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BROCATO

RISKING  
THE  
VINE



ROMANCING THE VINE - BOOK 1

# RISKING THE VINE

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ROMANCING THE VINES BOOK 1

GEMMA BROCATO

## ABOUT THE BOOK

**Deciding to risk all, finding him in the end is the most intoxicating reward.**

Jacqui Bishop's dating life is dead in the water, but her professional prospects look outstanding. Promised a management position, she embarks on a team building course at a northern California winery. Shocked when her boss promotes a less qualified rival, Jac opts to chuck her job and revive the family farm.

Luscious Luke Rossi has been banished to Team Vino to learn how to be the team player his boss wants. Once there, he finds he'd rather play on Jac Bishop's team. But a labor dispute and a boss who only wants a yes-man force him to leave Jac's side.

As the daytime exercises give way to nighttime passions Jac learns there's more to life than a nine-to-five existence. But resigning her job and moving to a farm hundreds of miles from Luke could spell doom for the couple. Their affair will require teamwork of a different kind.

For Jac, the looming question is whether her budding relationship with Luke will thrive or die on the vine.

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## **Risking The Vine**

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## CHAPTER ONE

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Within seconds of slamming the gearshift into *Park*, Jacqui Bishop turned the key in the ignition, plunging her world into silence just as *Imagine* Dragons started singing about failed dreams and demons. The sudden hush was broken only by birdsong from the towering oaks shading the lot.

Team Vino. What kind of name was that for a team building camp? She squinted out the window, peering at the Victorian structure at the end of the flower-lined path. The wraparound porch and white clapboard siding were perfect foils for the tall windows marching across the first and second stories. A placard next to a side door read *Office*. To her right stood a nicely landscaped pole building with a cheery red awning proclaiming it as Winery and Gift Shop.

This would be her home for one week. Her employer's idea, sending her here to learn how to lead the fifty-person admin department for the medical billing company where she'd worked for the last three years. Once she completed this course, they had to promote her. Her boss had promised as much before she'd agreed to attend the seminar. Or camp, or whatever they were calling it.

Most of the other staffers in her department already sought her out for answers on the tougher questions. Before she left her condo in Oregon this morning, she'd fielded three urgent phone calls because the other candidate for the promotion, Deidre Fleury, had effed up—no surprise there—and opted to hide behind closed doors rather than fix her mistake. Probably playing *Trivia Crack*.

Once Jac had landed in San Francisco, there were a half dozen text messages from her co-workers. Deidre had finally surfaced and was providing implausible answers about a snag they'd run into with a client. Jac had the issue resolved with two quick phone calls.

How the woman was being considered for a promotion was a mystery. Well, not so much a mystery since Jac knew nepotism had reared its ugly head when they'd hired the woman. Deidre was related to the owner. Jac had worked her way up the ranks, despite not being a relation.

And while she still fumed about being sent on this fool's mission disguised as a training exercise to advance her career, Jac *was* charmed by the mansion. She'd secretly welcomed the chance to spend time at this vineyard in northern California. She'd practically grown up on her grandparent's herb farm outside of Eugene. The family still owned four hundred acres in the Willamette valley. Her cousin had moved in after Gramps had passed away. Jac hadn't seen the place in over a year, but with just her first glimpse of Team Vino, nostalgia for summers spent on the farm flooded her.

She gathered her purse from the passenger seat and exited the rental, the door handle cool under her palm despite the warmth of the early autumn day. Stepping from the car, the pea gravel underfoot dug into the soles of her shoes, causing her to hasten across the lot toward the main house. Checking in this early, she'd have plenty of time to explore the grounds before the sun set.

Her high heels clacked on the wooden porch as she crossed to the door. Inside the house she paused, temporarily unable to see in the sudden dimness. She pulled off her sunglasses before stepping through the doorway to the office.

The woman behind the desk offered a tentative smile. "Hello. May I help you?"

"I'm Jacqui Bishop. I'm here for the team building program."

"Ah! Welcome. I'm Jules Rosetti." The woman's grin lit her face and illuminated her sky blue eyes. She stood and



extended her hand in a hospitable way. “You’re here from MedServices in Medford, right?”

Grasping the woman’s warm hand, Jac felt immediately at ease. She smiled. “Guilty.”

“You say it like it’s a crime,” Jules laughed and shook her head, setting in motion the honey blond ponytail captured beneath her ball cap.

Jac glanced around the cozy office. French doors dominated one wall and stood open, allowing in a gentle breeze and a generous amount of sunlight. “I work in a cube farm with fluorescent lighting instead of natural light. And we have less than two hundred sunny days a year. I’d say criminal fits.”

“Well, you’ll get plenty of sunshine this week. The weather is supposed to be clear. Temps in the low seventies. A little unusual for this time of year, but certainly welcome.”

“Keep the humidity down and I might just have to move here.” Jac played with the stem of her sunglasses. Yeah, she’d be happy to live here instead of a claustrophobic city. “I, uh ... need to get my bags from the car. Do you have paperwork for me to sign?”

“Give me the keys and I’ll have my assistant grab them for you.”

“You don’t have to. I can carry them.”

“Part of the service. We do it for everyone, even the guys.” Jules scooped up a walkie-talkie from the desk and keyed the mic. “Marcus, we have a guest.”

“Be there in a few,” a deep voice crackled.

“Thanks.” After setting the black plastic device back in the cradle, Jules grabbed a stack of file folders. She thumbed through them, pulled one folder out, and replaced the rest of the pile neatly in the stand. “Here you are.”

*Here I am all right. Why me?* Jac hunched her shoulders and tipped her head from side to side to pop her neck. The creaking served as a reminder to quit clenching her jaw. She

should be excited about the prospect of her impending promotion. Why was it so difficult to drum up enthusiasm?

Jules slid a form across the desk and handed her a pen. “This is the registration form. Sign there on the dotted line at the bottom.”

Jac scrawled her signature and nudged the paper back. “Now what?”

“Now I give you the itinerary for the week.” Jules’ lips pursed as she studied the forms in her hand. “Typically, a company sends several attendees to the program, however you’ll be the only one here from MedServices.”

“Is that a problem?”

Jules leaned against her desk. “Not really. We have another singleton, so we’ll pair the two of you. He’s from Medford, too. Luca Rossi. From St. Simeon Medical Center. Do you know him?”

“I do. I’ve met him socially a few times.”

Actually, her best friend Bella Robins worked in Human Resources at the hospital. She’d been enamored with the chief operating officer for the medical center since he’d joined them, six months ago, claiming he could eat crackers in her bed anytime. Too bad about Bella’s pesky live-in boyfriend.

Jac’s lips quirked up. Rossi *was* delicious, as she’d seen when she’d accepted Bella’s invitation to a happy hour gathering of her co-workers. Jac had experienced an instant attraction to the man. Unfortunately so had at least a half-dozen other women present. Although Luke had bought her a drink, another woman had dragged him away before they were able to get better acquainted.

“He hasn’t arrived yet, but he should be here by dinner. We’ll eat together as a group. The exercises start tomorrow.” Jules pulled open a cabinet next to the desk and retrieved an old-fashioned skeleton key. “If you want to leave your car key on the desk, I’ll give you a fast tour and show you to your room. Marcus will deliver your luggage shortly.”

Jac followed the proprietor through the lower level of the house, exclaiming about the Tuscan style décor in the dining room and the bookshelves in the media room. She barely contained her joy over the comfortable seating on the screened porch on the side of the house.

The view of the avenues of vines sprawling up and down the gentle rises in the vineyard stole Jac's breath. "Oh, my God! How do you get any work done with this view?"

"It is nice, isn't it?" Jules paused at the foot of the grand staircase in the foyer and glanced out through the open front doors. Her brows drew together in a brief frown. "But where you see stunning beauty, all I see is work, work, work."

She finished on a laugh, so Jac figured it was safe to assume Jules didn't really mind the daily labor she invested in her property. Without a single high-rise building to block the pastoral view, Jac contemplated chucking her life in Medford to the curb and moving to Gramps's farm. Except she didn't really have the first idea of how to live an agrarian lifestyle. Maybe this week she'd learn some of what she needed to know.

Or not. There was a promotion to look forward to. She'd dreamed of it for the past three years and it was so close now, she could visualize herself in the office with the big windows overlooking downtown. Now, considering the natural beauty sprawling away from the mansion, she doubted even the prestige of a new title would ever compete with this panorama.

Apples and oranges, really. Jac shrugged and climbed the stairs behind Jules, her steps muffled on the thick carpet runner in the hall as they progressed toward her assigned room. Jules kept up a running commentary the entire time.

"Here you are, number twenty-five. It was redecorated recently and has great views. I think you'll find it comfortable." Jules twisted the key in the lock and opened the door.

Jac gasped. "Oh, it's lovely."

A pale green comforter covered the queen-sized bed. Dark gold curtains complemented the spread. The windows stood open and the lace inset of the draperies fluttered in the fragrant breeze. An antique carpet with a navy, gray, and green pattern stretched from under the bed, hiding the wide-planked hardwood floor.

The tang of ripening fruit wafted in the window. “Do you have an apple orchard on the property?”

“You have a good sniffer. You can’t see it from here but we do have a small stand of apple and olive trees.”

Jac dropped her purse on the desk and moved to the window. There, she discovered another stunning vista, more of the vineyard, and a small house situated under several oak trees next to a brook. A worker in paint-splattered coveralls walked out the front door carrying a power saw. “I love the little cottage. Who lives there?”

Jules moved next to her, a proud look on her face. Another worker exited the house, dragging a large piece of canvas behind him. When she spoke, her voice resonated with emotion. “No one right now. But I will be as soon as the remodel is done.”

“Lucky you.”

“Yeah.” Her expression revealed satisfaction, before she seemed to give herself a shake. She pointed to a door on the right. “Okay, bathroom’s through there. Let me know if you need toiletries or extra towels. You have the afternoon free and dinner will be at seven this evening. Breakfast buffet opens at half past seven tomorrow. Program activities begin at nine.”

“Is it okay to wander in the vineyard?”

“Absolutely. The only area off limits is the distillation area. For sanitary reasons. There’s a map in the office of the vineyard, if you want to pick one up and take a walk.” Jules flashed her a grin. “Just be back in time for the team dinner. Do you need anything else?”

“A Wi-Fi password?”

“It’s *redorwhite*, all lower case.” Jules crossed to the door, pausing by the bedside table to lay down the key. “I’ll see you at seven.”

The door shut with the heavy *thunk* of a solid wood panel, so unlike her condo’s hollow metal doors that had been painted to look like wood. Jac spun in a slow circle, taking in the peaceful sense in the room. Yeah, this might be work; it was certainly more restful than her everyday cubicle. No constantly ringing telephones, no shrill laughter from people goofing off in the break room, which was so far from her assigned desk it shouldn’t matter, but it did.

And she wasn’t going to miss the constant throat clearing from Allergy Allen, who sat on the other side of the upholstered wall from her. Even her white noise machine couldn’t drown out the incessant, annoying intrusion.

This was going to be a very nice respite from her everyday work. She kicked off her shoes and flopped on the bed, squirming on it until she’d snuggled comfortably atop the pillow-like mattress. She closed her eyes and envisioned the office she’d eventually move to. She just had to make it through this week and her future would be as golden as grapes ripening on the vine.

The drapes fluttered again as a small gust of wind blew into the room, bringing the sweet smell of fruit and flowers. She shouldn’t be lying here dreaming about the future. There was nature to explore. Excitement bubbled up, forcing her off the bed. Just as she slipped her shoes back on, her phone chirped with an incoming text. It sounded a second time, and again in rapid succession.

She pulled the instrument from her purse and studied the texts. As she suspected, the office was one clown short of a circus. Her co-workers had been alone with Deidre for less than a day and already they were planning a revolution. For sure, if they could, they’d vote her off the island.

Instead of leaving her room, Jac hit the return button on the last text. As the call connected, she took a seat in the navy barrel chair by the desk. Too bad she couldn’t relax and enjoy

the cushiony comfort surrounding her. Certain this would take a while she kicked her shoes back off and hunkered down to kick ass and fix whatever Deidre had broken.

While she set things to right, the guy, Marcus, knocked on the door and delivered her luggage and a map of the property. She muted the volume on her call. “Thanks. Hopefully I won’t be on this call too much longer.”

Marcus smiled, his white teeth dazzling against his dark skin. He nodded to her phone and whispered, “When you’re done, if you want a guided tour, ask Jules to find me. I’d be happy to play hooky and show you around.”

She grimaced. “Not sure I’ll ever be done with this problem. I think my employer sent the wrong person to team building.”

Once he’d exited the room, she heard his laughter all the way down the hall.

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“No, Nona. I told you I’m in California, not Tuscany.” Exasperation traveled through Luke Rossi’s jaw, making the muscles pop. He wiggled his chin from side to side, attempting to alleviate excess tension.

“But Luca, you said you were going to wine country,” Nona stated, her words lightly accented with the pretty emphasis typical in people who weren’t native English speakers.

He’d had this conversation with his grandmother at least three times in as many days. Nona thought the only decent wine in the world came from her home region of Italy and no amount of arguing or tastings of Oregon or California wines could convince her otherwise.

Nona’s superior and slightly argumentative attitude about the best regions for vineyards played a distant second fiddle given his current location. Which was on the narrow lane leading to Team Vino. One little run-in with the nurses’ union

a few weeks ago resulted in his banishment to this place until he could learn to play nice with others.

After a few minutes of conversation, he told his Nona *te voglio bene*, he loved her, and hung up. He tossed the phone to the passenger seat, and paid attention to the road.

He hadn't been on the job for four months, barely a honeymoon period by most business standards. As Chief Operating Officer, he was responsible for cutting costs. His knuckles went white on the steering wheel.

In hindsight, suggesting a highly unpopular cost saving measure for nursing staff overtime wasn't the best idea right before contract talks. Unnecessary, since the medical center was making money. His boss had insisted, despite Luke's efforts to persuade him otherwise. Saving money was always good, but not at the expense of alienating their skilled workers. The nurses threatened to retaliate with a sick-out protest, risking the health of their patients. He and Brian Evert, his boss, had exchanged some harsh words and he'd been sent away to learn how to be a team player.

Luke ground his teeth together. Pain shot through his jaw. How Brian had managed to avoid the same punishment was beyond him.

He cranked the wheel to the right to ease into a parking slot in the gravel lot in front of the house. At least he'd enjoyed the scenery on his way down from Medford. And the quiet. Until he called his Nona, he'd left the phone off, determined not to bring work with him.

Due to his crazy work schedule since moving to south-central Oregon, he hadn't even had time to unpack his household goods. With the exception of his clothes, bathroom items, and some kitchen utensils, everything remained in boxes. He couldn't decide if that was due to his current workload, or fear of having to seek a new job and deal with another move.

Yeah, his situation was dire. He had to succeed with the first huge contract challenge he'd walked into, or face being

let go. And yet they'd sent him away for a week on this frivolous errand. The idea of it churned like acid in his gut.

After pulling his bags from the trunk, he walked to the office to check in. Although here under duress, at least he'd make the most of it. As he stepped into the foyer, the delicious aroma of beef stew and freshly baked bread enveloped him. His stomach rumbled.

The woman at the desk tried, and failed, to hold back her grin. "You must be Luca. Dinner will be ready in about thirty minutes."

He attempted to smother the growling noise in his gut with his hand. "Please call me Luke. Only my Nona calls me Luca. And how did you know? Do you interpret bodily gurgles?"

The cute blond laughed. "God, wouldn't that be a talent to have? Actually, it was process of elimination. You're the last participant to arrive, so it's a safe assumption. I'm Jules Rosetti, your hostess and team coach."

Luke extended his hand. Her grip was strong and professional. He liked that. "Nice to meet you. As you can tell, I'm starving."

"Let's get you settled."

Jules made quick work of checking him in and escorting him to his room. After providing him with directions to the dining room, she left him alone. Luke dropped his suitcase on the stand and stared at it, lost in thought. God, he hoped this wasn't a complete waste of time. There were more valuable uses of his energy than playing in the country. He reached for his neck and rubbed the small tight spot, sending jagged pulses of pain up his scalp.

Blowing out a disgusted breath, he began to unpack, hanging his clothes in the antique wardrobe, stowing his shoes under the bed the way Nona had taught him. He carried his shaving kit to the bathroom and tossed it onto the vanity. A quick splash of water to his face later, he felt some of the tension leave his shoulders. At least he'd get to spend a few



days outside and away from an increasingly difficult work environment.

After working from sun up to well past sundown for the past six months, he deserved a little down time. This he rationalized as he stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. And who knew? Maybe this would be a grand adventure and he'd learn something new.

## CHAPTER TWO

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Two hours, sixteen emails, and five phone calls later, Jac had accomplished her task. The client had threatened to take their multimillion-dollar account elsewhere because of Deidre's flip response to a very real privacy issue. It had taken a conference call with the client and Ted Fleury, MedServices' president, to resolve everything. The call had ended with the client's demand to never have to deal with Deidre again. The solution suited Jacqui just fine.

The breeze floating in the window proved too much for her. A quick glance at the clock on the bedside table showed she had only a half hour until dinner. Just enough time for a brisk walk to the hill she spied out the window. She unzipped her suitcase, feeling lighter and happier than she had since ... well, since her last vacation four years ago.

Rummaging through the case, she snagged a pair of jeans and a lightweight yellow cardigan. She'd thrown it in at the last minute because she loved the way it complemented her russet-colored hair and brown eyes. It was her favorite sweater.

After shoving her phone in the back pocket of her jeans, she plucked the key from the bedside table. In her hand it felt weighty and solid, a testament to the way things used to be built. Five seconds later, she locked the door with a satisfying twist and strode toward the stairs, all but skipping down each one. The front door remained open, and her step was eager as she crossed the large hall. The view beyond the entry was inviting. God, she loved being in this kind of rustic setting.

Just as she crossed the threshold, her phone rang. *No!* She wasn't in the mood to speak to anyone else from the office today. Curling her hand into a fist, she fought the urge to answer. A second ring sounded. *Let it go to voicemail.* She kept walking across the porch, intent on ignoring it. She groaned as it rang a third time and she lost the skirmish.

She pulled the phone from her pocket. Consulting the display, she was delighted to see it wasn't the office.

"Hey, Bella," she answered on the fourth ring.

"Screening your calls much lately?" Bella Robins demanded with the appropriate mixture of snark, chagrin, and playfulness in her voice. "I'm driving home from work and wanted to check in to make sure you got there okay."

"I arrived about two hours ago and have been on the phone with my office ever since. I was afraid it was another co-worker with more shit storms for me to solve long-distance. I just got outside. God, it's gorgeous here."

"Seriously, you need to set a different ringtone for my calls."

Jac wandered along the flower-lined walk leading toward the vines. "You're right. Just can't decide what I need to pick."

Bella's throaty laugh came across the line. "Something by Maroon 5, please."

"Hmmm. I'll think about it." Jac laughed with her friend. "How was your day?"

"Just another day in paradise. Same shenanigans as yesterday, just a different set of leprechauns to deal with." Bella took her Irish heritage seriously. "The nurses' union is up in arms again about one of the new interns. We've dealt with the union rep and their grievance all day."

"That sucks. You'd think the neophytes would recognize the nurses know more than they do at this stage of the game."

"Some people never learn."

"Speaking of nurses and their grievances, you'll never guess who my teammate is," Jac said. "Luca Rossi."

She had to pull the phone away from her ear as Bella screeched. “You lucky dog! Luscious Luke is your partner? I’d heard he was heading to a team building camp. It’s karma. An entire week with him to yourself.”

“Hold your horses, Bella. Based on what you’ve told me about the guy, I’m not sure we’re as meant to be as you think,” Jac protested. Bella had alluded to the fact that in addition to being swoon-worthy, the man was pigheaded, unwilling to listen to anyone else’s opinion, and stubborn in general. All good reasons he’d been banished to team building camp. None of it boded well for any team with him on it.

“Once you get past his attitude and focus on his Roman god looks, you’ll change your tune. Luke is every woman’s type. All dark wavy hair, and those piercing hazel eyes. He looks great in a suit. But ooh-la-la, he wore shorts at the company picnic and he has beautiful legs. You’ve met him, you know how gorgeous he is.”

Bella paused. “Besides, he really is a nice guy. He was dropped into the deep end when he got here. Things aren’t shaping up so great for labor relations at St. Simeon.”

