with her sudden appearance. The tray in his hands fell to the floor with a loud crash. Instruments spilled across the linoleum.

Bruce spun around. “For the love of God, why do you always do that to me?”

“Sorry.” She headed to the rack of gloves attached to the wall and snapped on a pair of size small, blue nitrile gloves. Ah, the smell of rubber. So it begins. “Let me help you with that.”

She bent down to help gather up the instruments. He’d have to get another set. Sterility didn’t matter with the dead, but they needed a clean set to avoid contamination of potential evidence. Her methods and practices were pristine, and she didn’t want to think about what could be on this floor.

They placed the instruments back on the metal tray. She stood and stretched, turning to take in the body while Bruce went to grab another set of instruments.

Unremarkable in appearance, the victim appeared to be late thirties. He looked oddly reposed in death, peaceful. A stark contrast to the ragged gash over his abdomen, and yes, there was indeed a white, creamy substance leaking out from the edges of the wound.

A white sheet covered his waist. Why Bruce insisted on maintaining the dignity of the dead confused her to no end, but he did. He did it with an almost religious fanaticism which was odd considering the first step of her exam was always a full series of photographs. For that, everybody got stripped. The dead had no need for modesty. One of the things she loved about Bruce, he didn’t discriminate. He covered the women as well, drawing a sheet over their hips and using smaller towels to drape across their breasts.

“Tell me about him.” She walked over to her desk and grabbed the camera.

“He was found in a back alley.”

“And why the urgency?”

Rushing a report helped no one. Meticulous adherence to protocols ensured the information she gathered allowed the District Attorneys to successfully prosecute their cases. She also worked closely with Homicide. People like Detective Mackenzie were crucial to the successful gathering of

evidence. They were all critical links in that ever-important chain of custody for evidence collection.

Whoever had a bug up their butt, and thought they could pressure her through Bruce to rush this exam, could cool their heels. This exam would take as long as it took.

Already past noon, complicated autopsies like this one would keep her well into the evening hours, and she probably wouldn't finish processing all the slides until Friday.

With a sigh, she stepped close. At first, she did nothing, taking a moment to form initial impressions. The man had been dead for some time. Lividity had set in hours ago.

"Did they take liver temps?" She turned to Bruce, hoping those on scene had followed procedure.

"They did. Liver temp on scene was 19.5 Celsius."

She did the math. Every hour past death, core body heat dropped by one-and-a-half degrees Celsius until it equilibrated with ambient temperatures. Holding out her hand, she asked. "Get me the temperature probe."

Ever helpful, Bruce handed over the slim metal probe.

"Can you get me a report on the last 48-hours of ambient temperatures, please?"

"On it," he said, sitting at the desktop computer. The tapping of the keys, as he searched relevant information, broke up the silence of the sterile exam room.

She inserted the temperature probe through the same hole the on sight examiner had used, making certain to hit the center of the liver. The temperature stabilized at 17 Celsius.

The deceased's face had taken on the classic grimace associated with contractions as the protein, ATP, drained from his muscles' cells. Rigor had set in.

"Can I have my recorder?"

Bruce handed over her voice recorder, and she settled it around her neck.

"Temps last night were in the low fifties," he said.

"Fahrenheit?" He'd have to convert that.

"Sorry. Ten Celsius."

"Check the math on the liver temps, please."

With a push of a button, she spoke into the recorder using a clear voice. “Body is clearly in the rigid stage of rigor mortis. Facial, upper neck, and shoulder muscles are tense.” She lifted an arm and checked bicep and wrist flexor movement. Completely fixed. “Lower arms as well.”

Pinching the toes, she moved to push on the ankles which completed her assessment. “Entire body is stiff, which is in line with whole body rigidity occurring eight to twelve hours after death. That with liver temperatures...” She glanced at Bruce.

“If we assume 10 Celsius as an average temperature...” He pulled out a calculator and did the math. “If the liver temp was 19.5 Celsius on scene, then time of death was...” He glanced at the screen.

She completed the calculations in her head. “Time of death is approximately eleven hours from when the team arrived on scene.” The body had dropped another two and a half degrees since then, which meant the man had died around midnight last night.

Bruce nodded, his calculator confirming what she already knew.

“Okay,” she said, more to herself than to Bruce. “Let’s do this.”