Jac sighed low enough that Bella couldn’t hear her. She turned the corner at the end of the drive onto a little track leading down a hill. The breeze flirted with the ends of her hair and kissed her face with the type of heat you could only feel in late September.

Bella continued, “Anyway, back to Luscious Luke. Remember the guy from ‘Under The Tuscan Sun?’ The love interest? Doesn’t Luke remind you of him? Marcello!” Bella’s voice rose giddily, just as Diane Lane’s had in the movie upon spying the man on the balcony.

This was why Bella was Jac’s best friend. Comic relief. Jac stifled a chuckle and replied, “As delightful as spending time with him sounds, I’m here to focus on the exercise. Once I’m done, a certain promotion is mine.”

The breath Bella blew out was audible. “You need to stop speeding after that bunny, Jac. You know Ted Fleury’s

reputation. He could easily pass you over in favor of Deidre. Just like he did to promote his dorky daughter, Janis.”

And didn't that slight continue to stick in Jac's craw? Ted had done it before but had assured her the next management job was hers. Plus, he had given her a tidy little raise to ease the sting of promoting his less competent daughter ahead of her *and* making Jac train the woman, too. She squeezed rising irritation back into the genie's lamp.

She couldn't let office politics ruin her good mood over landing here in a little slice of heaven. “I know. I'm telling you, I feel certain this time it won't happen. He won't do that to me again.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Jac replied weakly. She forced confidence into her voice. “Yes. This time for sure.”

She neared the end of the path, where it crested a small hill. Pausing at the top, she caught her breath in delighted surprise. Golden light from the waning sun illuminated the rolling field of vines. The yellowing leaves had faded in anticipation of the harvest. The stunning view resonated deep within her. It felt like home. “Oh, Bella. You should see this place. I could move here in a heartbeat.”

“Don't you dare! I can't be your friend anymore if you move that far away.”

“Seriously? Don't be silly, Bella.”

“Okay, not seriously. Take a picture and send it to me. I wanna see.”

After hanging up, Jac activated the camera on her phone. This was a view suitable for printing and framing. She had the perfect spot in her dining area for it. Somewhere she'd see it every day. Pure magic.

After wandering through the field for ten additional minutes and snapping more pictures, she headed toward the mansion. The prospect of spending time on this farm caused giddiness to fizz through her like sparkling wine. She was going to enjoy this adventure.

Life was going well, her future was bright, and at the moment she couldn't think of another place she'd want to be.

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Jac introduced herself to her fellow team builders. There were four boisterous insurance guys on an executive retreat, two women from a big name law firm, and six mid-level, middle-aged managers from a telecommunications company. Together with her and Luke Rossi, they would make seven two-person teams. Her partner was still absent, but it didn't worry her. If she had to, she could tag along with one of the other teams. However, not those two lady lawyers. Since walking into the room five minutes ago, they'd barely stopped bickering long enough to introduce themselves.

One of the insurance guys approached her with a glass of dark red wine. She suppressed a shudder when the man, old enough to be her dad, swept his fingers across the back of her hand as she accepted the offered glass. "Thanks," she murmured. As she sipped, the wine's rich currant flavor exploded on her tongue, followed closely by the spicy sting of pepper.

"Good, isn't it?" he asked.

"Very good," she replied. She downed a bit more.

His cohorts crowded around him. "I'm Jeff, this is Jeremy, Jake, and Steve." He pointed to each as he named them.

"Jacqui," she shared.

Steve grunted. "Another 'J' name. Might have to change my name to Josh, or Jerald."

"Where are you from?" one of them asked.

She didn't have a prayer at keeping them straight. Except for maybe Steve, just based on his unique name. "Medford, Oregon."

"Small town in the southwest corner, right? Pretty country. I bet you love it there."

Hoping to deflect attention from her, she gestured out the window toward the rolling vineyard. “Doesn’t hold a candle to this area. The scenery is gorgeous here.”

“Did you come with a partner?” The original creeper tucked his thumb into his waistband. His stomach lapped over the top of his belt.

“No. My company sent only me. I understand there’s another singleton I’ll be teamed up with. I don’t know if he’s arrived yet.”

“Well, if he doesn’t make it, you can join us. The more the merrier, right?” This came from the tallest guy in the bunch.

Jules joined them. “He’s here. He just checked in a little bit ago. I’m sure he’ll be down soon. We’ll wait a few minutes for him to join us, then we’ll eat. I hope your rooms are all okay.”

Relief pulsed through her as Jules mentioned Luke had arrived. No offense to the insurance guys, but she was worn out with what little interaction she’d had with them. Jac paid scant attention to the conversation flowing around her as she sipped her wine. Nerves chased through her stomach at the idea of working for a week with Bella’s ideal of male perfection.

Footsteps echoed near the doorway to the dining area only an instant before the owner of them walked through.

She’d been instantly smitten with the man when Bella had introduced her to him last month. The attraction blossomed to life again. Luca Rossi was panty-dropping, ovary-exploding handsome. Bella’s nickname for him was well deserved. *Luscious Luke, indeed.* His short, dark brown hair curled and waved as if it had a mind of its own. Bright, inquisitive eyes didn’t seem to miss anything as he glanced around the room. His gaze slid past her, lighted on Jules, who remained standing next to her, then returned to Jac’s face.

A slow, sexy grin tugged the corners of his mouth. A faint shadow of stubble emphasized more than hid his square jaw. It was a strong face ... perfect in the way it was put together.

Conversation around her faded into the background. Jac forgot to breathe for a second. A wave of dizziness swept over her. And, no, a lack of oxygen wasn't the cause. Uh-uh, it had to be due to being this close to a living, breathing Roman god. Or because he continued to stare at her. He lifted a brow over gorgeous blue-green eyes and his smile broadened, allowing even white teeth to peek between full lips.

“Ah, there you are. Come in, Luke. We were about to sit down for dinner.” Jules beckoned him to her side.

“I hope I haven't made you wait. I'm sure you are all as hungry as I am.” His smooth baritone voice slid over Jac like musical honey. Luke sauntered toward them, his tanned hand rubbing small circles over his lean abs.

He wore a button-down white shirt and blue jeans. Bare feet, shod in leather flip-flops completed his ensemble. Jac's stomach did a slow roll as he approached. Giving herself a mental shake, she broke eye contact with him and studied the empty glass in her hand. When had she drained the wine? She could only recall taking two or three sips.

She glanced around the room. The man had attracted the attention of the two quarreling lawyers. They finally stopped their debate and stared at Luke's butt as he crossed toward Jules and Jac. The first thought through her mind was *hands off, ladies. This one is mine*. Heat flooded into her face an instant later.

Jules made introductions. “And this is your partner for the next few days, Jacqui Bishop.”

“I know you,” Luke said. He extended his hand. “You're Bella's friend.”

Sensation, as intoxicating as wine, formed between their palms and meandered up her arm. Jac's heart sped up, a steady tattoo against her breastbone. “Uh-huh. It's nice to see a familiar face. I'm looking forward to working with you on the challenges.” Her voice held a breathless quality she couldn't remember ever hearing before.



Luke tightened his grip on her hand for a fraction of a second before releasing it. The feeling was much more welcome than when Flirty Insurance Guy touched her. Luke greeted the others standing in the small group.

After introductions were completed, and Jac had regained her equilibrium, Jules gestured to the long refectory table, inviting everyone to take a seat. Jac made her way to the far end of the table. As she started to pull out a chair, Luke moved next to her and did the honors.

“I hope you don’t mind if I sit next to you. I figured we should get better acquainted if we’re going to be teammates.”

*Oh, heck no!* She wouldn’t mind sitting next to him at all. “A sound idea.”

She sat and Luke scooted her chair closer to the table before claiming the seat next to her. Giving Jac a wink, Flirty Insurance Guy dropped into the seat directly across from her, with Belinda, one of the lawyers, taking the position to his right. Jules anchored one end, with Marcus opposite her.

As the wait staff placed baskets of bread on the table, Luke asked, “So we met at a hospital happy hour, but you aren’t an employee. Where do you work?”

“MedServices. We’re a medical records management firm,” she replied.

“Hate to say it, I think we use your competition.”

“I know. Bella’s told me on numerous occasions.”

His eyes darkened. “Bella’s okay. We’ve worked together to settle a couple of issues with the nurses’ union. She strikes me as one of the sane ones in the HR department.”

“Hmm. Well, I’ve never heard her described that particular way.” Jac smiled at the idea of her zany friend being sane.

“In my experience the entire department thrives on a witch hunt.” Luke’s tone was glum. “They are constantly looking for a scapegoat to pin the latest trouble on, instead of considering the source of the trouble.”

“I think that’s the case with most organizations.” She reached for a piece of bread. Time to change the subject. “Where did you move from?”

“Most recently from Tampa. I’ve always lived in the southeast, so this is an interesting change.”

“How so?”

Luke spread butter on the piece of sourdough bread he’d selected. “The climate in Oregon is cooler and more temperate. Still terribly humid. There are a lot of rainy days in the northwest.”

“So right,” Jac replied, tugging on her hair, closer to straight than curly today. Humidity sucked, which was why she typically wore her hair up. She never had trouble making small talk, so why were they talking about the weather?

“Why are you here? And by here I mean at team building camp.” The expression in Luke’s eyes seemed open and curious. But something else lurked and smoldered, more than mere friendliness.

Low in her body, Jac experienced an answering heat. She cast about, trying to recall his question. “Oh ... um, I’m up for a promotion and since I’ve never supervised people before, the owner wanted me to learn some tricks to boost cooperation between my department and other internal clients. Although, being out of the office hasn’t stopped the calls from coming in. I guess it’s nice to be missed.”

“Trouble?”

“Nothing I can’t handle. I’m in client services and sometimes our customers can be demanding. Medical billing, records and privacy concerns, all can be a bit of a nightmare.”

“Tell me about it,” Luke sympathized. His gaze clouded. “Probably a lot like personnel and budget management.”

Jac leaned to her right as the waiter put a bowl of stew in front of her. Her shoulder brushed Luke’s. Warm, welcome heat from the contact thrilled her. Even though she sort of already knew the answer, she asked, “What brought you here?”

Luke fisted his hand on the table, tapped it a couple of times, while a muscle in his jaw popped.

*Oops, sore subject.*

“Let’s not talk about work anymore, okay? Honestly, I’d rather talk about the weather or baseball than my job. Or whether or not you have a husband.” He lifted one brow and tipped his head to the side.

A small sizzle raced across her belly. “Uh ... no, no husband. Not even a boyfriend in sight.” And she hadn’t been heavily involved with anyone since her college sweetheart. *Damn him.*

He nodded. “Good. I didn’t have a chance to get to know you at happy hour. I’m glad to fix that now.”

The slow lift at the corners of his mouth drew her in. Made her believe he really did think it was good she didn’t have a significant other. Jac paid scant attention as the waiters finished serving and cleared out of the room.

Jules interrupted the conversations happening around the room. “So let me explain what you can expect this week.”

Flirty Insurance Guy leered across the table at her. “I know what I’d like to expect.”

Jac stiffened in her seat and gaped at the man. Luke lifted the bottle of wine by his bowl and leaned into her as he topped off her glass, making sure to brush her shoulder with his chest. His thigh nudged hers, making her gasp. The carved edges on the stem of her goblet cut into her fingers.

“Smile like I’ve said something sexy,” Luke whispered against her ear.

He could have asked if bears shit in the woods and she’d have found it intriguing. Letting a sultry expression claim her face wasn’t a difficult task. Across from her, FIG narrowed his eyes, and said nothing more. Finally, he jerked his head toward Jules instead of continuing to stare at Jac. Seeming oblivious to the byplay around the table, Jules had continued explaining their schedule.

Thankfully by the time the remnants of their meal were cleared away, Belinda, the lawyer seated on FIG's right, had diverted his attention. Luke had kept the conversation rolling along with her and Jules, treating them to stories about his grandmother and her wine snob inclinations. Jules' laughter tinkled musically in the dining room. The entire meal felt more like time spent among friends than with relative strangers.

It was easy to engage in and enjoy the conversation and the food. Jac was actually surprised to discover she was disappointed as the meal ended. A few of the participants, wine stems in hand, ventured out to the large, screened porch jutting off the side of the house.

"You going to join them?" Luke waved to the people drifting outside.

Jac was torn. She'd like to, if Luke were going. But she already felt the effects of the two—or was it three?—glasses of wine she'd had. "I don't think I should. I'm probably going to have a headache tomorrow as it is."

"We could find you a glass of water, or a cup of coffee." Luke crooked his fingers as if encouraging her to change her mind. "Come on. It's early. Would you like to take a stroll? It's a beautiful evening."

A breeze wafted through the window behind her, perfuming the air with the heady scent of jasmine. "A walk might be just the thing to clear my head."

A grin bloomed on Luke's lips, illuminating his face. With unexpected poise, he rose off his chair, extending his hand. She hesitated only a second before accepting. A now familiar spark blossomed as she slipped her palm against his. Tugging, he pulled her out of her seat. Her momentum carried her to his chest. A high-voltage current arced between them and traveled at breakneck speed to her diaphragm, making it hard to catch her breath.

Luke's eyes widened and he slipped a steadying arm around her waist. Her head spun but she didn't think it was because of the wine she'd consumed. It definitely had more to

do with the magnetic man holding her. Keeping her eyes on his face, she eased away, regretting the loss of warmth.

“Sorry. I told you I’d had too much wine.” Her laugh was self-deprecating as warmth flooded her face.

“I’m not sorry,” he said. He dropped his gaze to her lips, lingered a moment, then those hazel eyes returned to lock with hers. “Let’s go get some fresh air. It will do both of us good.”

## CHAPTER THREE

---

**O**h, *God!* Jacqui Bishop felt amazing in his arms. Lithe, supple, hot, and trembling. If it hadn't been for the fact she'd had too much wine at dinner, Luke might have pulled her closer, held her longer. Only a jerk would take advantage of her tipsy state. It was partially his fault she'd drank more than she was used to at dinner ... he'd kept her glass, as well as his, full throughout the meal.

For now, he'd have to be content to just draw her hand through the crook of his elbow and lead her outside. With luck, a walk would clear her head. Not that he'd had any spectacular luck to speak of in the past four months. To be honest, having her this close wasn't going to ease his desire one little bit. Funny, he couldn't make himself care.

When he'd met her last month, he'd appreciated her looks and her quick grin. Their brief meeting had left him disappointed she hadn't attended the last happy hour Bella had organized.

When he'd crossed the threshold of the dining room, he'd been pleased and excited to see her standing next to Jules. The prospects for the week definitely looked golden. She was the consummate dinner companion, keeping the conversation flowing and lively. And now, she was going to take a moonlight stroll with him. He couldn't believe his good fortune.

On their way past the dining room sideboard, he picked up a bottle of water. It dangled between his fingers as he escorted her past the other people gathered on the screened porch. The

outside door screeched as he pushed it open, reminding him of long-ago summers.

“You know, when I was a kid, the twang of the screen door spring was the sound of freedom.” He twisted off the bottle cap, splashing a bit over his fingers. He handed it to her, wiping the excess off on the back of his jeans.

Jac sipped, then snuggled close against his side as they navigated the steps to the gravel path. “It reminds me of my grandparents’ farm. They had a door with scrolled woodwork on the bottom half.”

They reached the bottom step. Luke adjusted his grip on her arm, still holding her as they walked under a pretty vine-covered arbor. “A lot of my friends spent their summers playing video games. Not me. I’d slam out of the house first thing and ride my bike until the streetlights came on. Or I’d play at the playground right down the street from my parents’ house. I could make it across the monkey bars in five seconds. The park’s still open, but no kids play there anymore. Everyone is too busy.”

Even in the dim light, he noticed the flicker of sadness passing over her face. “Too bad kids don’t really get to be kids these days. Heck, most adults don’t know how to slow down either. I haven’t had a vacation in four years.” Jac shook her head. The glow from the lamps lining the path glinted on her hair, creating a halo fit for an angel. “I took a month off after college, before I started my job. Now it’s just work, work, work. And I don’t mind. But I think I’d like my life better if I worked for myself.”

Curiosity grew like a dandelion. The woman intrigued him on so many levels. “Is that what you want? To run your own business?”

“I like what I do ...” She didn’t finish the thought.

He let silence reign for a moment, before prompting her. “And?”

“I don’t like living in the city. Medford is small, yet it still feels crowded on occasion. I have a loft downtown with a

view of the mountains and lots of green space. But I want more than a view. I want the actual terrain. I want to get up in the morning and smell fresh air, not diesel fumes.”

“You could move out of the city and commute in,” Luke pointed out as he steered her toward a rise at the edge of the vineyard. Trees rustled in the cool evening breeze.

Her hair bobbed on her shoulders as she shook her head. “From where I’d want to live, the commute would be too long. I’d never have the time to enjoy the land. I’d be in the city or the car all the time.”

“If you moved to the country, what would you do? You don’t strike me as a farm girl.”

Jac stopped, pulling her arm from the crook of his elbow. She took another drink before handing the water back to him. “That’s the thing. I believe I am. My grandparents’ farm is still owned by the family. I could go there and grow herbs and spices.”

He capped the bottle and pushed it into his back pocket. Settling his hands on her shoulders, he peered through the dark at her. “Is that what you want to do?”

“Yes. No.” She shifted her gaze away from him and stared at the rows of grape vines rolling out from where they stood. She raised a hand to her forehead and rubbed, as if troubled by a perplexing and complex problem. “I don’t know. I love my job, and I’m good at it. But I think I’d be good as an entrepreneur. I could be successful. If you could do anything you wanted, what would it be?”

He dropped his hands from her shoulders. Taking a step away from her, he shoved his hands into his pockets. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had asked him that question. Probably his Nona, after he’d told her about his move to Medford.

He considered for a moment before answering. “I’d teach. I’d love to work at a university in a finance or hospital administration department. I was an adjunct professor at the



University of South Florida in Tampa. It was a great program. I really miss teaching.”

“Why aren’t you pursuing it now?”

“The opportunity at St. Simeon came along. It was too good to turn down.”

“Colleges in Medford offer healthcare admin classes. Some really good ones.” Reaching out, she plucked a leaf from a nearby tree. She tugged it between her fingers.

His cock jumped at the idea of her tugging on him the same way. Between the water bottle shoved in his back pocket and his surging erection, his jeans were entirely too tight. He shifted his hips, hoping to ease the uncomfortable restriction without drawing attention to his rising problem. “I’ve had my hands full trying to get the medical center on track. I’ve been working sixty to eighty hours a week getting up to speed. I don’t see that easing back in the near future.” And wasn’t the thought of the monumental job in front of him an instant soft-on?

He missed teaching. Truth be told, despite how much he’d loved his job in Tampa, the collegiate gig had offered more satisfaction. Giving it up almost became a deal-breaker for him when he considered taking the job in Oregon. At the time, the money and the opportunity to make a difference at St. Simeon’s had been right. Now the challenge seemed insurmountable, the hours never-ending, and the money not nearly enough to compensate for the headaches he’d inherited.

He grasped Jac’s hand, energy flaring between them as he wove his fingers with hers. The action felt natural. They resumed walking in silence. Eventually, they reached an incredibly large oak tree at the top of the rise. Jac trailed her other hand over the bark before she leaned against the rough surface.

She raised her face and stared into the branches overhead. “Oh, it’s lovely out here.”

The sight of her exposed neck set his lips, and other parts of his anatomy, to twitching. Luke wanted to trail his tongue

up the long column of her throat until he reached her mouth. He barely knew her and already desired her more than he'd thought possible. It had been far too long since a woman interested him this way.

She straightened, smiling at him, and he lost interest in resisting. It was as if she was the sun and had an irresistible gravitational pull, drawing him close enough to get burned.

With less than two steps, he crowded into her personal space, planting his hands on either side of her head, leaning in. Her delectable body warmed and excited him. Moving one hand to her head, he plunged his fingers into her heavy golden-red hair to cradle her scalp. Her velvety brown eyes turned a shade he'd call whiskey. Which, he thought idly, was appropriate. Her nearness and heat were intoxicating.

As he lowered his mouth to her throat, she slid a hand up his chest. A shot of lust and adrenaline jabbed from the point of contact directly to his groin. His sac drew up tight against his body as his cock answered the action with a throbbing pulse of blood. Laying his lips on her throat, he carefully held the rest of his body away.

God, his attraction to Jac had been strong the day he'd first met her. Now, it was off the charts. He didn't want to frighten her. He was startled enough at his reaction to her.

She tasted of honey and heaven as he nibbled his way along the tendons in her neck, nipping and licking from her shoulder to just below her ear. Her skin was smoother than a twelve-year-old scotch and twice as heady. His world spun like a centrifuge on high.

Angling her head slightly, she brought her mouth into proximity to his. With next to no effort, he claimed her lips. At first, just a tiny brush, but on his second taste he discovered her lips had parted. He wasted no time dipping his tongue in the slick, hot opening. If his eyes hadn't closed, they might have rolled back in his head.

One of her hands reached to cup his cheek while the other dropped to his belt loop and her fingers tangled there. With the tiniest of jerks, she pulled him close, moaning softly as his

erection pressed into her tummy. He groaned in response and circled his hips, rubbing against her with abandon.

A loud burst of laughter, coming from the direction of the vineyard, interrupted them. Luke pulled away, tugging on Jac's hair as he did.

“Ow.”

“Sorry. Someone's coming.” He smoothed a tangled strand, the texture soft and silky.

“Talk about incredibly bad timing,” Jac muttered. She straightened from her spot on the trunk of the tree. “It sounds like FIG and his friends.”

The laughter grew louder. “Fig?”

He jumped when she pulled the water bottle from his back pocket.

She unscrewed the cap before she replied, “Yeah. There were so many insurance agents, I kind of gave them nicknames, to keep them straight. Flirty Insurance Guy sat across from us at dinner. Boisterous Insurance Guy and Daddio Insurance Guy, BIG and DIG, were at the end of the table by Marcus. And Steve was on your left.” Her voice was husky, almost smoky, and filled with humor.

She took a drink from the bottle and all Luke could think of was her lips on him.

He blinked. “Steve?”

“He's the only one whose name didn't start with 'J'. He was easier to remember.”

“Ah.” God help him, Jac was not only beautiful, but witty as well. Her throat worked as she swallowed more water. Damn, he was having a hard time pulling his gaze away.

Steps crunched on the gravel near them. The BIG, FIG, DIG dudes moved into to view. Jac smoothed her sweater with a graceful motion. She took a step away, establishing a professional distance between them.

“There you are, darlin’,” the heaviest guy called. *Must be the flirty one.* He continued in a sing-song voice. “We’ve been searching for you.”

“Well, you found me.” Jac’s voice remained pleasant, with just a hint of ‘oh, damn!’ in it.

FIG leered at her. “Are you sure you don’t want to play on our team? We could use some artistic talent for the exercise tomorrow.”

Luke clenched his fists and stepped toward the agents. No fucking way were they going to steal her from him. *Assholes!*

Jac laid her hand on his arm, restraining him as she gestured to herself. “You are assuming I have creative talent. Probably not the smartest idea.” Without releasing her hold on Luke’s arm, she leaned forward. In a low voice, she said, “I completely lack the arty gene. In fact, all my walls are beige, because I think that looks best.”

Luke bit his lip to keep from laughing. No person in their right mind liked beige. Unless they were guys, or color blind. And judging by the way Jac coordinated the vibrant, sunny colors of her clothes and the jewelry she wore, he’d bet she was lying through her teeth just to be nice.

“I bet you can be very inventive ... when you want.” FIG’s tone was laced with innuendo. He lowered his gaze to her chest and licked his lips.

“That’s it.” About to lunge, Luke found his momentum checked by the sharp sensation of Jac’s fingers pinching his tricep. Damn, it hurt. “What? No one should talk to you like that.”

Giving her head a small shake, she gestured to FIG and his friends. “I think they’re just having some fun. I bet they had at least as much to drink as I have. Sometimes, alcohol fuels my tongue, which might make me say they’re just overly zealous loudmouths. But, I’d never say anything mean unless I’ve had a few drinks. I’m sure Jeff or Jeremy,” She pressed her hand to her lips, the gesture almost embarrassed, “or Jake, sorry, I’m

horrible at names. Anyway, I'm sure these fun gentlemen mean nothing by their words."

Luke relaxed and worked to keep his face bland. The men just beamed, as if completely unaware Jac had just buried an insult in what she said. Another reason to be infatuated with her. Together, they were going to make a kickass team.

"Well, it's late and I suppose I should call it a night. I love wine, but it makes me so very tired." Jac wound her arm through Luke's and rested her head on his shoulder. The light pressure sent a torpedo of lust to below his belt. She stifled a yawn before continuing. "I guess we'll see you guys tomorrow. Will you be hitting the breakfast buffet? Jules told me they bring pastries in from the best bakery in Santa Rosa. She guarantees they'll take care of any cravings you might have. Oops. I mean sugar cravings."

The guy named Steve patted FIG's paunch, jiggling the flab. "Jeff here has an undeniable sweet tooth. We'll see you tomorrow."

Steve seemed to be the responsible one. Luke recalled seeing a full, untouched goblet of wine sitting in front of the guy's plate. Thank heavens one of them was sober.

After saying goodnight, the four of them shuffled away. Jac chuckled softly as she moved after them.

"Hang on." Luke snagged her wrist. "What you did was pretty awesome."

"What did I do?" She glanced at him, all wide eyes and arched brows.

He'd believe in her innocence if he didn't glimpse the merriment twinkling in her eyes. "I don't think those guys even knew you slammed them as loudmouths. You buried the slur pretty deep in the happy drunk charade. How'd you learn to do that?"

Pursing her lips, she regarded him as if considering whether to tell the truth or not. "Some guys don't really listen to your words. You can say almost anything you want and if

you do it with a cute pout or a little giggle, they'll never know you just called them a bad name."

He laughed. "They were jerks. I wanted to deck FIG."

"Aw, he's just a sheep in wolf's clothing."

"You did it again." He wove their fingers together. "Ready to head back to the house?"

Jac swept a wistful glance at the vineyard stretching out before them. "I suppose."

"We'll be here all week. We can come back tomorrow, if you like," he offered.

"Yeah, I'd like."

When she pressed her lips to his cheek they reminded him of smooth satin. A slight sigh escaped her lips as she started up the path. She pulled gently on his hand until he fell in beside her.

The walk back to the main house passed in silence. Night blooming jasmine scented the air with a sweet, tangy aroma. Luke found perfection in the moment, and the company. The spring on the screen twanged as he pulled it open to usher Jac inside. A pang of nostalgia, along with a strong peaceful sensation, drifted along his senses.

Without the distractions of the office, the nurses' unions, the budgeting nightmares, and unruly interns, Luke felt ... happy. For the first time since he'd moved to Oregon.

Jules, seated at her desk as they passed by the office door, lifted a hand and called out goodnight. Jac preceded him up the stairs, her really fine ass showcased in brown straight-leg jeans. Luke caught himself licking his lips.

*Down, boy!* For Christ's sake, he was as bad as FIG. It wouldn't do to get his hopes up. After all, they barely knew each other. And they'd be in close proximity for the rest of the week. Not to mention, she lived in the same town as he did. There'd be time to let the attraction he felt for her grow.

Following her down the hallway was an exercise in restraint. He shoved his fist into his pocket as Jac slowed to a

stop in front of her door. Standing by silently, he waited until she unlocked the door. She pushed the wooden panel inward.

Turned to face him.

A smile teased her lips. "I'd say this has felt a bit like a date. Except we already shared a good night kiss."

"Are you sure? I kind of thought the peck under the tree was just a warm-up."

"Hmm. If that was just practice, you are ready for the big leagues." Her eyes lit up. She dipped her gaze to his lips while her tongue trailed over hers.

No further encouragement needed, Luke leaned down and captured her mouth, slanting a tender kiss there. He traced the outline of her lips with his tongue, restraining himself from going any further.

Jac broke the seal between their lips and smiled into his eyes as she cupped his cheek. "Goodnight, Luke."

"Goodnight, Jac. I'll see you tomorrow for breakfast."

She slipped through her open door. Holding his gaze with hers, she slid the door shut with a tilt to her lips and a quiet snick of the lock.

A beautiful smile he wouldn't soon forget.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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The repeated chirp of an alert on her phone woke Jac. Sunlight filtered through a gap in the curtains and painted a line across the floor. Her head ached a little, nothing serious, just enough for her to know she'd had one glass of wine too many last night. The throbbing in her temples matched the persistent throb between her legs. Another reminder of last night.

Groaning, she reached for the harbinger of bad news still chirping on the bedside table. Who in the office would be calling her at this hour? Oh hell, she'd overslept. She sat up sharply, clutching a hand to her head as it spun in protest. The display revealed the name of a woman in her department.

She cleared her throat before answering. "Hey, Valerie. Good morning." Thank heavens she didn't sound like she'd woken from a drunken stupor.

"Have you heard?" the woman demanded without even a hello. A constant source of office gossip, Valerie sat in the cube next to Jac's.

Whatever it was, it sounded like a job for 'SuperJac.' She relaxed against the headboard preparing to right what injustice had been done. "Have I heard what?"

"They're promoting Deidre." Disgust flattened Valerie's tone.

Jac's world reeled Tilt-A-Whirl-style. *Shit!* That wasn't what she'd expected. "Excuse me?"



“You heard me. Ted is giving the job, *your* job, to the most incompetent woman working here.”

“But ... I don't understand. How can he do this? Didn't I just save the biggest client yesterday after she messed up the account? Hang on.” Jac pulled the phone from her ear to consult the display. She swiped her way into her office email account. Pressure built in her chest, rolling to a slow boil.

She jabbed the button to put Valerie on speaker. “I mean, good grief! There are six emails from Deidre already this morning begging for help.”

“I know. She was in a tizzy yesterday because you were out of the office and couldn't cover for her.”

“You've got to be wrong, Valerie. Ted wouldn't do this to me.” He couldn't. Not after he'd promised her.

“Fraid so. I got in early and went to the break room to start a pot of coffee. Ted was already there with Tammy from HR discussing the big announcement. They're calling a staff meeting at two this afternoon to share the good news, as Ted put it.”

Jac visualized Valerie sketching air quotes around the words *good news*. “What the fu—” She cut off the profanity before she could utter it. Swearing wasn't going to help. “This is all kinds of messed up.”

“Tell me about it. I'm going to have to find a new job. I can't work for her.” Valerie snorted. “Deidre is stunningly clueless about how things work here. Can you imagine her trying to lead a team?”

Jac couldn't. That's why she was away from the office at a team building seminar. To learn how to be a good manager. *I guess if I'd come from the same genetic line as Ted Fleury, I'd have had a shot at the promotion.* But she wasn't family. And she wasn't ever going to be promoted to the position she'd worked so damned hard for. A yawning pit of anger and sadness claimed her gut, the resulting nausea definitely not a side effect of the lovely cabernet she'd consumed last night.

Drawing her knees to her chest, she rested her cheek atop them, phone clutched in her hand. Her mind raced as fast as her heart, trying to figure out what to do about the turn of events. She could find another job easily, but ...

“You still there?” Valerie asked.

Shoving away anxiety over the idea of searching for a new job, Jac released a resigned breath. “Yeah. Just trying to sort it all out.”

Valerie made soothing sounds in Jac’s ear. “Ted’s making a huge mistake. The job should be yours. No one is going to be happy about it.”

“It’s his company. He should be able to promote whomever he wants.”

“I wish, for once, you wouldn’t defend him. He’s screwing you royally on this. Bad decisions impact the bottom line. This one is going to bite him in the ass. I don’t know how you can stay so calm.”

“Years of practice.” Jac straightened her spine. It wouldn’t do her any good to stress about it. She couldn’t change anything. “Listen, just do your work today. And don’t do anything rash. Remember the best time to find a new job is while you still have the old one. Don’t worry about me. I’m sure Ted has something good in mind for me.”

It would be great if Jac felt as confident as she sounded. As she disconnected from the call with Valerie, the phone chirped again.

*Ted.* No way in hell was she going to take this call. The sting was too fresh.

She stared at the display until it faded, waiting for the icon signaling she had voicemail. Clenching her teeth, she tossed the phone to the bed as if it burned like acid. This wasn’t going to get her down. She wouldn’t let it.

Glancing around the dim room, her gaze lighted on her suitcase. She should pack and head home to start her own job search. Being here only prolonged the inevitable. Ted had screwed her over, just like last time.

But if she weren't here, she would have missed the opportunity to get to know Luke better. So far, he was the one bright spot in her week. He was captivating, handsome and nicer than Bella's stories had led her to believe. And he kissed like a dream. She ran a fingertip over her mouth, recalling the taste and texture of him.

Straightening, she came to a decision. She'd stay with the team building class. Ted had already paid for her trip here. And Luke made it attractive to remain. Plus, completing the course would be a great addition to the resumé she was already writing in her mind. Because, even though she'd decided to stay here at the vineyard and learn everything she could, Ted didn't deserve to benefit from the knowledge she gained. And she wouldn't stay at MedServices. She couldn't. Not now.

She shoved the covers aside and swung her feet to the floor. The hardwood chilled her toes as she marched to the bathroom. A fast shower would ease the last of the ache in her head and, hopefully, wash away any remaining doubts about her future.

Twenty minutes later, she walked into the dining room. BIG and FIG waved to her from the end of the table, where they sat with the lady lawyers. Luke was on the opposite end, facing the door. His head was down as he read something on his phone. He glanced up as she crossed the space between them. A broad smile lit his face as she approached. He rose when she stopped next to him.

Jac laid her hand on the back of a chair. "May I join you?"

"You don't need to ask." His fingers brushed hers as he pulled the chair out.

"I'll grab a plate and be right back."

His gaze seared into her like a brand as she moved away to the sideboard. Not that she minded. It was nice to have his attention. As she filled her plate with eggs and bacon, her stomach rebelled a little. *Stupid nerves*. She should focus on Luke's continued scrutiny and not the looming uncertainty of her professional future.

She added a cup of coffee to her load, balancing everything as she made the return trip to Luke's side. Concentrating on setting down her food, she avoided his eyes as she took her seat.

"What's going on?" he asked. "You look like you got some bad news."

She glanced up sharply. *Damn!* So much for thinking she'd hidden the emotions boiling under the surface. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing, Jac. I can see you are upset about something." He covered her hand where it rested on the table.

The warmth from his palm helped ease the seething mass of emotions fighting for her attention. She blinked against the sting his gesture had freed, sucking in a deep breath. "I just found out I didn't get the promotion I thought I was getting." She didn't feel any better uttering the words aloud.

His hand tightened on her fingers as he dipped his head toward her. "I'm sorry."

Jac shrugged.

"What are you going to do now?" Luke's solid, comforting voice teased away a bit of her tension.

She jerked a shoulder. "Don't know. Maybe I'll find some land, go into debt and start raising free-range chickens."

Luke threw his head back and laughed. "That a girl. When one dream cracks, make scrambled eggs."

A smirk formed on her lips. She shook her head, prodding her eggs with a fork. "There's a novel take on lemons and lemonade."

"This is team building. We're supposed to look at things differently. I'm just getting in the spirit." Luke rolled up his shirtsleeves, exposing the smattering of dark hair on his forearms. The casual look, paired with jeans that hugged his thighs, was drop dead sexy.

Jac's breath caught in her lungs. She needed to stop mentally undressing him and thinking about the body under his clothes. Giving herself an inner scolding, she focused on

making acceptable conversation. “How’s this for different ... I’m making a fur coat out of a hair shirt.” Oh Lord, talk about a way to make a guy uncomfortable. Even the mere mention of a hair shirt was bound to turn him off. What was she thinking? Or rather, why was she letting her ovaries do the thinking?

He winced, shifting his shoulders. “Good one. How about adding ham and cheese on ‘sour’ dough bread.”

“Now we’re stretching it a bit.” Jac felt lighter at the moment than she had since the phone jolted her awake this morning. “Seriously, though, I can’t keep working for MedServices. This is the second time my boss has promoted a less qualified family member over me. I know they’ll expect me to train this woman, just like last time. I’m already rewriting my résumé in my mind.” It was a crying shame her heart wasn’t in it. She enjoyed her job and most of her co-workers.

“That’s the problem with working for a family-owned business. They’ll take you for granted every time. It isn’t any better in the corporate world, Jac. Most businesses are designed to promote mediocrity.” Luke reached for his juice glass. His knuckles turned white as he grasped it. A shadow passed over his face.

“It appears I’m not the only one experiencing the blue Mondays on a Tuesday.”

Luke glanced at his phone and grimaced. “Nope. Another problem came up yesterday between the nurses and doctors. HR is handling the situation, but they keep emailing. And the nurses’ union is exercising their early-up option on contract negotiations. But this isn’t about me. It’s about what you’re going to do now. And what I can do to help.”

“Why would you go out on a limb for me? You hardly know me. You wouldn’t have a clue about what kind of work ethic I have.”

“One of the emails I got this morning was from Bella Robins. She said I was lucky to have you on my team here this week. Told me you are one of the best problem solvers and

creative thinkers she's ever known. You know she doesn't lavish praise without justification."

"No, she doesn't." She couldn't believe Bella would have emailed Luke specifically to give her a character reference. Affection for her friend bubbled up within her chest. "I'm afraid I'll be relying on those creative skills quite a bit in the next few weeks while I'm figuring out what to do with my life. Gramps's farm is a leading contender right now."

"You said he grew spices, right?"

"Yeah. Basil, rosemary, and thyme were his biggest crops. I could branch out into Brassica crops, like kale or Brussels sprouts. Stuff that's high in antioxidants. That area is turning into a cash crop venture." She glanced out the window at the rows of vines marching over the fields. "Or maybe I could open a vineyard. Wine is highly popular and if I grow red varieties, it's considered antioxidants too. And the soil could be right at Gramps' farm."

"Well, you'll certainly learn a lot about growing grapes this week. You are going to stay, right? Finish the training course?" The expression on Luke's face was hopeful.

The intensity in his eyes warmed her. It was easy to imagine he truly wanted her to stay. "Absolutely. I think team building will be a great addition on my résumé. Unless Ted calls me back to the office, I'll be here."

Across the room FIG brayed obnoxiously at something Belinda, the lawyer said, temporarily making conversation difficult. Juice sloshed around in Luke's glass as he lifted it and toasted to her. "I'm glad. I'd much rather be partnered with you than with your flirty insurance agent."

Peering over her shoulder at the commotion across the room, Jac suppressed a shudder. Spittle flew from FIG's lips, droplets landing on Sally, the other lady lawyer's white shirt. Jac turned back to Luke, relief swimming in her gut that she'd dodged being paired with FIG or his compatriots. A broad grin lingered on Luke's mouth. He was the perfect partner for this type of activity. And others, too, Jac was certain.

Her physical response to Luke surprised her in its intensity. Every fiber in her being strained toward the man. He wasn't just attractive on the outside. His entire demeanor proved his sincerity and warmth. He obviously had problems with his own job to worry about, but he focused on staying positive and helping to solve her issues. He was the sort of man Bella called a keeper.

Jac dropped her gaze to her hands, clutched together in her lap. She battled the urge to run her fingers over his lips. Or press her mouth to his, then drag him up the stairs to her room and peel off his pale blue button-down shirt.

With her teeth.

Any response or action she might have made was cut off as Jules and Marcus entered the room. Conversation died around them as Jules made her way toward the front of the room.

“Good morning. I hope you all got plenty of rest last night and are ready to go.”

FIG pounded on the table. “I'm raring to go and show the other teams how to get things done. I'll be taking charge and kicking ass today.”

His friends groaned. Steve shot him a glare and whispered into DIG's ear. Vehement head shaking ensued. Probably they were arguing about which one of them had to have FIG on their team.

Jules held her palms out for silence. “We have two activities today. I think you're going to love the first one, which is cork art. We'll supply the corks and as teams, you'll use them to create a work of art worthy of framing. We'll stick to pictures because they're easier than sculptures. If you've had a chance to visit our gift shop, you've probably seen some of our finer examples from past participants.”

Belinda danced in her chair a little, her large breasts bouncing and straining the buttons on her hot pink shirt. “The one of wine splashing into a glass is gorgeous. Is it for sale?”

Jules nodded and leaned against the table. “Yes, it is. As participants, you signed an agreement that anything you create

here during your sessions is property of the vineyard with the option to be put up for sale in our gift shop or a local gallery. One hundred percent of the profits on anything sold we donate to the local boys and girls clubs in Santa Rosa. We've given the clubs a lot of money in the past two years thanks to our participants' creativity."

Marcus paused in the act of pouring a cup of coffee. "Over fifty grand."