She snapped an initial set of pictures, making certain to get quality images of lividity. It was impossible to know what the prosecuting team would find useful in their case. In her line of work, more was always better.

“Interesting tattoos,” Bruce said.

“Yeah, incredible really.”

“They have the same three-dimensional effect as that junkie we looked at. Remember? The one with the rose thorns?” Bruce added.

“Yeah, that must be like a new trend.” She handed the camera to Bruce. “Get a good set of pictures of the tattoo, please.”

In cases of unknown identity, standard procedure required dental molds and X-rays, in addition to finger prints. In recent years, with the prevalence of tattoos invading mainstream society, they had better luck if they used tattoos to identify bodies.

It was still a long, laborious process, but fortunately not one she had to worry about. Bruce would turn over the photographs of the tattoos to the crime scene investigators. They would do the legwork and track down the tattoo parlor that had inked it and hopefully match receipts to discover who John or Jane Doe might be.

Bruce took the camera and clicked away, leaving her a moment to admire the skill of the artist who’d inked the tattoo. Another three-

dimensional rendering, this man had a scorpion crawling over his left shoulder. The shadowing made it look as if it were real, rather than inked into the skin. Over the right bicep, a black widow had a foreleg lifted, and silken strands jetted backward, forming a web over the man's shoulder. It curved around to his scapula. As impressive as that one was, the one that took her breath away was the raw, ragged edges of skin peeling back to reveal a metallic framework inside. It looked so real, she had to touch it to convince herself it was simply a tattoo.

Instead of the ghost inside the machine, this was a depiction of the machine inside the man. It was at once poetic and profound.

There was a gash over the abdomen. A real one. Congealed blood had crusted at the skin edges, and with the contraction of tissues, a creamy, white substance oozed out of the cut. No wonder it had Bruce on edge.

She tented her fingers and forced herself to ignore the obvious. That gash would have her full attention soon enough. For now, she fell back on her highly-structured exam protocols and moved to the head of the bed to begin.



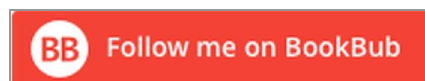
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Final Thoughts

I hope you enjoyed this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you enjoyed reading this story, let other people know. Friend recommendations are the strongest catalyst for readers' purchase decisions! And I'd love to be able to continue bringing the characters and stories from My-Mind-to-the-Page.

Second, call or e-mail a friend and tell them about this book. If you really want them to read it, gift it to them. If you prefer digital friends, please use the "Recommend" feature of Goodreads to spread the word.

Or visit my blog <https://elliemasters.com/>, where you can find out more about my writing process and personal life.

Come visit The EDGE: Dark Discussions where we'll have a chance to talk about my works, their creation, and maybe what the future has in store for my writing.

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Thank you so much for your support!

Love,
Ellie

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About Ellie Masters

ELLIE MASTERS is a multi-genre and best-selling author, writing the stories she loves to read. These are dark erotic tales. Or maybe, sweet contemporary stories. How about a romantic thriller to whet your appetite? Ellie writes it all. Want to read passionate poems and sensual secrets? She does that, too. Dip into the eclectic mind of Ellie Masters, spend time exploring the sensual realm where she breathes life into her characters and brings them from her mind to the page and into the heart of her readers every day.

Ellie Masters has been exploring the worlds of romance, dark erotica, science fiction, and fantasy by writing the stories she wants to read. When not writing, Ellie can be found outside, where her passion for all things outdoor reigns supreme: off-roading, riding ATVs, scuba diving, hiking, and breathing fresh air are top on her list.

She has lived all over the United States—east, west, north, south and central—but grew up under the Hawaiian sun. She’s also been privileged to have lived overseas, experiencing other cultures and making lifelong friends. Now, Ellie is proud to call herself a Southern transplant, learning to say y’all and “bless her heart” with the best of them. She lives with her beloved husband, two children who refuse to flee the nest, and four fur-babies; three cats who rule the household, and a dog who wants nothing other than for the cats to be his best friends. The cats have a different opinion regarding this matter.

Ellie’s favorite way to spend an evening is curled up on a couch, laptop in place, watching a fire, drinking a good wine, and bringing forth all the

characters from her mind to the page and hopefully into the hearts of her readers.

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THE END



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