"What a great idea." Jac leaned against her chair, marveling at the charitable tie-in. It wasn't like anyone could take their oversized artwork home unless they drove. And, if working as a team, how did they decide who got to own it? It was a perfect solution for everyone.

"Well, mark the picture on display to the right of the door as sold," Belinda said. "I'm glad I brought my checkbook. That picture is going to look lovely hanging over my husband's wine chiller."

Jules smiled graciously and nodded. "To continue, after lunch we have another painting project. Only this one is a little more physical. Since we are a working winery, there is always some kind of maintenance to be done. The cask room is in dire need of painting. You'll be working as teams on a specific section of the room. The casks can't be moved or dislodged in the process of painting behind them. You'll have to work together to figure out the best way to accomplish the task while working in really tight spaces. This exercise will be useful when you are facing sticky situations back at the office. We'll be focusing on creative problem solving."

FIG harrumphed loudly. "Sounds to me like you're getting paid to use us as labor."

Jules' eyes went flinty, but the rest of her expression remained pleasant. "Actually, I'm making double work for myself. Because once you're done, I have trained painters ready to redo your handiwork. And because I know sometimes painting can get messy, I'm paying a cleaning crew to come in to sanitize the area, as specified by state health codes and industry standards for cleanliness."



*Boom!* Just like that Jules had put the man in his place, without even breaking a sweat. Jac grinned behind the rim of her coffee cup. Somehow, she'd never personally mastered the art of the velvet-gloved put-down. Well, not sober anyway. Maybe she could pay Jules to teach her the skill before she had to return to Medford to face Ted.

Jules consulted her slender silver watch. "We'll begin in twenty minutes in the big green barn at the bottom of the hill. There are golf carts parked in the lot for your transportation." She accepted a to-go cup from Marcus and nodded toward the door. "See you down there." She and Marcus strolled out of the dining room, their heads together, whispering.

Jac addressed Luke. "I'm going to my room. You want to drive together?"

"Sure. No checking email while you're in the room. Don't want to get embroiled in office stuff when there's art to work on." Luke stood by her chair and reached to help her up.

Her skin tingled where Luke's hand connected with hers as she rose. And that was just the back of her hand. Imagine what response his touch would elicit on other, more sensitive spots on her body. His nostrils flared and the intensity in his blue eyes increased, coloring the irises a deep azure. A shiver of delight and anticipation coursed down her spine.

Jac cleared the sudden frog developing in her throat as her thoughts had wandered into the erogenous zone. "I ... uh, I'll meet you in the lobby in a few minutes."

As she exited the room behind FIG and his buddies, she just knew Luke's gaze was burning a path between where he remained rooted to the spot, and her backside. She fought hard to not add a little extra sway in her hips as she retreated.

Although she couldn't think why.

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Luke paced in the foyer as he waited for Jac to come downstairs. He distracted himself by rereading the email the

Director of Nursing had sent overnight. The union contract expired in two weeks' time, and she'd tacked more conditions on the agreement they'd already settled. They wanted to change the language behind their accrued paid time off schedule and requested an additional four percent wage bump for nurses with over ten consecutive years of service.

Neither request was unreasonable. But the medical center management and the union representative had agreed in principle on the contract. The Center's financial analysts were already running the numbers.

In all fairness Luke knew they couldn't afford both changes. Unfortunately, he was absolutely certain the D.O.N. wouldn't appreciate hearing her proposed changes would be treated as a 'one or the other' option. Her displeasure would make his life hell. His gut clenched and burned as he visualized a picket line of nurses marching on the circle drive at the front of the emergency room entrance.

Last night, he'd told Jacqui of his dream of teaching. Funny, because he'd barely admitted it to himself and suddenly, he'd confided in Jac. There was something about her he found fascinating. Her sense of humor topped his list of things about her that caught his attention.

And she was a stunner. Thick, cinnamon colored hair with golden highlights. Molten chocolate eyes. Those eyes were what attracted him first when they'd met at a bar in downtown Medford. Even across the dimly lit space, he saw happiness and intelligence dancing in them.

It wasn't just her appearance. She was warm and gracious. And the way she'd responded when he kissed her last night, curling into him like a soft, eager kitten. Everywhere she'd touched him last night still tingled with residual electricity.

He powered down his phone, deciding memories of their moonlight kiss was a much better distraction than his email. Overhead, footsteps sounded as someone hurried down the hallway. Jac appeared at the top of the steps just as Luke shoved his phone into his pocket. In spite of the problems plaguing her this morning, happiness lit her face as she

bounced down the steps. She most definitely was a glass-half-full woman. It was just one of the many desirable attributes she possessed.

He'd check at the hospital and with their medical billing company to see if there were any open positions she'd be qualified for. God, he hoped she'd stay in the area. He kind of already considered her a friend, something he hadn't had much time for in the past six months.

He returned her grin as she skidded to a stop in front of him. "Ready?"

She saluted him. "Let's go be a team."

Together, they walked out the front door. The sun had pleasantly warmed the cool morning air. "I never know what to expect from the fall weather." He made conversation as they walked to the last golf cart remaining in the lot. "In Florida, September was always hot and humid. We didn't get much of breeze from the Gulf."

"I do like this time of year in this region. It seems the days are brighter and sunnier. Although we still get plenty of rain."

Well, this was awkward. He'd brought up the weather like they were on a bad date and didn't have anything better to talk about. He opted to change the subject. "Tell me more about what you do for MedServices. I might be able to help you with a job search. I'm a big dog in my company."

"Big dog, eh?" Jac shot him a mirth-filled glance as she climbed into the cart. She took a moment to get settled before answering. "I investigate billing and insurance filing errors. I have to know billing codes and be familiar with the biggest insurers' policies on write-offs and payment procedures. It's a lot to keep straight."

The cart beeped as he backed from its stone parking block. "You know, there is a growing need for patient insurance advocates. We have a small two-person department whose only job is to help patients decipher their bills. In many cases, they find errors in favor of the insured. I'm always happy to sign off refunds in those cases."

He wasn't kidding. The satisfaction he received from settling claims where the patient had been overcharged was second to no other business pleasure. His head bobbed back as he pressed the accelerator. "We plan to expand the advocate staff quite a bit, as our patient base grows."

Jac raised her eyebrows. "That's awesome. Usually a company resists providing refunds. Or at the very least, makes the patient jump tall buildings to prove they're owed money. That's why I'm thinking about getting out of the business altogether. It's their money and MedServices tries too hard to keep it from them. The practice makes me uncomfortable."

"So, back to farming?" Luke questioned. He maneuvered around a corner on the cart path leading to the bottom of the hill. An oversized green pole-building gleamed in the dappled morning sunlight filtering through the leaves of nearby oak trees. With the vineyard rolling away behind the building, the scene itself was picture worthy.

Next to him, Jac shrugged. "I really don't know much about agriculture. I can't go into a new venture without being informed. I'll either stay put at my job while I take classes and learn everything I can, or ..." She trailed off and shrugged again.

When he leaned forward to look at her face, her eyes were shrouded in doubt.

"Hey, things will work out. Between my connections and Bella's we could find you a new job, once you decide that's what you want."

"I haven't even told Bella this latest news yet," Jac admitted. "But she's hooked up with a lot of other HR types and keeps mentioning positions to me. I know she's always looking for me. For which I am very grateful. Just as I appreciate your willingness to help. It's really nice of you."

Luke dropped his hand from the steering wheel onto her thigh and gave it a squeeze. His palm heated with the contact. He'd meant it to be reassuring and friendly, but the jolt of lust spearing straight to his groin proved otherwise. He quickly visualized the latest budget spreadsheet to fight back his rising

erection. Jac's lips parted and over the crunching of gravel under the tires, he swore he heard her quiet gasp.

He pulled into the parking area next to the other carts, sad the interlude was over. Braking to a stop, he reached for the ignition switch. Pressed against the steering wheel, he grinned over his shoulder in time to catch her studying his ass. Color flared on her cheeks. She looked away, but not before she cast another quick glance at his crotch.

His cock hardened against the zipper on his jeans. God, they were a team.

“Ready to go make some art?” he asked.

She nodded. “As we were driving down the hill, did you notice how pretty the scene was? I wonder if we could recreate the barn somehow.”

“Damn! I was thinking the same thing. We were meant to be thrown together here.”

“I don't know that I believe in predestination, but it seems to be working in our favor this week.” Jac's smoky laugh curled around his heart and tugged.

Twisting on the bench seat toward her, Luke ran his left hand up her arm, over her shoulder and into her hair. Applying the slightest pressure, he pulled her forward to meet his lips.

Pleasure burst through him when she opened her mouth. He stroked her tongue with his, tangling them together as he deepened the kiss. Her light touch on his chest inflamed him, making him want more. Even though his hands itched to test the weight and warmth of her breasts, he refrained from reaching for them. Instead, he settled for stroking his knuckles down her arms, allowing them to brush across the seductive slope. Her nipples hardened as he slipped his fingers over their crests.

She moaned and pulled away from his marauding lips. “Luke, we really shouldn't do this here. What if someone sees?”

“I can't seem to make myself stop.” He pressed his mouth to hers again.

She eased back, but leaned her forehead to his, maintaining contact. Her dainty hands landed on his knees. “There will be other chances. We’ll be here all week.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. Would a week be long enough? “We do live in the same town, so we can keep seeing each other, right?”

Leaning away, desire mixed with resoluteness when she gazed at him. Jac searched his face before replying. “With things so up in the air for me, I’m not sure what my status will be in the next few weeks. I don’t ... I don’t think we should plan too far in the future at this point. Who knows where I’ll land, and you said yourself you have a heavy workload. But we should make the most of our time here.”

Realization stung like a wasp, swift and sharp. She wasn’t looking forward the way he was. He should be happy to have a no-strings attached relationship. But, dammit! He was certain he wanted more. At least more than she seemed willing to give. “I understand. But what if I don’t want just a quick fling? What if I want more?” His tone came across flat. And maybe a little cold.

Her head jerked up and her stare snagged him. “I don’t know, Luke. I can’t make any commitment at this point. I’d like to enjoy our time here, but if all you want is a teammate, I can make that work too.”

*Shit!* A work-only relationship wasn’t what he wanted. He could negotiate union agreements and complex financial service contracts without anything more than a pad of paper and a pencil. Navigating this situation was proving impossible. “If that’s what you want. For the record, I don’t see us only being a team as far as business is concerned.”

Conflict flared in her expression, her brows drawing together, creating a cute dimple between them. She pressed her lips together as she scooted away from him and off the seat. “We should go in.”

She stalked toward the building. *Is she mad?* Damned if he could understand why. Or drag his eyes away from the sexy sway of her hips as she crossed to the open door.

Replaying the conversation they'd shared as they drove to the work area, Luke couldn't identify exactly where he'd taken a wrong turn. But he most surely had. His footsteps lagged as he followed Jac into the barn.

Hopefully this morning's exercise would work wonders in putting them back on the same team.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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What the hell was wrong with her? Jac had all but slapped the man away with her rising insecurities. *Freaking Ted Fleury*. Every time she allowed herself to anticipate any possible advancement, he jerked hard on the reins and slammed her back in her place. Knowing his pattern, the news shouldn't have caught her so off guard today, but it had. Especially after coming through for the company and solving the problems created by the incompetent woman he'd just promoted. Anger churned in her gut.

Luke had just followed through on what they'd started last night. God, when he kissed her, desire flared to life between her legs, making her wet. She'd nearly panted when the back of his hand drifted over her nipples. Imagine how she'd have embarrassed herself if he'd actually palmed her breasts.

Casting a surreptitious glance at him, she found his face set in an attentive mask as he stood stiffly by her side, listening to Jules explain the project. She hoped he was really paying attention to the instructions, because she was still too distracted by the memory of the bulge in his jeans when they'd sat in the golf cart.

She definitely wanted him. However, any thought beyond the end of the week scared the crap out of her. She hated uncertainty and yet here she was, sitting smack dab in the middle of it. The harsh noise of her grinding teeth jerked her back to the present. She mentally commanded herself to unclench her jaw, lower her shoulders, and release the tension pinching her like a too-tight shoe. Fat lot of good the stern



order did. With a herculean effort, she forced her attention back to Jules' calm voice.

Luke bent to pick up the thin sheet of wood that was the base of their artwork, his jeans stretched tautly over his butt. Jac licked her lips. He placed the board on the table and turned in time to see her ogling him. Slow, sexy confidence spread over his face and she was lost. If there weren't so many other people in the room, she might have tackled him and had her way with him right there. And the rat bastard knew it, judging by the way his eyes danced.

"You have three hours to work on this. Do your best to finish on time." Jules called out. "We'll be serving a buffet lunch just outside in the picnic area, so if you don't complete your project in the allotted time, you'll still be able to use the lunch break to finish, if needed."

Luke leaned against the worktable and crossed his arms over his chest as he raked his gaze over her body. He asked, "So, are we going to try to recreate the scene outside?"

"Stop looking at me that way!"

False innocence moved over his face, brows lifting, eyes widening in question. The grin stayed put. "What way?"

"Like you've just hit the bull's eye with all three baseballs. Like I'm some kind of prize you've just won." She pressed her lips together and wrapped her arms around her waist.

"I don't think that's how I was looking at you." He shoved away from the table and gestured to the buckets of wine corks under the counter. "So, what's it going to be? A landscape or a portrait?"

At least he'd wiped the victorious expression off his face. Jac sighed. "Landscape. I do think it would make a pretty picture."

"Are you any good at sketching? One of us should draw where we want to place the corks on the wood while the other sorts through the supplies. Using a divide and conquer strategy seems a good idea for a team."

"Sounds perfect."

Jac grabbed a pencil from a cup on the tabletop. Leaning her weight onto one hip, she studied the board, flipping the pencil through her fingers while she thought. After a quick glance through the window, she leaned over, braced one hand on the table, and began scratching out a rough layout for the project.

Luke sorted through the corks, dividing them by the color tipping the ends. He worked swiftly and in silence. Around the room, the other teams worked on their projects without much conversation.

While she penciled in the drawing, Jac considered where corks would have to be placed to create the image they'd agreed on. She drew small circles, designating placement of each cylinder.

She nudged against Luke as she reached for the paints that had been provided to add any necessary color. He steadied himself with a hand on the floor. "Watch where you're going, lady." His bright eyes softened the reprimand in his words.

She teased right back. "Sorry. It's just that some people are always in the way."

"Did you stop to think maybe I'm in the way deliberately? Maybe I'm meant to be in your path."

Now the conversation was getting a little too heavy for her tastes. "Great teams always anticipate movement and positioning and get out of each other's way." She gripped a bottle of paint, squeezing the soft plastic while she waited for his response.

After searching her face for a moment, Luke tipped his head to the side, as though not sure how to handle her forcing the topic back to business. "Better get to work." He reached for a handful of corks and returned to sorting them.

*I'm an idiot.*

He wanted to flirt and she'd said exactly the right thing to force his banter to a screeching halt. Biting back an apology, she focused on pouring a small amount of brown paint on a paper plate that would serve as a palette. Once satisfied with

the quantity, she added a generous amount of green to it. Finally, she sprinkled in a bit of water to make it more of a wash than paint.

Choosing a sponge brush, she smeared the mixture on the board in wide arcs to mimic the hills she could see out the window. She dabbed a little more brown paint to the wash, and a few more drops of water, swirling them together. Satisfied with the final color, she swept the darker color onto the board above the lighter green.

Luke stood and looked over the sketch she'd created on the board. "Wow, you're good."

"Thanks." She couldn't lie to herself. His praise soothed part of the hurt left by what had happened at the office today. "It's easy to draw it out and add color. Now we have to let the wash dry a bit. While we're waiting, we could start cutting some of the corks. Using different sizes will add dimension to the work."

Luke reached for the small handsaw in their toolbox. "Good idea. I'll cut while you finish sorting. Unless you want to use the saw."

"Nope, go ahead. I believe we should work according to our strengths. It's how I'd delegate on a project at work. People should be encouraged to try new things, but if you have someone who's good at something, it makes sense to let them take the lead."

Her thoughts wandered to the idea of Luke taking the lead in bed. Or would he let her? Dismissing the idea, she grabbed the cord for the hot glue gun, intent on plugging it in. "That's what teamwork is all about."

Brows drawn together, Luke nodded. He hefted a cutting board from its storage spot below the table. He positioned a cork, holding it in place with thumb and forefinger. Muscles rippled on his shoulder and back as he began to saw. When the plug sputtered from his grasp and rolled off the table, he laughed. "Slippery little suckers."

Jac laughed with him. “Try this.” She flipped the board over, exposing the small, rounded divot she’d spied when Luke had lifted the board. “I think the cork should fit in the slot and be easier to cut. Like this ...”

Placing a cork, she maneuvered his hand to position the saw on top, holding the cork steady. A thrill of electricity sparked through her palm and zipped up her arm. His quick glance confirmed he’d felt it too. Reluctantly, she pulled her hand away, but held his gaze for a moment longer.

Sudden gratitude that they did live in the same town flooded her. If he wanted to continue seeing her after this week, she’d enjoy the attention. He was an intriguing, beguiling man.

The sexy grin she was beginning to adore spread over his mouth once more. “Ah, you’re right. This works much better. Thanks.” Without breaking eye contact, he began to saw on the cork. And narrowly missed his finger in the process.

“Be careful there. You almost cut yourself,” Jac cautioned.

Luke’s eyes widened at his near-accident. “I guess it doesn’t pay to be distracted by your teammate.”

“Let’s save the distraction for later.” She couldn’t believe how bold she sounded. He brought out the vixen she didn’t realize she had in her.

Wrapped in the haze of her attraction to the man, the rest of the teams had faded into the background. Now, lady lawyers Belinda and Sally, squabbling about who got to be in charge, pulled Jac away from the moment she and Luke shared.

She gazed idly around the room at the other participants. The insurance guys were all seated on the floor, a pile of corks in the center of their circle. No teamwork there unless Stupid Joke Telling was one of the events for the week. While Jac watched, FIG tossed a handful of the small projectiles at Steve, who retaliated. Steve’s aim was better and the cork bounced off FIG’s forehead before dropping onto the shelf created by the guy’s protruding stomach.

“Amateurs,” Jac mumbled as she tested the green wash. It was dry enough. “I’m going to start with the building in the corner and work out. Will you cut some lengthwise for me? I think ten will do.”

Luke saluted her, the saw still in his hand. “Aye-aye, Captain.”

“Oh, I get to be in charge?”

“Well, every team has to have a leader. For this one, it’s you. I’ll do it for the next event.” Luke resumed cutting the corks.

“I’m not sure why your company sent you here. You’re an awesome team leader. I’d work for you any day.”

Before he could respond, Jules stepped up to their table. “You guys are way ahead of the other groups. I’ve watched you communicate and separate the tasks at hand. Exactly the way it should happen in the workplace.”

Jac smeared the end of a cork with glue. Taking care, she pressed it to the line she’d drawn for the barn. “Thanks. I suppose it helps that we’re completely new to each other. No preset ranking of authority to hold us back.”

Jules nodded. “Possibly. Unfortunately, it won’t be the situation you’ll find yourself in when you go back to the real world.”

“Hey, this is real.” Luke stopped sawing long enough to toss the cut pieces to a growing pile next to the board. He grabbed another and began the process again.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Jules watched the effort Luke put into project. “What I meant was, generally once you’re in the office you’ll still have to deal with the preconceived notions of your co-workers. For example, Jacqui wasn’t in a leadership role before. She was just a friend and office mate. Now, suddenly, she’s the head cheese. Some people can’t or won’t adapt easily to that change.”

“I see what you’re saying,” Jac said. It was exactly the kind of situation she expected. Or thought she would have dealt with upon her return to Medford. Her shoulders

tightened; tension snapped like a flag waving in the wind. “Lucky for me, I probably won’t face that situation.”

Jules tipped her head curiously. “Care to elaborate?”

Pressing a glued cork to the board, Jac pushed harder than she should. It skidded out of place, leaving a streak of glue. The hot blob burned her as she wiped the excess away. Shaking the offended digit, she briefed Jules quickly.

The expression on Jules’ face hardened as Jac finished. “That explains the voicemail I got from Ted Fleury this morning. He instructed me to send you back to the office. And requested a full refund of his fees.”

“What the hell?” Luke grunted through thinned lips. The saw clattered as he dropped it to the table. He propped his hands on his hips and looked expectantly at Jac.

Anger seared through her the way the melted glue had burned her finger. Jac carefully set the glue gun aside. “I’m not surprised. He probably needs me there to help smooth the transition for Deidre. And start training her to be my supervisor.” She clenched her hands into helpless fists.

“That’s complete bullshit.” Luke’s voice rose.

The insurance guys stopped messing around and glanced their direction, as if sensing all wasn’t well. Even the lady lawyers shut up for a moment.

“Back to work, everyone. You only have ninety minutes left.” Jules rested a hand on Luke’s arm. “It certainly is. I’m not planning on giving him his money back. Company policy. The contract reads no refunds once the course starts, which happened at last night’s dinner. Even if a participant has to leave early. As far as I’m concerned, Jacqui can stay and complete the course, unless Ted insists otherwise. I’ll try to convince him to let her stay.” She faced Jac, an expression in her eyes that looked suspiciously like sympathy. “Anything you learn here will still benefit your company because it seems *you* are the unofficial leader. They’ll need the skills you perfect as they make the transition. And I’ll be sure to tell Ted that when I call him back.”

“Would you mind meeting with me sometime this week to talk about how to spin this course to my benefit in a job interview?” Jac hated to voice the question, but felt compelled to do so, nonetheless.

Jules nodded. A broad, approving smile tugged the corners of her lips. “Absolutely. The skills you achieve here will be attractive to any employer lucky enough to hire you.”

“I’m not sure what I’m going to do.” Jac told her. “I’m pretty sure I don’t want to stay at MedServices. Even if Ted changes his mind and promotes me instead, he’s shown his true colors. I’m not family and there’s nowhere to go with this organization.”

Luke dropped his hands to his sides and rested his butt on the edge of the table. “Maybe you should ask Jules for an extra week here and learn everything you can about farming.”

Jac shot him a reproving glare. “Luke.”

Sharing a glance between them, Jules said, “I’m intrigued. You want to learn about running a farm?”

“It’s just a pipe dream. My family owns land in central Oregon and no one is doing anything to make it pay. I teased Luke earlier about running away and raising chickens.”

“Seriously?” Jules’ tone held incredulity.

Laughing, Jac replied, “Well, maybe not chickens. My grandparents used to run a spice and herb farm. It’s lain dormant ... no, fallow, for a few years but I think I could bring it back. It would certainly be a simpler lifestyle than my city life.”

“Country girl, huh?” Jules toyed with the corks laid out, ready to be added to the art project.

“Yep.” Jac remained outwardly positive, while inside she held a running debate. She knew nothing about farming, which didn’t lessen the appeal. “God, it feels like I’m going off the deep end. Just like the character from the show my grandpa used to watch. *Green Acres*.”

Luke barked out a laugh. “At least you’ll be a little less clueless than Oliver and Lisa.”

Jules dropped the cork she’d played with and dusted her hands together. “Tell you what ... let’s talk tomorrow evening after our daily projects. I’ll have time to pull together some resource material for you. I was born and raised in Los Angeles. I never even talked to the gardeners on my mom’s property. I kind of went through the same thing when I bought the vineyard. I’m happy to share what I know.”

The unease gurgling heavily in Jac’s stomach lightened. “Deal.”

“Now, get back to work.” Jules leaned in confidently and gestured to the board on the table. “I don’t want the other teams to beat you at this. Your picture is going to be great and make a lot of money for our charity.”

As she sauntered away toward the lawyers’ table, Jac stared after her. “I’d have never guessed she didn’t grow up on this property. She seems bred for it.”

“Can’t judge a book—” Luke started.

“I know, by its cover.” Wonderful, now they were completing each other’s sentences. “Come on, let’s finish our picture. Jules really put the pressure on. We don’t want to disappoint.”

Luke gestured to the growing pile of cut pieces. “Hey, I’ve been working while you were gabbing.”

“Well, leadership does have its privileges. Besides, I can glue faster than you can cut.”

They worked side-by-side in silence to complete the project. Once Luke finished with the saw, he took the glue gun and started prepping the pieces for Jac. The picture took shape faster because they worked so well together. Luke even managed to find the right amount of red-tipped corks to allow Jac to create a flowerbed along the bottom of the picture.

She poured a dab of purple paint on another paper plate and added a separate dollop of green. Quickly she demonstrated how to daub the color on the end of the corks



representing the grape vines. Once she handed Luke the paintbrush, the extra little touch turned their project into a beautiful work of art.

Jules walked to the front of the room, clapping her hands as she went. “Time’s up. We have a couple of teams who didn’t finish.” She eyed the insurance guys, her lips pressed into a tight line. “You have ninety minutes before the afternoon activity. Marcus set up the lunch buffet in the pavilion behind this building. If you want, you can use those ninety minutes to complete your project after you eat.”

FIG jammed his hands on his hips. “What if we don’t want to finish?”

“That’s up to you. You aren’t required to complete the project. What’s important is you found a way to work together as a team. Three hours should have been enough to hit the deadline, but sometimes, things interfere.” Jules folded her arms over her chest. “How you react to those disturbances is as much a part of the exercise as anything else. You’ll face situations in the office that can cock-up your projects. You need to learn how to delegate and re-prioritize as team leaders.”

“Well, we aren’t finishing,” Steve muttered. “This one ain’t a priority.”

Jules shrugged. “Fine. Go ahead and clean up your stations before you hit the buffet.”

“We have to clean up?” FIG whined as he gestured to the monumental mess his team had made with paint and glue, not to mention cork shavings. The jerk probably underpaid his administrative assistant and forced her to wash out his coffee mug.

“Part of the details on any team project is the follow-up or wrap-up. You should get in the habit of evaluating each team project you are on, determining how you can make things run smoother on the next one.”

FIG opened his mouth to complain, but Luke beat him to it. “That’s what a good leader does. I think the people on a

team appreciate it. It's also a chance to praise people. Which is just as important."

Jules beamed at him. "So right, Luke. In fact, we'll be reviewing today's activities, what worked ... and what didn't, tonight at dinner. There might even be some prizes handed out. If there aren't any other questions, you can finish here and grab lunch."

Cleaning wasn't a huge chore for Jac and Luke. They'd tidied up as they'd worked, so now it was a matter of wiping down the paint bottles, rinsing out brushes, and returning the unused corks to the proper barrels. Once again, Jac marveled at how easily she and Luke had worked together. If they kept trundling along this way, they might end up the team to beat.

Luke smiled at her as he took the brushes from her and headed to the sink. His grin warmed her system better than a good red wine. The heady heat settled with a tantalizing tug low in her pelvis.

He returned to her side, pulling her back from her musing. "Ready to eat?"

Her stomach rumbled loudly. Her thoughts and the embarrassment of the burbling in her tummy forced heat to climb her throat and cheeks. She grimaced. "Sorry. This morning's eggs didn't last, I guess. Let's go check out the buffet before FIG and company eat everything."

Luke led the way to the picnic structure where they found a buffet of cold sandwiches, three varieties of salads, and a tray of the yummiest looking cookies Jac had ever seen. In front of them in line, FIG and DIG loaded their plates with the cookies, while Luke helped himself to a turkey sandwich. He carried Jac's plate so she could grab soft drinks for them.

She followed him to a long table with benches on either side. Luke deposited her plate across from his.

As they settled on the benches, Belinda and Sally came over. "Mind if we join you?"

Jac nodded, though she'd have enjoyed continuing getting to know Luke better. "Sure. How did you do with this

morning's project?"

"We finished, but it's crap," Belinda laughed as she climbed over the bench to sit.

"No it isn't," Sally disagreed. "It turned out okay."

Belinda narrowed her eyes, sending the younger woman a quelling stare. "It sucks and you know it. In our defense, we're lawyers, not artists."

Color rose on Sally's ears. "But—"

"No buts about it. We aren't creative people," Belinda demurred in disgust.

She eyed Luke. "We checked out your picture after we finished cleaning up. It was impressive. I wonder if Jules would sell it to me, too? It would make a great companion piece for the other one I bought."

"Jacqui really made it come to life. I never even considered using the paint, but she had a vision." Luke patted Jac's hand where it rested on the table.

Sally raised her brows. "Are you an artist?" she asked Jac.

"Not even close. I'm in account services with a medical records and billing company." Jac laughed, the sound tinged with an unfamiliar darkness. Hoping to take the focus off herself, she changed the topic. "What kind of law do you practice?"

Belinda straightened and set down her fork. "Employment law. We deal mainly with discrimination and harassment lawsuits. We're based in New York."

Luke shot Jac a fast look before leaning forward. "You're talking about cases where qualified people are passed over for a position and someone less qualified being promoted?"

"Exactly." Sally beamed at Luke.

*Please don't go there. Please don't.* Jac sent the mental command with a squint she hoped Luke would catch. She was having a good time and didn't want to spoil it with thoughts about the office and the situation she found herself in.

Apparently, Luke received the message. “Sounds like interesting work. Were you involved in the case against the Knicks in New York?”

Belinda nodded. “Our firm was. We sat at the defendant’s table in the courtroom.”

“Ouch! That had to suck for them. What was the final judgment? Something near five million?”

“Six. And in my opinion, it wasn’t enough.” Belinda’s tone bordered on giddy. It was obvious she would have worked for the plaintive.

Jac paid attention to her meal, rather than the conversation. At some point, the toe of her sneaker connected to the tip of Luke’s. Her gaze flew to his eyes, which held a promising gleam. Neither bothered to shift their feet.

Conversation flowed and she uttered an occasional response, just to make it seem she was attentive. But her thoughts wandered to Luke’s mouth, and his broad chest, and the way his fingers flexed as he peeled and sectioned his orange. The sweet citrus tang filled the air, making her mouth water. He offered half of the fruit to her, which she readily accepted. The taste of sunshine burst on her tongue.

A couple of the other teams stopped by their table to compliment them on their project. Their praise was lavish, causing pride to swell in her chest. Several of the other teams disappeared into the barn to finish their projects before the next event began.

“I need to check in with my office before the afternoon exercise,” Luke said after their lunch companions left the table. “What are you going to do?”

“Well, I won’t be calling Ted.” She’d deliberately left her phone on the desk in her room so she couldn’t be reached. She didn’t want to talk to him until she’d formed some kind of plan. “I think I’ll take a walk through the vineyard.”

“You want company?” he offered.

“I thought you had calls to make.”

“They can wait.” He dropped his hand to hers where it rested on the table.

The need to rotate her hand so they were palm to palm was strong. She bit her lip and shook her head. “You go ahead and make your calls. I can use some time to start formulating what I intend to say to Ted once I do call him back.”

“I vote you tell him to go to hell.” Luke’s grin eased his harsh words.

“As tempting as that sounds, I should probably come up with something better. Something more along the lines of I’ll be leaving for a company where I’ll be celebrated, not merely tolerated.”

“That’s the spirit.” He patted her hand, encouraging and comforting at the same time. Once he stood, he stretched his arms overhead. The white shirt he’d left untucked rose above the belt on his jeans, revealing taut stomach muscles adorned with a thin line of hair spearing south.

It was probably wrong to want to sweep her tongue down that trail to discover the treasure at the end of the line. Sparks erupted between her thighs. Jac’s mouth went dry and her heart sped up just thinking about it.

If Luke noticed her fascination with his abdomen, he didn’t let on. “I’ll meet you at the cask room in thirty minutes. Do you need anything from me?”

Oh, she needed something from him. Bemused, she dragged her gaze to his face. “Anything?”

Humor, tinged with desire darkened his eyes. His lips curved into a slow, suggestive smile. “I meant like a sweater or different pair of shoes, or your phone. But I’m open to other ideas.”

“Oh.” She reined in her erotic imagination and forced the muscles on her face to relax. “No, I think I’m good.”

Luke scooted around the table with nimble grace. When he reached her side, he extended his arm, offering to help her out of her seat. After she laid her hand in his, he jerked her up and against his body. The second her breasts brushed against the

hard plane of his chest, fire burst between them. Breath froze in her lungs as he stared at her upturned face, zeroing in on her lips.

Jac kept her eyes open and on his as he lowered his mouth to hers. Flecks of silver popped in his baby blues, a thin line of brown ringed the iris. His eyes were made more exotic by the thick, dark lashes surrounding them. Once his lips touched hers, the lashes swept down, brushing her cheek as he angled his head.

She sank into the kiss and closed her eyes, a glittering kaleidoscope flaring behind her eyelids. The touch of his hand when he laid it on her hip was hot, solid, and inviting. Desire shook her when he tugged her lower lip between his and sucked hard.

If he kept kissing her this way, she'd melt into a puddle of please-do-me-now right in front of him. Laying her hand to his chest, she applied the smallest pressure to his heated muscles. Luke broke the seal between their lips and stepped a scant two inches away from her. His orange-scented breath brushed sweetly on her face.

Clearing her throat, she toyed with the buttons on his shirt before murmuring, "We, uh, should probably hold this thought for later." And she meant it. Later, if he wanted to go where this kiss led, she'd go right with him. And if he didn't want to go, well, she'd do her damndest to convince him otherwise. What a difference a few hours of working next to the magnetic man had made.

Luke rested his forehead against hers, his hands remaining on her hips, sure and possessive. "Later. Right." He drew a deep breath.

She didn't like the bereft feeling that remained after he released her. "Maybe we could skip the afternoon session. I mean, I might get sent home and not get to complete the course anyway."

A wry grin twisted his features. "We might be missed if we blew it off. Besides, like I said earlier, we do live in the same town. And I'm guessing, based on the fact you kissed me back

—quite nicely, I might add—you aren't opposed to a relationship with me.”

Surprise fluttered in her chest, like grape leaves trembling in a breeze. When had she made that decision? “I guess I'm not.”

“Then there's plenty of time.” He stepped away from her, trailing fingers along her arm. He grasped her hand and squeezed. Letting go, he began to walk backward away from her, his gaze intent. “Go take your walk. We'll pick this up later. That's a promise.”

## CHAPTER SIX

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The second Luke checked in with his office, agitation replaced the sensual tug that had erupted when he kissed Jac. Too damn bad he couldn't take a step back in time and rethink calling his admin assistant for an update.

The news was all bad. The nursing staff took offense over the slow resolution on the grievance with Dr. Dipshit, the intern who'd crossed the imaginary line they'd drawn on the linoleum. Plus, the brand-spanking new medical center comptroller had called three times, each time slightly more urgent in her demand for Luke to return her phone calls.

The bean counter had only started three weeks ago and had spent time poring over financial statements like nobody's business. Apparently, she'd found some discrepancies in the books and wanted to discuss them. A quick call to her had confirmed Luke's growing impression the woman had exaggerated her skill level on her application.

Once he'd listened to her brief but terse demand for his attention, Luke issued an order of his own—she needed to get her facts and suspicions together and they'd meet the instant he returned. After telling her to schedule an appointment, he disconnected the call and dropped his phone to the desk.

He cracked his neck from side to side in hopes of easing the residual tension left by the demands of his job. He loved what he did, but it had become a 24/7 proposition he hadn't been prepared for. What made it even more wearing, he'd found something ... someone, who'd created a welcome distraction.



Staring blankly at the oatmeal-colored coverlet on the bed, it wasn't difficult to imagine Jac nestled among the rich brown pillows strewn across it. His body tensed just thinking about having her under him, being inside her.

He blew out a breath. If he continued this line of thought, her close proximity for the rest of the afternoon would be sweet torture. No doubt he would have to start visualizing spreadsheets and board reports to keep his hard-to-tame reaction to her from becoming painfully obvious. His laugh was short and bitter as he finally left to meet her at the cask room.

When he slipped in beside her, Jac's glance was warm and relieved.

"I wasn't sure you'd make it on time. Marcus is about to start explaining what we're doing. Trouble at the office?" she whispered.

"Just like any other day. It will keep until I get back. Did I miss anything important?" he asked.

"No." Her honey amber hair danced on her shoulders as she shook her head.

Luke glanced around the cavernous space, barely containing the impressed whistle about to leak from his lips. Walking through the door, he'd noticed how the storage facility was built into a hillside. The humidity was constant in caves like this, making them ideal for aging wine. The room seemed endless, stretching away from him, and angling slightly downhill. An intricate series of risers held at least a hundred oak wine barrels.

From where he stood, he could see the way the platforms were constructed to keep everything level. Exposed brick support arches broke the rounded line of the roof of the cave. Pendant lights and wall sconces provided the only illumination.

In the dim light, the deteriorating condition of the whitewash paint on the walls and ceilings was noticeable. This was the project they'd work on next.

Marcus' instructions caught his attention. "We aren't going to do the ceiling today. We're leaving that to the guys who own scaffolding and precision painting equipment. All we'll focus on is the area behind the barrels. You'll have about three feet of space to work in, so the conditions aren't optimal."

He smiled at the scattered groans. "I know, a colossal understatement. Bumping into or jarring the barrels in any way is bad. Getting paint on one could affect the flavor and could be catastrophically bad. Knocking one off a stand is grounds for immediate dismissal from the program."

FIG snorted. "What the—"

Marcus raised his hand to stay FIG's protest. "Just kidding. But please be careful around the casks. The balance is fragile and unintentional stirring of the contents can change the fermentation schedule."

Jac held up a finger. "I assume you're providing coveralls or something to protect our clothing."

Sweeping his arm to the left, Marcus indicated a row of supply carts Luke hadn't noticed. "Everything you need is over there. You'll see there's tape on the floor designating where your team is painting. The right side tiers of barrels are set a bit farther away from the wall so there is a miniscule amount of more room to work. We took space limitations into account when we assigned spots."

Steve's chuckle was harsh as he thumped FIG's gut. "So, basically you're saying the heavyweights should look for their area on the right."

Marcus kept his expression stoic. "All I'm saying is like any good team leader, we tried to accommodate so the task at hand is easier to accomplish. It's a practice you should get in the habit of considering. Each team member will have a set of skills and strengths to bring to the project. You have to identify and use their talents and abilities in the best way possible."

Jac nudged his arm. "I'm impressed by how Jules and Marcus always manage to spin any negatives into a teaching opportunity," she whispered.

Luke leaned down, putting his mouth next to her ear. “It’s a trick we should probably remember.” A hint of cinnamon and cloves drifted from her hair, the scent an intoxicating perfume.

“This is not just a slap-some-color on the wall exercise. The walls are rough and every inch needs to be coated with the whitewash. It might take a little creativity on your part. You have until half past four to finish painting and clean up any mess you make. I’ll be around if you need any help.” Marcus snapped his fingers. “Go on, what are you waiting for? Walls ain’t gonna paint themselves.” His laugh boomed off the rounded ceiling, echoing the length of the room.

Luke followed Jac to the supply cart labeled with their names. She sorted through the contents, bending at the waist to check out the lower shelf. Breath froze in his throat at the sight of her rocking ass outlined in tight denim. He swallowed hard, hoping to curb the urge to sweep his hand over her backside.

Jac grabbed the paint-splattered coveralls, handing him a pair. Warmth flared in his cheeks when she caught him staring at her ass. She flushed a becoming shade of pink and shifted, as if self-conscious.

He accepted the heavy cotton painters’ uniform from her. “Sorry. The view was too awesome not to appreciate.”

The way she pressed her lips together, he was certain she meant to contain a smile, instead of showing anger. “You are incorrigible. We better get busy or we’ll never finish.”

“Right.” Luke toed off his tennis shoes. After shaking out the protective covering, he held the outfit against his body. “Um ... maybe we could switch.”

Jac had already shoved her legs into hers. She glanced up. “Oh. I didn’t realize they were different sizes. I’m swimming in mine, so they might be yours.”

The idea of Jac wearing his clothes nearly made his eyes cross. Cursing his damned vivid imagination, his mind conjured a vision of her in his white Oxford shirt and nothing else. Hair tousled, a sleep-deprived, sated glow on her face.

Thank heavens he still held the coveralls against his body. Hopefully it hid his solid erection. Watching her strip hers off didn't help. *The square of the hypotenuse ...* he began reciting the Pythagorean Theorem.

Jac swapped her pair for the ones he held on to for dear life. Bunching the material at his waist, he released a pent-up breath as the lusty grip on his body eased a little ... *is equal to the sum ... Ah, much better.*

After Jac pulled on the protective covering, she scanned the taped off portions of the floor. Grasping the handle on the cart, she pushed it toward their assigned spot. With a sheepish grin he did his best to hide, Luke pulled on the larger coveralls and quickly zipped up. Although he had the urge to palm the front of his pants to relocate his woody to a less obvious position, he feared someone else catching him in the act. Instead, he wiggled his hips as discreetly as possible to adjust the fit of his jeans, giving himself precious extra seconds before following her.

The teams around them took their places, and work began in earnest.

Across from their section, insurance man DIG, who was the thinnest the four of them, squeezed his frame behind the barrels. "This is going to suck big time. There's no room to maneuver," he complained loudly.

"Well, I sure as hell ain't going to fit. Shut up and let's get busy." FIG's voice resonated against the ceiling, sounding as if he were standing next to Luke, instead of across the wide room.

In the corner, Marcus cleared his throat and scowled toward the insurance dudes. "That's not how we build a team, Jeff."

"Glad I'm not on their team," Jac murmured against his ear, her soft breath tickling.

*Of the square of the other two sides.* Jesus, it was a good thing there were going to be barrels between them. Luke knew

as sure as the sun would rise he wasn't going to be able to keep his hands to himself.

Jac laid one hand on the top of a cask and her foot on the platform it rested on. "Can you help me?" she asked.

Moving behind her, he gripped her waist, steadying her as she boosted herself upward. "What are you doing?"

"Recon." Laughter tinged her tone. "I want to figure out our best options before we start. Might as well try to be as smart about the exercise as possible."

"Spoken like a world-class leader." Luke dug his fingers into the sleek muscles of her hips and resorted to reciting the infinite numbers associated with pi.

Jac glanced over her shoulder. "I think I have this figured out. Let me down."

Stepping back, Luke complied, but in the process, Jac's backside slid against his groin. He sucked in a sharp breath.

She didn't notice, or at least pretended not to notice, and moved toward the cart with a graceful sway of her hips. Squatting next to it, she pawed her way through the contents of the shelf.

"I knew I saw this here." She tugged out a folded sheet of canvas. Catching two of the corners, she snapped it open. "I think what will work best is if we split the wall horizontally. I'll fit behind the platform, so I'll take the bottom half. You can work on the top."

Luke eyed their section, evaluating Jac's suggestion. "It will work if we have the right tools. Is there an extendable roller? One capable of reaching the ceiling?"

The drop cloth fell to the floor when she released it to pluck another tool from the cart. A series of clicks sounded as Jac pressed tiny buttons on a short rod. With each click, she pulled the end further out, until it extended to a full five feet.

A cocky grin on her lips, she screwed the roller handle to one end. Five seconds later she'd slipped a fuzzy roller cover the cover into place and handed the entire contraption to him.

“Here you go.” Bending, she picked up the cloth and spread it over the casks in their section.

“What’s up with the cloth?” he asked.

“Did you not hear Marcus say getting paint on the barrels was grounds for dismissal? I’m just trying to make sure I get to stay until the end.”

“Ah. You really know what you’re doing, don’t you?”

She chose another frame from the cart and prepared it as she spoke. “I enjoy painting. It’s like mowing the lawn...or ironing a shirt. You can see your progress as you work. It’s satisfying. My friends know I like it, so I’m always invited to help them whenever they’re redecorating. Here.” She handed him the paint bucket.

Setting two trays on another drop cloth, she motioned for him to pour.

Luke pried the paint lid off as Jac continued to prep their area. Getting down on all fours, she peered under the platform. With deft movements, she slid her roller and a roll of masking tape under the stand. The end of the brush she shoved through clacked woodenly against the opposite wall.

Luke straightened from pouring the paint. With his toe he nudged one of the pans in her direction. She grasped it, her finger plunging into the white paint. Chuckling, she wiped it off on the front of her coveralls. With a satisfied grunt, she gently manipulated the paint tray under the stand of casks. She stood and dusted her hands on the back of her painter’s overalls.

“Let’s roll,” she said with a little snort of amusement.

Not waiting for his nod, she squeezed between a break in the platforms. Her head disappeared from view as she sat down. Over the top of the barrels, Luke watched as she squirmed to get comfortable, picked up the masking tape, and began taping off edges.

She tipped her head back to look at him, exposing the long column of her neck. *A damn good thing we’re separated by the wine barrels.*

“Luke, get busy,” she chided, saturating her brush in white paint. She drew a bold horizontal line halfway up the wall. “You paint everything above, I’ll do the lower half. And don’t you dare drip on me.”

A mock salute later, Luke soaked his roller in paint and started on the wall above the barrels. They worked silently, quickly, and cohesively as a team. Around them, some teams did the same, while others laughed and joked. The insurance guys took turns painting dirty words and pictures on the walls, washing over them with the paint, hiding their childishness.

Luke found the mindless motion of stroking the roller over the wall soothing. His brain completely disengaged from the clusterfuck going on at the medical center between the nurses and Dr. Dipshit. The idea of any problems the accountant might uncover faded into the background. The only things worth his consideration right now were the continuous motion of his paintbrush, and the occasional blast of Jac’s tangy perfume over the paint fumes.

Jac sang quietly while she worked, her soft, rich alto invading his brain. Luke caught himself humming along as he worked.

After adding more paint to his tray, Luke lifted it onto drop cloth-covered barrels, balancing it in the valley between two of them. He dipped his roller and resumed painting overhead.

Jac repositioned herself directly under where he worked. His wet roller squished against the wall, echoed by the sound of Jac stroking paint on her half.

The next time he stuck the roller in the tray, it began to skid toward the edge of the barrel. Dismay filled him and time slowed into an *oh-fuck-no* freeze frame as the shallow piece of plastic tipped over.

Jac’s outraged screech bounced off the wall, followed by sudden quiet. Drips of paint plopped on the canvas under her. Other teams stopped their progress and craned their necks to check out what was going on.

“Oh, God, I’m sorry.” Luke propped his roller between the barrels, making sure to wedge it in place. Stepping on the platform with one foot, he lifted up to peer over the top. “Jacqui, are you okay?”

“Um ...”

Whitewash covered half her head, oozing down her left side. After scrubbing the back of her hand over her leg, she tried to wipe the excess from her face. With her back to him, Luke couldn’t see just how bad it was.

“Oh, fuck. I can’t believe I did that.” His voice rose in horror.

“Believe it!” Thank God she chuckled as she said it. “Can you find a rag or some paper towels? I’m afraid if I move the mess will end up bigger.”

Belinda hustled over, a wad of paper in her hand. She knelt next to the riser and shoved her arm under. “Take these. Sally’s coming around to help.”

Sally had already slipped between the platforms. Even though she was tiny, Luke could see how crammed together the two of them were. Sally reached across Jac’s chest and began sluicing the sticky mess off her shoulder. Jac twisted a little to give her better access and pressed the unpainted portion of her back to the barrels. FIG wandered over and took up a position right next to Luke.

Anger at his own stupidity swept over Luke like a broom through a dust pile. “I’m so sorry, Jac. Setting the tray on the barrels was asinine.”

“Won’t get any argument from me.” Jac struggled to her feet in the confined space. She turned as Sally continued scrubbing at the paint coloring half her head white.

Marcus joined the onlookers. “What’s going on?” He let out a low whistle. “You’re a mess, girl.”

Marcus’s comment brought a rueful pout to Jac’s face, creasing the paint still decorating her face. “Tell me about it. But look, Marcus. Not a drop on the barrels.” She said it like it was the most important thing to her.



“At least you took that to heart.” Marcus’ teeth flashed whitely against his dark complexion. “You better come on out of there and get cleaned up before the shit dries. It’ll be a bitch to get out if it does.”

“The choir is on the same page with ya there.” Holding her hair away from her head, Jac followed Sally from behind the barrels.

Luke was ready with more paper towels. He wiped away as much of the mess from her back and sides as possible. Jac inhaled sharply as he passed his hand down her arm, brushing the side of her breast in the process. Everything in him tightened in the instant after the brief contact.

Jac cleared her throat and shrugged away Luke’s hands. She took the paper towels from Sally, smiling as she did. “Thanks, Sally. I’ve got it from here. Marcus, I can’t go into the house covered in paint this way. I don’t suppose you have a place where I can wash off the worst of this, do you? An outdoor shower, maybe?”

“Back by the picnic pavilion where we had lunch, there’s an area where you can hose off. Just behind the building.”

Luke grabbed the drop cloth off the barrels. Carefully, he wrapped it around Jac’s shoulders, sealing her paint-splattered body within the canvas folds. “I’ll take you over.”

“We should clean up this mess before we go.” Jac gestured toward the other side of the barrels, where she’d been sitting when he’d dumped half a can of paint on her head.

Luke glanced at Marcus and lifted a hand in question. “Can we get a little help here? I don’t want the paint drying in her hair.”

“Me and the boys will take care of the mess.” Marcus slapped FIG on the back. FIG shot him a dirty look. “Hey now, Jeff. That’s what teams do. They help each other. You’re not going let the team down, now are you?”

“We’ll help, too,” Sally offered.

Marcus beamed at her. “Atta girl! Luke, take Jacqui and get her cleaned up. You’re excused from the rest of this

exercise.” He tapped his hand on Jac’s arm. “You know, the color works on you, but maybe you should go clean up now.”

Jac chuckled, the sound easy and sexy at the same time. “Thanks. We’ll see you at dinner.”

Body humming like a plucked guitar string, Luke followed her out of the cask room.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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The rapidly drying paint oozed down her neck like a cold, disgusting slug. As she swiped it away with a corner of the drop cloth Luke had wrapped around her, Jac thanked her lucky stars she'd worn the coveralls Team Vino had supplied. Otherwise, her blue T-shirt would have been ruined. The bench seat of the golf cart became a trampoline as Luke sped to the barn where they'd worked earlier. She bounced with each rut they hit.

"You can slow down," she said, hanging on to the side handle for dear life. "With the amount of water in the whitewash, this mess should clean up pretty easily."

"I'm just sick I did that." Luke's voice held a note of frustration.

"Well, you did fix it so we got out of the exercise. It might not be the best way to be excused, but we don't have to finish painting. Or clean up. Bright side, right?"

He snorted. "Damned Pollyanna. Do you always find the good?"

The barn came into view as they crested a small hill. "It's a rewarding way to live. For example, now I know FIG's name is really Jeff. Easy enough to remember because fig starts with *F* and Jeff has a double dose of *F* in his name. Easy peasy." She jerked forward in her seat as Luke braked to a stop on the side of the building.

Sure enough, there was a cedar-fenced enclosure at the far corner. She pulled the sides of the drop cloth together before

she jumped out of the cart and reached for the gate handle. The bottom scraped over the pavement as she swung it open. Inside were gardening tools, a wheelbarrow, and a green hose coiled on the ground. There was also a drain in the center of the cement pad and several buckets filled with sand.

Luke bumped into her when he stepped around her. “Sorry.”

Shrugging, Jac peeled the canvas material away and dropped it while he fastened one end of the hose to the barn spigot. Pipes clanked to life when Luke twisted the knob. The hose jerked and jumped, filling with water that gushed from its open end. Jac toed off her shoes and kicked them aside, away from the water, the pavement rough and chilly under her bare feet.

Luke straightened and motioned her to the center. “Unfortunately, your clothes are probably going to get soaked.”

“They’ll dry. Come on, hose me down.” She scrunched up her shoulders and squeezed her eyes shut. Frigid water splattered over her head. “Bloody hell! That’s cold.”

“Sorry. Again. There isn’t any hot water available here.”

Keeping her eyes closed, she ran her fingers through her hair, trying to push the paint out. “Not your fault. You don’t have to keep apologizing. Let’s just get this done.”

At least Luke’s fingers were warm as he massaged her scalp to help. Yeah, they actually felt freaking amazing. A rush of heat seeped from her chest then lower, raising more goose bumps than the icy shower had.

“Can you hold the hose? I could help more if I can use both hands.”

It flashed through her mind, which hose she really wanted to hold. And how much better it would be if his two hands were on her. The heat in her cheeks was at complete odds with the arctic temperature of the water flowing over her head.

“If I hold the hose, you’ll end up getting soaked, too.”

“True.” He dropped the hose to the ground where it promptly spurled over her feet.

Not caring how she looked, she danced a crazy jig to keep her toes from going numb. Luke grabbed a garden rake, flipped it upside down, and shoved the wooden handle into one of the buckets of sand. After he retrieved the hose, he wrapped it around and around the shaft and ended by jamming the brass-fitted end between the tines.

He grinned and pointed to his handiwork. “Ta-da! Instant shower. C’mere.”

Jac accepted the hand he offered and let him pull her forward under the flow of water. It was still cold, but with him helping to scrub the paint away, it wouldn’t last as long.

The cold water sluicing down her spine remained at odds with the heat generated when he massaged her scalp. She tipped her head back and he framed it between his hands. Something flickered in his eyes, a flash of lust, of hunger. Jac bit her lower lip as sensation coursed through her body, lodging in her brain. Despite the temperature of the water, this little impromptu shower had activated the desire receptors within.

And they weren’t going to be denied.

Luke didn’t hold back either. Dark lashes swept down as he closed his eyes an instant before his lips claimed hers. It wasn’t a tender kiss. No, this was filled with raw want and need. Open-mouthed, thrusting. His tongue stole into her mouth, retreated, only to advance again.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her close, nestling her against his hard-in-all-the-right-places body. The heat and evidence of his arousal turned the moisture between their wet bodies to steam.

Without releasing his hold Luke walked her backward until she hit the board fence surrounding them. The planks pressing into her shoulder blades were rough, the planes of Luke’s chest incendiary. Raising her hands from those hard muscles, she threaded her fingers through his short, wavy hair. Luke nibbled

her lower lip, nipping and pulling slightly before soothing the sting with his tongue.

The tingling between her legs kicked up a notch when he worked his hands between their bodies. He trailed them up her ribcage, pausing to cup and squeeze her sensitive breasts as he ground his hips to hers. The sweet tugging sensation in her gut tightened her body until it felt like a string on a violin that he plucked.

Her heart raced at the feel of his fingers, unfastening her coveralls, the rasp of the zipper loud in the quiet air. He slipped his hand into the opening and ran it from her pubic bone to the waistband of her jeans. She squirmed and shifted, her body giving in to desire, offering him more. He tugged her T-shirt from her pants, smiling against her lips.

Skyrockets took flight behind her closed eyes at the first touch of his fingers on the bare flesh of her stomach. Luke slid his hand upward, tracing each rib as he went. His lips didn't stop moving on hers. Without any conscious thought, Jac lifted her leg around the back of his thigh and jerked him closer, opening herself at her very core.

His hard erection prodded her through the layers of their clothing and lodged against her center. Moist heat flooded between her legs when he circled his hips against hers. He'd reached her breast and slipped his finger behind the lace of her bra, flicking the taut nipple. Sensation tugged hard in her womb, squeezing and heating her.

He worshipped her mouth, tongue tangling with hers, thrusting in time with his hips. God, she couldn't remember the last time she'd been dry-humped so deliciously. At the moment her only complaint was the amount of clothing between them.

Water gushed heedlessly from the makeshift shower, plopping on the cement. The sharp scent of paint, garden clippings, and soil perfumed the air. Sunlight poured into the enclosure, warming their heads.

Luke gentled his kiss until he merely sipped at her lips. Releasing them, he traced his way across her cheek, licked his

way down the column of her neck. The sun flared golden behind her eyelids when she tipped her head heavenward, exposing more of her neck to his clever mouth.

His hand still cupped her breast when he straightened. Once he'd tasted her lips again, he pressed his forehead to hers. His breath rushed against her cheek, his struggle to calm a racing heart as evident as hers. Body singing, she sucked in a breath as he gave one final tweak to her nipple.

Cold reality flooded her when he removed his hand from under her shirt. She didn't want to open her eyes and see regret on his face, so she left them closed as he tucked the hem of her shirt back into her jeans.

"I got carried away. I'm sorry." His words were soft against her ear. Leaving his hands on her hips, he leaned away, as if to give her space.

"I'm not," she said. She pried her lids open to look him in the eye. "You kiss like a maestro, coaxing all the right notes from me at the right moment."

He grinned, easing the hot desire in his eyes from molten to magnificent. "No one's ever compared me to a musician before. I think I like it."

Jac lowered her hands to his biceps, maintaining touch between them. A hard pounding pulse leapt in his throat, and she rose on tiptoes to plant a soft kiss against the smooth skin covering the erratic beat. Luke inhaled sharply, digging his fingers into her sides.

She rested her damp head against the fence, closed her eyes, and reveled in the heat of the sun on her face, the intense warmth of his hands on her body.

"I think we got all the paint out," he murmured. "Maybe we should head back to the house so you can get some dry clothes."

"Probably right, but I hate to end our time here." She opened her eyes and flicked her gaze around the enclosure. Water still flowed from the makeshift shower. "You know, if

this was part of the team building exercises, this showering together, I believe we might have aced it.”

“Or we could use a little more practice.” He nuzzled the tender skin in the hollow between her ear and jaw.

Pushing against his arms, she nudged him away. A shiver coursed down her spine at the loss of his heat. “I’m sure they’ve missed us by now. And as delightful as this shower turned out, I think I’d prefer a hot one.”

“Hmm, I was just thinking a cold shower might be in order.” In spite of his show of teeth, his expression seemed filled with regret. Electricity arced between them as he laced their fingers together. He pressed his lips to her cheek, then whispered in her ear, “To be continued later?”

His words tickled, his warm breath igniting another slow burning flame within. “I hope so.”

After shutting the water off, he led her from the enclosure back to the golf cart.

The fact he didn’t release her hand the entire trip back to the house melted something inside her into a burbling well of emotion.

Jules greeted them from the top step of the porch. “Marcus radioed me what happened. Are you okay, Jacqui?” She started down the steps, a fluffy white towel over her shoulder, another clutched in her hand.

The heavy canvas coveralls clung to Jac’s skin, a cold, wet blanket. She accepted the towel Jules offered, wrapping it around her shoulders. “I think we got most of the paint out. Hey, you should consider running hot water to the barn.”

“I’ll get right on it. Honestly, I do believe this was the first time we’ve ever used that area as a shower.” The woman’s chuckle was rich and filled with warmth. The friendly look in her eyes hardened as she added, “Ted Fleury has called six times. He’s insisting you return to the office. I tried to explain how important it was for you to stay to complete the training, but he didn’t seem interested in allowing it. I even tried to finagle at least one extra day, but I’m not sure he bit on the



idea. I'm sorry." Jules pulled the other towel from her shoulder and offered it to Jac.

Jules' words escalated the tension creeping up Jac's neck. Mutely accepting the absorbent fabric, she rubbed it over her scalp, wicking moisture from her hair, trying to rub newly budding stress away. "If he's called you six times, I'll bet he blew up my phone. I knew I was smart not bringing it with me. Although," she sent a speculative glance at Luke, "if I'd had it, it might have gotten ruined with the paint. Shoot, another missed opportunity."

Luke's brows lowered over his angry eyes. "What are you going to do?"

Outright quitting her job was turning into an attractive option. "First, I'm going to shower and get rid of any lingering paint. Next, I think I'll find a big glass of wine, which shouldn't be a problem at a vineyard, right?" She looked to Jules for confirmation.

"I have a special bottle I've saved for the right occasion. This qualifies as right. I'll deliver it to your room while you clean up."

A special vintage of wine might be the highlight of her day. Well, except for the exceptional make-out session she'd just indulged in with Luke. That darned unreachable spot—at least in polite company—between her legs tingled and throbbed while she studied his lips. Maybe after she returned Ted's call, she'd celebrate by letting Luke find the spot and relieve the incessant tickle.

Yeah, that sounded like a plan.

"Bring up that bottle, I'll gladly accept it." She pointed at Luke. "Give me an hour to handle all this, then stop by. Maybe I'll share the wine. If there's any left."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

---

She was an idiot. Before jumping in the shower, Jac had checked her cellphone. Five missed calls, five voicemails, and ten frantic text messages from her coworkers. Damn Ted Fleury and his fucking ‘family first’ approach to doing business. Jac dropped the phone back onto the desk and made for the shower.

Hot water poured over her skin, washing away the last traces of white paint. She’d washed her hair twice, luxuriating in the smell of the pricey shampoo furnished with the room. As she worked up lather, it was easy for Jac to pretend it was Luke’s fingers massaging her scalp. Her breath shortened, and not just due to the humidity in the steamy shower.

After drying off, she wrapped the damp towel around her torso, tucking the end between her breasts. A plastic laundry sack dug out from under the sink made a perfect depository for her soggy coveralls and she stuffed the wet clothing inside, pulling the strings tightly shut. Waiting for the mirror to clear of steam, she spread her jeans, t-shirt, and underwear over the shower curtain rod.

Her lips tightened as she raked a brush through the tangles in her hair. No doubt, Ted’s new account services manager had already screwed something up with a client. Which explained Ted’s insistence that Jac return her ass to the office. Valerie’s cryptic text about all hell breaking loose had almost intrigued her enough to call the woman back before jumping in the shower. Time enough for that later.

Slapping the brush on the vanity with more force than necessary, the noise cracked against the mirror, echoing in the small bathroom. Dropping her towel, Jac pulled the courtesy robe from the back of the door and shrugged into the soft fleece.

Her phone rang as she stepped into the bedroom, cinching the belt around her waist. The sleeve flopped over her hand as she reached for the madly ringing iPhone. *Shit!* Ted again. Drawing a deep breath, she swiped the screen.

“Jacqui Bishop,” she answered in her most regal, professional voice.

“I expected a call back hours ago, Jacqui.” Ted’s tense, irritated voice boomed over the connection. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Hello, Ted.” She’d kill him with professionalism and common sense. “I’ve been away from my room all day, participating in the team building exercises. This morning the teams were assigned an art project. For the afternoon exercise we had to work together to paint part of the cask room within a certain time frame. Unfortunately, I had a little mishap—”

“Fine, fine, fine,” Ted interrupted. “You should’ve had your phone with you, in case I called.”

Jac modulated her voice, as if explaining to a child why he shouldn’t shove his freaking finger into an electric socket. “Ted, the rules of the exercises forbid carrying phones. Too much of a distraction, I guess.”

“I have to be able to reach you. We’ve run into a snafu and I need—”

Someone knocked on the door. *Saved by the bell!* “Hang on, Ted, someone’s at my door.”

His exasperated rush of breath sounded close to a curse in her ear as she crossed the room. Served him right. He was about to tell her he needed her help. Too damn little, too damn late. He should have given more thought to promoting the uber-inept Deidre. Jac opened the door to Jules, carrying a tray

loaded with goodies. She waved the woman in, following her to the dresser.

“Okay, Ted, you were saying ...” Jac focused on the yummy items Jules unloaded from the tray. Tucking the phone against her ear, she picked up the open bottle of wine Jules had just set down.

“I was saying I need your help with a billing question. Corvallis Regional Medical Center is protesting certain charges on their most recent statement.”

“That’s Deidre’s account.” And Jac wasn’t interested in rescuing the woman after she’d already explained to her the hospital’s unique billing system. She plucked the crystal stem from Jules’ hand and splashed a good portion of wine into its generous bowl.

“Well,” Ted cleared his throat, “I’m not sure Deidre is ...”

Capable? The right woman for the job? A complete waste of oxygen? Ire rose in her throat, threatening to choke her. She swallowed her anger with a sip of the tart, fresh white wine. Lemon exploded on her tongue, chased by notes of pineapple.

“I thought she had a good relationship with CRMC. I know I’ve explained their set-up to Deidre. She should be able to glance at their statement and figure out if something is wrong.” Jac took another long drink of the wine.

Jules rolled her eyes as she moved a tray of fruit, crackers, and cheese to the counter.

“I’m afraid this might be, er, beyond her capabilities.” Ted’s voice almost sounded contrite.

“So you need my help? To get your new manager out of the hot water she’s landed herself in?” The words, said aloud, tasted bitter on her tongue. She washed it away with more of Jules’ excellent wine.

She could make him grovel and beg for help. She ought to. God knew she wanted to. This was one of those moments she hated her damned inclination to make the team better. She just might win the team building MVP award. If there was such a thing.

Ted cleared his throat again, as if asking for her assistance stuck in his craw. As it should. He'd screwed her out of the promotion she deserved and now what she'd feared had happened. He was going to use her talents to get him out of a jam with one of their largest accounts.

Jules spread a folded napkin next to the bottle of liquid happiness and set a chilled bucket on the cloth. After slipping the bottle into the bucket, she propped her hands on her hip. "Be strong," she mouthed.

Jules' encouragement brought a smile to Jac's face and her voice when she spoke. "I don't know, Ted. I'm learning so much here. I think I'll be a better asset to the team if I continue this training and bring back what I know." She popped a small piece of Swiss cheese into her mouth.

Jules shot her thumbs up and walked to the door. Pausing, she whispered, "Need anything else?"

Cupping a hand over the mouthpiece, Jac quipped, "A new job?" Ted's voice continued to drone in her ear, something about being a team player, yada, yada, yada.

"Sorry, can't help you there." The frown eased on Jules' face as she reached for the doorknob. "Later tonight, let's sit down and talk farming."

Jac smiled. At least this seemed a step, if somewhat scary, in the right direction. She tuned back into Ted's annoying demands as the door closed behind Jules.

"I don't see why it's so important for you to stay. I need you here more. Corvallis is too big of a client to lose."

"Ted, really, Deidre should be able to figure out the statement. Their multipliers on physical therapy bills are calculated differently than any other services. They'd specifically requested the lower rate. A manual adjustment is required to correct the bill before it goes out. Is it possible the correction didn't happen? It would make a twenty thousand dollar difference in the total."

Ted went silent as clacking sounded over the phone. Jac pictured his chubby fingertips ruthlessly pounding the keys on

the antique adding machine sitting on the corner of his desk. While waiting for the light bulb to skyrocket over his head, she poured more wine.

Glass in hand, she strolled to the window. She'd never get tired of this view. A soft breeze fluttered the curtains and kissed the skin revealed in the vee of her robe. The gentle gust evoked memories of Luke's heated palm on her flesh. A delicious tingle coursed from her chest to the spot between her legs, pooling low and heavy there.

A triumphant "Ah ha!" pulled her back to the present.

"You're right. That's exactly what the problem was." Ted's delighted chortle grated her last nerve.

She wanted to make him say it again. Of course she was right, dammit! And he was going to screw his business at the same time he screwed her. The knuckles of one hand turned white on the delicate stem of crystal, and the hard plastic of her phone dug into the palm of her other.

*So freaking through with this.*

"Ted, we need to talk when I return. Which won't be until next Monday. You've already paid for the course and the room, and Jules told me they have a strict no-refund policy, so I'm going to stay."

"But ... but what if we have more problems?" he sputtered.

"Deidre has to learn to handle them. I've shown her everything she needs to do *her* job correctly. She simply has to apply the information at hand. She'll be fine."

Ted snorted. Curious, it seemed he didn't believe his niece would be okay any more than Jac did. "I want you to keep your phone with you, in case I need to reach you."

"Against the rules, remember? I will promise to check in at lunch each day. It's the best I can do. It was your idea to send me here, after all. Might as well learn everything they can teach me." *My next employer is going to find the new skills quite valuable.*

“Fine. I’ll see you when you get back.”

Jac drained the last of her wine after she hung up. Once she collected a refill and grabbed an apple slice from the plate, she flounced onto the comfortable navy-blue chair. Crossing her legs, she kicked her foot and contemplated the pale yellow liquid swirling in the glass, brooding about her future.

She’d made up her mind while talking to Ted. She’d leave MedServices. There was no backing away from that decision now.

Starting up an agricultural operation wouldn’t be cheap. She had some money saved, and if necessary, she could ask her parents for a loan. Until she got on her feet, she could freelance as an auditor for hospital patient billing departments. It wouldn’t be much, but it would at least buy groceries and pay the electric bills on Grandpa’s farmhouse.

Plus, she’d sell her townhome and use the proceeds from the sale as seed money. She certainly didn’t need a house in Medford if she lived in Eugene.

Jac glanced at the phone she’d tossed to the bed after her conversation with Ted had ended. She’d have to talk to her cousin, Rowena, about moving in. She doubted it would be a problem. Last time they’d talked, Ro had mentioned she wanted to live closer to town. A call to her could wait until this weekend.

Satisfaction seeped through Jac, or maybe this mellow feeling was due to the wine. She lifted the glass to her reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall. Her hair had begun to dry in soft waves. The white robe emphasized the pale peach tones in her skin, while the wine had brought a flush to her cheeks. Smiling, she downed another swig, this one in celebration of a decision made, instead of in frustration with the ineptitude wreaking havoc back at the office.

Digging the toes of one foot into the plush carpeting, she swung her other foot in the air as she burrowed farther into the comfy chair cushions. The sides of her robe slipped apart, revealing her thigh and baring more of her chest. She had a pretty pleasant buzz going right now, mentally and physically.

As she licked drops of wine from her lips, someone knocked at the door.

Hoping it was Jules with more wine, she called out, “Come in.”

Luke walked into the room. Yep, the afternoon’s prospects were certainly getting better. He must have showered because his dark hair was damp and curling softly. A forest green button down shirt replaced the crisp white one he’d worn earlier. Cuffs rolled up to his elbows, the color transformed his eyes to a mesmerizing azure. Instead of jeans, he wore black trousers.

Letting his gaze rove over her body, a simmering grin spread across his face. “Looks like you managed to get all the paint out.”

“Yep.” She grinned and gestured to the dresser holding the snacks. “Help yourself to a glass of wine. Jules wasn’t kidding when she said it was special.”

Luke moved to the dresser and lifted the wine bottle. Only a small amount remained in the bottle, barely enough for a serving. “You didn’t leave me much.”

“Shame on me. Sorry, I didn’t realize I’d drank so much.” She mock-frowned, then giggled like a schoolgirl. Covering her mouth with her hand, she stifled another silly laugh. “Guess what? I’m quitting my job.”

“Decision made?” Luke pulled a bottle of water from the mini-fridge next to the dresser, twisting the cap off as he crossed to her.

“Yep. And it feels like a hundred-pound, no, a two-hundred-pound boulder has lifted from my chest.” She patted a hand to the skin bared by the gaping fabric, drawing his eye. Even slightly inebriated, Jac realized the emotion darkening his eyes was desire.

A quick glance down her torso confirmed her suspicion the robe revealed more than it hid. She tugged one side closer to the other, unsure why she felt suddenly shy. When he attempted to take the glass from her other hand, she jerked it



away protectively. She held his eye as she drained the dregs, her lips curving as she handed him the now empty goblet.

Luke swapped her empty for the bottle of water he held. “You’re going to need this.”

“You take such good care of me.” She slurred slightly. “I was so angry about my boss’ phone call, I didn’t realize how much I was drinking.”

She tipped her head back and drank deeply of the cool, refreshing liquid, her eyes on Luke as the temperature of his regard heated. He smiled and her world reeled.

Twirling a finger, he gestured for her to continue drinking. She ran her tongue around dry lips, his lusty gaze tracking the motion, dipping to her chest, lowering to her exposed thigh. His bold perusal felt like a tender caress.

Jac gulped more water, hoping to cool the sudden burn in her belly. He was so sexy, standing there with hunger written all over his face. The late afternoon sunlight slipped in through the open window, bathing his features with an otherworldly glow. The ends of his long, curling eyelashes were tipped in gold, and the ring of white flecks surrounding his pupils gleamed in the bright light.

God, she had to kiss him. Had to feel his arms around her, his lips consuming her. She ached to plaster her body against the length of his incredibly muscular frame. Still clutching the water bottle, she rose. And wavered in place as the wine she’d consumed made an impact.

Luke reached for her. The warmth of his hand seeped through the fleece as he steadied her. Her head spun. Or shit, maybe it was the room. “Whoa, I guess I really did drink too much.”

“Bet it seemed a good idea at the time.” Luke’s laugh swirled around her brain, working its take-me-now magic on her self-restraint. He pried the bottle from her grasp. “Think you want to lie down?”

“Maybe. You want to lay down with me?” She tilted her gaze up, focusing on his face. His lips quirked in a way that

seemed to promise 'I'm gonna sex you up.' It stole her breath.

He paused briefly, before setting the bottle on the desk. His quick grin had faded. "As much as I'd love to, I don't want to take advantage of you in this condition."

Good God, nice men really did still exist. "I'm not that drunk. We can start slow. Maybe you could just kiss me again."

She didn't wait for a response. Going up on her toes, she cupped his cheeks, pulling his face to hers. He didn't resist, but he didn't pursue either.

*Okay, then.*

Touching the tip of her tongue to his lips, she traced their seam, prodding her way past the barrier. She teased his mouth open, dipping into its warmth. And sweet mother of God, he kissed her back. The intensity in his lips curled her toes. A rush of liquid lust surged between her thighs.

Luke's hands tightened around her upper arms, slipped lower, rested on her hips. He flexed his fingers into her muscles, creating delicious pressure as he rubbed his thumbs over her pelvic bones. Stretching even further along his body, the light friction of his shirt against the exposed skin of her upper chest sent shards of need whipping along her spine.

The belt of her robe loosened and the front gaped open. Heat rolled in waves from his body to hers. As his fingers connected with the bare skin of her midriff, she almost purred. He settled his palms on the small of her back and pulled her close. The hard ridge of his desire nudged against her abdomen.

His tongue quested, seeking the deep recesses of her mouth. Moving one hand to the curve of her buttocks, he trailed the other along the ridges of her ribs until he reached the center of her shoulder blades. With the slightest urging, she nestled into the nook created by his encircling arms. His heavy cotton shirt grazed her sensitive nipples, drawing them to a point. Everywhere he touched branded her with fire. Without conscious thought, she ground her hips against his groin. He

inhaled sharply and pulled her closer, dipping his fingers along the line of her thong. With ease, he lifted her against his chest to carry her toward the bed.

Colors dazzled behind her closed eyelids. Pink and purple and orange, a glorious sunset in her brain that began an endless pirouette; swooping, whirling like a ballet dancer. The colors and motion collided in a spectacular display. Topsy sensation followed, rolling like a coaster at a theme park, dragging her under.

She jerked her lips from his. Oh, God, she'd had too much to drink. Now she was going to embarrass herself. Thank heavens she was already breathless. It made it easier to inhale shallowly through the nausea rising from her gut.

"I'm sorry. I don't ... Put me down, Luke." Panic resonated in her voice.

It was enough to get his attention. "What's wrong?"

"I'm really dizzy."

"Here, sit down." He helped her onto the bed, gently pushing on her head until her forehead rested on her knees. "You okay?"

"Don't feel good," she mumbled against her thighs.

"I'll be right back. Stay put." His footsteps receded toward the bath. Water ran in the background.

Wheezing through clenched teeth, Jac tried to shake off the fuzz in her brain. She heard him approach the bed, then his fingers caressed her shoulders as he shifted her hair to the side. Shivers ran along her spine when he draped a cool, wet cloth around her neck. The chilly rag, combined with slow, deep breathing, seemed to help.

The temperature of the compress competed with the embarrassed heat rising in her cheeks. She hid her face in her hands. God, she'd been an idiot to keep splashing wine into her glass to combat the anger she harbored for her boss.

Luke dropped to his knees before her and continued to feather his fingers through her hair. He was close enough for

her to smell his clean scent and the hint of sage from the shampoo he'd used.

“Feeling better?” His breath tickled her ear in a murmur.

Her forehead knocked against her knees as she nodded. “I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, now. Don’t worry. Today was a rough day for you. I don’t mind that you let loose a little.”

She groaned and squeezed her eyes tight. “Oh my God! I threw myself at you.”

“I wasn’t complaining. And I’ve been a little polluted myself a time or two. Who hasn’t?” His deep chuckle resonated in the quiet room.

He laid his hand on her thigh and flexed his fingers, the touch sending a blazing flash of electricity to her center. Jac tamped it down, knowing he wouldn’t make a move on her in this condition. Grasping the edges of her robe, she pulled them together as she straightened. The wet washcloth plopped onto the bed next to her. She fumbled for the belt to tie the garment together, her fingers less than nimble.

Luke caught the two ends and made short work of cinching them together. He pushed the tangled mass of her hair out of her eyes and studied her. “Maybe you should grab a nap.”

“You mean I should sleep it off.” She mentally inventoried her body. The nausea had faded, but dizziness lingered. “Probably not a bad idea.”

Luke helped her rise from the bed. Keeping one hand on her arm, he swept the comforter and sheet down. “Here you go.” Hands on her shoulders, he urged her back to the bed.

Jac snuggled into the soft down pillows. The mattress cradled her like a cloud as she closed her eyes. Thankfully, the world had stopped spinning.

The mattress dipped as Luke sat. Peering over her shoulder, she caught sight of him tugging off a shoe. “What are you doing?”

He dropped it with a thud. Slipped the other off. He hadn't worn socks with his Sperry's. Oh Lord, he had sexy feet. "I thought I'd stay, just to make sure you're all right. I can use a nap too. Do you mind?" He stood, pulled his phone and keys from his pocket, and laid them on the bedside table.

His motions seemed casual, comfortable; familiar. Jac loved his easy nature. Loved how right his personal effects looked on her bedside table. Scooting over a little, she made room for him on the bed. "Not at all. Can you wake me in time to get dressed for dinner?" She yawned and without waiting for his answer, rolled to her side and laid her head back on the pillow.

The bed shifted when Luke stretched out next to her. She tensed, waiting to see how this would go. Would he just be a friend, lying on his back, napping next to her, or would he be more lover-like and spoon behind her?

She voted for spooning.

Luke stilled on the bed but drew a deep breath. She heard it sigh out of his mouth as he laid his hand on the curve of her hip, the gesture landing somewhere between friend and lover. The weight and warmth of his palm soothed any lingering embarrassment from Jac, lulling her to sleep.

## CHAPTER NINE

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Waning daylight cast a glow in the room as Jac awoke. A trace of the setting sun painted the wall by the bed a smoky cream color when she cracked an eye. She didn't battle to keep her sticky lids open. It was easier to leave them closed. She lay on her side, drifting, enjoying the warmth of the bed covers, the cushion of the pillow-like mattress, the hard muscular arm across her midsection and the rock solid chest pressed against her back.

Luke had turned at some point and slid into lover territory, cradling her. His easy breathing told her he was still asleep. Each exhale caressed her nape, stirring the short hairs. She swallowed hard, past the cotton in her mouth. She might never drink wine again. Or at least not anytime soon. Too much never amounted to a good thing. Although, Luke snuggled behind her could be considered a great thing.

She shifted carefully, trying not to wake him, and peered through slitted eyes at the bedside clock. She'd slept for at least ninety minutes. Early still ... barely cocktail hour. The mandatory team building dinner wouldn't be served for another two hours. Her lids drooped shut, the calm, flickering pink behind them so much better than the dizzy kaleidoscope she'd experienced earlier.

She adjusted her head on the pillow, causing Luke to tighten his arm around her, cuddling her closer. A change in his breathing pattern confirmed that she'd awoken him.

He nuzzled her neck. "How are you feeling?"

“Rested.” She couldn’t stop the chuckle from escaping her mouth. “And significantly more sober than I was when I laid down.”

“Hmm, good. No headache?” He drew his long legs up behind hers.

Any lingering pain evaporated at the touch of his thighs. He slipped one foot between hers and pulled her even closer to his body. Jac slipped an arm from under the sheet and rested it over his, folded around her waist. When had they pulled the covers up? She didn’t remember.

A thrill went through her at the feel of Luke lacing their fingers together and drawing their locked hands up until they nestled against her chest. He nibbled her earlobe, sending a thrill of sensation coursing along the curve of her breasts.

She answered softly, “Nope, not anymore.”

“What time is it?”

Time to get rid of some of these clothes. Time to discover how miraculous it would feel to have Luke’s full weight on top of her. Time to see how well they fit together. “Almost five.”

She sighed at the stroke of his tongue over the tender flesh at the hollow under her ear. Shivers ran down her spine when he opened his lips and kissed the artery along the side of her throat. Her breath shortened when he released her hand and slipped his fingers under the flap of her robe to possess her breast.

He shifted behind her, rained kisses along her cheek, as the hard ridge behind the placket of his trousers nudged her. As she rolled toward him, the edges of her robe opened, exposing her to his gaze. The heat in Luke’s eyes matched the scorch of his fingers as they toyed with her nipple, rubbing, rolling; plucking until it peaked.

His expression turned grave, questioning, as he spoke into the quiet room. “I still don’t want to take advantage of you, if you aren’t ready.”

Jac laid a hand on his shirt, flirting with the buttons, counting her way toward where the fabric tucked into his

pants. “It’s not really taking advantage if I want it as much as you do.” She slid her hand along his waistband, curving it over his hips. The muscles there bunched beneath her fingers and she couldn’t resist digging in.

He lowered his mouth and claimed hers, hungry, insatiable ... bringing her to the edge of desire before he flexed his fingers on her breast and pushed her over the thin line of restraint. He kissed with a rare kind of intensity, demanding her attention and response. Dipping his tongue between her lips, he sought the innermost recesses of her mouth.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she stroked his tongue with hers, chased as he retreated, thrusting into his mouth. He eased from her and plucked at the belt at her waist, pulling on her robe. The muscles in her abdomen jumped at the trail of his fingers there, nudging the soft fleece open and away from her body. He skimmed his hand up her ribcage to cup and knead the sensitive skin of her breast.

Releasing her mouth, he continued to caress her, and whispered against her lips, “You are stunning.” He scooted down until his tongue could dart out for a taste of each nipple, his easy breath fanning across the wet surface, pebbling them into tight, hard buds. Delicious pressure built within her.

He closed his mouth around one tip and the forceful, sucking kiss made her back arch. He glided his hand down her torso, stopping for a quick dip into her navel, swirled his fingertip around the edge, mimicking the path of his tongue around her areola.

Blood pounded between her legs, tingling and surging as he coasted over her mound. Her thighs trembled when she lifted her knees, planted her feet on the bed, and tilted her hips toward the ceiling. His middle finger found her sweet spot and pressed into it through her damp panties. Her insides twisted erotically.

“So wet for me,” he murmured against her breast.

“Mmm.” Lost in his caresses, she couldn’t get words to form.



He nibbled, then swirled his tongue around the tip. The seal between her aching flesh and his mouth popped softly when he pulled away. “Open your eyes, Jac. I want to see you. I want you to see me.”

Raising her lids, she locked her gaze on him. Heat and passion shimmered in his eyes. He smiled, watching her reaction when he pulled her lacy thong to the side. Her breath caught as he rubbed his finger along her folds. When he toyed with her clit, sensation skyrocketed, arching her hips off the bed.

She whimpered at the feel of his finger slipping inside her channel. “More. Give me more.”

Concentration etched itself on Luke’s features. Brows lowered, gold tipped dark lashes framed his half-closed eyes. A bead of sweat trailed down his temple and his mouth went slack as he dipped a second finger into her opening. He thumbed her clit and slid his fingers in and out; a slow, sensual rhythm. Pressure built within her, flaring from where his hand worked between her legs, up her spine to her brain. She let her eyes drift closed as she floated on a sea of erotic bliss. The kaleidoscope was back with reds and purples soaring through bursts of light.

“Oh, God. I’m so close, Luke.” Sweet pain arose, nearly making it difficult to speak. “Not this way. Please, I want you in me.”

“Yes this way. This time.” He captured the tip of her breast between his lips and sped up the motion of the hand nestled between her thighs.

Jac squirmed under him, reveling in each tease of his mouth, tongue, fingers. Her hips moved in time with his rhythm, rising to meet each thrust. Her back bowed off the bed as his teeth closed over her nipple. A scream built in her throat as he swirled his thumb around her clit, his fingers reaching toward her center.

The scream burst forth as she exploded under him. Part of her—soul, consciousness—rose on a cloud of lust and longing.

Sultry satisfaction flowed over her, a bubbling spring as her insides clenched.

He continued to work his fingers within her, the motion sensual torture. He pressed up against her to claim her mouth. The delicious taste of his lips on hers, the movement of his tongue in her mouth, swallowed her small gasps as she tumbled. The world spiraled away from her in a whirl of color and sensation.

He stilled his fingers and released a pent-up breath. Heart racing like a thoroughbred, Jac slowly spun back to earth, grounded by the hand Luke had spread over her stomach.

Propping himself up on one elbow, Luke pushed his legs under her raised knees. Languidly toying with the buttons on his shirt, she slipped one, two; three from their holes, exposing his chest a little at a time. Aftershocks still thrummed through her, heightening when her fingertips caressed the smooth skin on his pecs. She snuck her hand inside his shirt to fondle his flat nipple, eliciting his gasp. His hips bucked against hers, the hard line of his cock prodding her suggestively.

Holding his smoky blue gaze, she said, “You had your way with me. Now, I believe it’s my turn.”

One corner of his lips quirked up, the half-smile sexy and endearing. “What did you have in mind?”

“How about if I show you?” Bracing her hand on his chest, she pushed him back to the bed. Rising on her knees, she quickly unbuttoned the rest of his shirt. He lifted his hips and helped her pull it from his trousers. His stomach muscles bunched and he lifted his shoulder so she could slide the cloth off. The sleeves got stuck as she tried to yank them over his hands. Laughing, she paused long enough to undo the cuffs. She tossed the shirt to the end of the bed and trained her eyes on his body.

Resting on her heels, her robe loose and open, she trailed her hands over his smooth torso. Dark blue ink decorated his ribs, an inch below the lower edge of his left pectoral.

Jac peered at it. “I can’t read it.” Her breasts brushed his skin as she stretched over him to turn on the light. As she continued her exploration, he settled an arm possessively over her hip. Desire sizzled again as he stroked small circles on her sides.

Jac traced the lines and swirls of his tattoo. The flourishing words were in Italian. She tried to sound out the beautifully inked words. “*Vivere ogni giorno al massimo*. What does that mean?”

Luke flexed his hand on her bare flesh and pinned his gaze on her face. “Live every day to the fullest.”

Without breaking eye contact, Jac bent and pressed a kiss to the words. “A lovely motto. Any special significance to it?”

“No. Just a reminder to make each day count.”

“Hmmm. Does this one count?” She brought her hands to his waistband and slipped the button there free. As she lowered the zipper, her fingers brushed the edge of his erection.

He inhaled sharply and rocked his hips up. “Oh, yeah. It counts more than any other in the past few months.”

Biting her lower lip, Jac skated her hand under the elastic of his boxer briefs, past wiry hair, to encircle his shaft. The angels had gifted him in the girth department.

Luke moaned. “Oh baby, your hand is magic.”

She squeezed. Hard muscle jumped under his smooth, hot skin. Watching his face, his lusty gaze on her face, confirmed how much he enjoyed her play. She pumped her hand, thumbing the drop of moisture on the tip, spreading it.

Hooking his thumbs in the waistband of his trousers, he panted, “Too many clothes. Don’t let go.” Luke shimmied the cloth over his hips, working it past her hand. His erection popped free, jerking in her grip. Her mouth went dry at the sight, the pulse between her legs kicking up about a billion times stronger.

While he struggled to free his legs, Jac lowered her mouth to his cock and swiped her tongue over the head, tasting his salty, earthy essence.

Thrashing to break free of the restricting trousers, Luke's knee connected with the back of her head, and she saw stars. "Oomph! Hey, watch it, mister." She released her grip on his shaft to rub her head.

Luke bolted upright. "Shit, I keep hitting you in the head. First with a paint tray and now this. Not sure which is worse." He grasped her shoulder, lifting his free hand to her hair.

A chuckle built in her throat, growing until she had to let it out. "The paint was worse. At least this time, I have you naked. And in my bed." She tangled her fingers with his, pulling his hand from her head. She rested their joined hands atop her thighs. "Yeah, this is definitely better."

Luke wrapped her in his arms and claimed her lips, cutting off her chuckle. Releasing her long enough to push off the fleece robe she still wore, he tossed it on top of his shirt at the end of the bed. Twisting, he pressed her back until she rested against the soft mattress.

Her heart stuttered and trembled at the feel of him, stretched out partly over her. His lips and tongue were fevered, claiming her mouth, trailing down her neck. Re-staking his claim on her breasts, he kneaded the plump flesh between his fingers.

Gliding his hand toward the apex of her thighs, he growled when he encountered her thong. He speared his fingers under the elastic and Jac lifted her hips to make his task easier. The scrap of lace joined their growing pile of clothing.

Placing a hand on the inside of her knee, Luke pushed gently, opening her wide. "Need a condom." He moved between her legs while groping for his pants.

Jac swept her hand boldly down her body from breast to pubic bone, further, until her fingers disappeared into her slick folds. "Hurry. I want you in me."

“Oh, baby,” he groaned. Chest heaving as if he fought for each breath, he licked his lips, finally locating his wallet and digging out a small foil pouch. He held it high for her to see.

Jac sat up and scooted closer. “You need help?”

“You want to?” He offered the packet to her.

She ripped it open and rising to her knees, straddled his lap. The warmth of his hands seared her hips, urging her closer. As she stroked up his cock, from base to tip, he shuddered. While she began easing the latex sheath over the steely rod, he found her slit. One fingertip flexed into her. Intense yearning flared, making her forget to roll the condom down.

He stopped his finger’s upward path, leaving only the very tip in her, his expression expectant.

“More,” she demanded.

His face held pure lust, his eyes fiery. “I’ll move at your pace.”

She wanted to go faster. She wanted more of him in her. And she wanted it now. Jac tried to lower herself to take more, but he retreated. Her gaze flew to his hand between her legs. She raised her eyes to his face as he laid a hand over hers and helped her roll the rubber down, slipping his finger into her at the same pace.

Understanding dawned. He wanted to play with her while she played with him. Thighs trembling, she barely slid the condom down. He responded in kind, moving his finger a bit further into her. Whimpering, she repeated her part, to be answered by his motion. When she reached the halfway point on his shaft, he circled his finger in her. Delicious sensation built, her body strumming tightly.

They finished the dance together, her fingers wrapped around the base of his cock, his fully inside her, pulsing and probing. She cupped his balls and squeezed, pleased to hear his shuddering breath.

Flexing a hand on her hip, he growled, “I need you. Now.”

He lunged, wrapped his arms around her and propelled her to the mattress. His erection prodded her and he claimed her mouth as he pushed into her. The joy of being filled, stretched, washed through her. Each stroke rasped against her clit, sending her soaring. She moaned and matched his thrusts.

As she reached toward the flame he'd ignited, he moved faster and faster. Legs and arms wrapped around him, his hips bucked between her legs. His groans into her ear spurred Jac to hold on as he drove their passion.

Her body strained toward the precipice of desire, pulling tight, her inner muscles squeezing around his cock. Luke drove her higher with every movement, every thrust, every circle of his hips.

Want and need pulsed like firelight. Luke slipped one hand between them to rub her clit. Sparks bloomed into flames as she came hard. A satisfied shriek erupted from her at the same time his victorious groan filled her senses. He continued to grind against her. Wave upon sensuous wave crested within her with each deep slide of his cock.

An incredible lightness, like floating, filled her in spite of being tethered to the bed by the weight of his body. His heart galloped in time with the throb between her legs, and his breath rushed in her ear as he panted his way to calm.

“God, I hope I’m not too heavy. I don’t think I can move,” he muttered.

“I think you feel just right.” She traced the indentations between each of his vertebrae. Reaching the base of his spine, she skated her palm over his buttock muscles. He bucked his hips into her, groaning as he did.

He nuzzled her neck and lifted away from her, his cock sliding free of her body. Rolling away, his breath hitched. “Be right back.”

The mattress gave as he eased off the bed. Jac drifted in a haze of afterglow, absently aware of the sounds of running water from the bathroom. Body still humming, her limbs were

fluid and lazy. The faucet shut off, and seconds later, she heard the clink of a glass on the bedside table.

Luke kissed her shoulder as he nestled in next to her. “Is your head okay?”

Curling on her side, she placed a hand on his lightly furred chest. “My everything is okay.”

“Everything, huh?” His teeth flashed white in the dim room.

The sight of his quick grin made her purr. “Mm, hmm.”

Outside laughter rose through the open window as the rest of the teams returned. He rubbed a strand of her hair between his fingers. “We should probably consider getting up. Don’t want to be late for team building.” His words said one thing, his tone told a completely different story.

“I hate to end this little *nap* with a dinner with the insurance guys.” She sighed, struggling with residual guilt. “But they did help clean up our mess, so we should probably at least say thanks.”

Luke’s eyes darkened as he ran his fingers down her arm. “I brought you some water. You need to drink it. What should we do about tonight? Do you want me to stay here? If you’d prefer to sleep alone, I understand.”

Cuddled in his arms this way, the last thing she wanted to think about was sleeping alone later. But Luke spending the night would be a huge step. She chewed her lips as she thought.

He saved her from having to answer. “We can work it out later. After dinner.” He winked.

Did he want to sleep alone? Doubt reared in her mind, sharp and anything but subtle. Jac settled against the pillows, watching as Luke reached for his clothes and tossed her the fleece robe he stripped off her body in his haste. The garment landed on her face and she left it there, feeling him rise from the bed. Fabric rustled as he dressed.

“I’m going to grab a fast shower in my room before dinner. I’ll see you downstairs,” he said.

Pulling the robe from her face, she clutched it to her chest like a shield. “Luke?”

“Yeah?”

Sucking in a huge gasp of air, she breathed it out and asked, “Do you regret this?”

He paused from tucking his shirttails into his pants. One side in, the other out, he leaned a knee on the bed, dipping toward her. “Hell no! Not even for an instant.” His mouth descended on hers, searing, confident; passionate.

He released her lips, his eyes filled with desire. Her heart hitched at the intensity she saw. She spoke over the lump in her throat. “You just seemed ...”

His smile was self-deprecating as he cupped her cheek. “Baby, if I seemed anything less than eager or smitten, I’m sorry. I just don’t want to crowd you. I don’t regret making love to you. So get that idea out of your mind.”

Relief blossomed, easing the constriction in her chest. “Okay. Good. Because I don’t regret it either.”

“But you should know, I just used my emergency condom. I didn’t come prepared to find someone I liked enough to want to sleep with. So if you want me to spend the night, we’ll be sleeping only.”

She sure as hell didn’t expect that. “Really? I was going to invite you back for round two. Maybe three.”

“You’re straight up evil, woman. Can I trust you to behave yourself?”

“Cuddling is good.”

“Good, but not as great as ...” His words trailed off as he stroked his hand up her leg, pausing at the juncture of her thighs.

Tingling burst to life in her body. Maybe she shouldn’t tempt fate by inviting him back after dinner. She hitched the



robe higher on her chest. “Not nearly as great as—well, maybe you should sleep in your own room tonight.”

Disappointment shadowed his face but understanding warmed his expression. “You’d better get up and shower. They’ll be serving dinner soon.”

He brushed her lips with his, a fast, friendly peck. Jac eyed him as he strode to the door, the back of his shirt untucked and brushing the curve of his butt. With his hand on the doorknob he glanced back toward the bed, his sensual gaze brushing over her body, as if memorizing each line and curve. She shivered at the intimate touch of his glance, biting her tongue to keep from calling him back. He winked as he pulled the door open.

With a quiet click, he was gone.

## CHAPTER TEN

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Jules stopped Jac as she entered the dining room. “How’d it go?”

Heat flashed into Jac’s cheeks. Oh, good Lord. Was she really asking about her and Luke? Jac hesitated, not sure how to respond.

“With your boss? Did you give notice?” Jules clarified.

*Oh, that.* Jac was still operating in the aftereffects of Luke’s excellent distraction. “Not yet. Although I have decided to quit. Ted isn’t ever going to recognize me with a promotion. Will you still have time to talk farming with me later?”

Jules beamed at her. “After dinner. Did you enjoy the wine? I’ll crack another bottle and we can talk soil acidity and irrigation to your heart’s content.”

“I drank a bit too much of your excellent wine.” Jac lowered her voice before continuing. “I needed a nap before dinner.”

“I’ve made the same mistake before. Occupational hazard of running a vineyard.” Jules laughed as she snagged Jac’s upper arm. “Bring your coffee to my office after dinner. I’ll point you in the right direction.”

Jules excused herself to greet another guest. Scanning the room, Jac found Luke engaged in conversation with Belinda and Sally. After stopping at the buffet for a glass of water, she made her way over to the trio.

“You got all the paint out,” Belinda said as Jac approached.

“It wasn’t easy, but yeah, eventually it all came out. Thanks for your help in cleaning up the mess. I hated to leave it to you, but getting as much of it rinsed out as possible was top priority.”

Sally lifted her glass in salute. “No worries. Jeff and Jeremy ended up cleaning the bulk of the mess. It really wasn’t bad. Most of the paint ended up on the tarp.”

Belinda scoffed. “Idiot Jeff stepped in the paint then walked away, leaving white footprints across the floor. I thought the top of Marcus’ head was going to blow off.” A disgusted looking grimace skated over her face. “I think Jeff is still on the porch with a bucket and scrub brush, trying to clean the bottom of his expensive leather shoes.”

“That explains the cursing I heard as I passed the front entry,” Jac deadpanned. The lady lawyers chuckled.

Musical tones rang out as Jules tapped a fork against the crystal wine stem in her hand. “Our evening activity will take place over dinner. Marcus and I have compiled three case studies where team building would certainly help achieve the goals. We’ll brainstorm solutions while we eat.” Jules had walked to the head of the table while she spoke. “Once dinner is over, you’ll be free for the rest of the evening. It’s Tuesday, and we regularly host the local population at the Rhythm in the Vines concert. The performance starts at half past eight at the pavilion where we had lunch today. You are welcome to attend. We have a string quartet from the local high school. They’re young, but talented.”

Jeff padded into the room as Jules finished. He held his shoes in one hand, gold-toed socks on his feet. “Are you serving refreshments?”

“A local Boy Scout troop holds a bake sale each week as a fund-raiser. I know they’d appreciate your money.”

Jeff scowled. “I was thinking about more adult refreshments.”

Jac gestured to the multiple bottles on the sideboard. “You are welcome to take a glass of wine with you. I only ask you to grab a plastic cup instead of the crystal. Now, let’s eat.”

Luke pulled Jac’s chair out and guided her into it before turning to his right to help Belinda. Jac’s heart leapt at his courteous behavior. Sally sat across the table, next to Steve. Jeff flopped into the seat next to Jac, banging his head against her shoulder when he bent to put his shoes under the chair. Third time she’d suffered a hit today. And only one of them had been pleasant.

The aroma coming from stinky feet under the table was far from appealing. She leaned toward Luke, who slipped his arm over the back of her chair. It wasn’t exactly staking a claim on her, but Jeff got the message. After shooting a glare at Luke, he turned to Jeremy who was seated next to him.

“Dude,” Jeremy complained. “Put your shoes on. Your feet smell and we’re in company.”

“Shut up, Jerms,” Jeff replied. Fortunately, he followed directions. His beefy hip jutted over the edge of his chair into Jac’s as he bent to slip his feet into his shoes. “Sorry.”

Dinner was a lively affair, with conversation, ideas, and suggestions flowing as freely as the wine. Jac accepted the glass the waiter had poured but only sipped at it, preferring to stick to water. Each time she emptied the goblet, Luke topped it off from an iced pitcher on the table.

As the meal drew to a close, Jules complimented them on all of their ideas, a satisfied grin on her face. She reissued the invitation to attend the evening concert, then excused herself. The other diners wandered away from the table, leaving only Luke and her.

“Do you want to go to the concert or just take a walk?” He toyed with her fingers, holding her gaze as he asked.

She shook her head. “I have a meeting with Jules. We’re going to discuss farming.”

Canting his head, he gazed at her. “Taking the first steps?”

“Everyone’s got to start somewhere. Once I find out what I’m in for, I’ll have to decide. My continued employment at MedServices isn’t an option, so I have to do something. Might as well be something I want to do. It kind of feels like I’m about to open Pandora’s box and there’s trouble inside.” She managed to ease her grimace into a grin.

Luke laughed and gave her fingers a squeeze. “I’ll bet you can handle it.” He pulled her to her feet as he stood. “Go talk to Jules about how to conquer the world of agriculture. I’m going to the pavilion with the rest of the crew. I’ll try to catch you later, okay?” He raised his eyebrows, his bright eyes earnest.

She pressed her lips to his, letting them linger. “I’m not sure how long I’ll be.”

“If it’s too late, I’ll just see you in the morning.” Luke picked up his wine glass and walked to the buffet for something disposable, tipping the rest of his drink into a red plastic cup. With a lingering glance he exited the room, his footsteps echoing on the hardwood floor.

Standing beside her chair, Jac stared at the empty doorway. She hadn’t expected to find herself at a crossroads in her life. Just as her career was imploding, she’d met a man who interested her beyond belief. She’d focused on her job so much for the past three years, she’d let her dating life languish.

Breaking the trend earlier this afternoon, after a long, dry spell, had been a truly amazing moment in her life. Her body continued to hum. Luke was a generous lover, and even if they couldn’t repeat the ultimate physical expression of their feelings, she’d welcome the chance to continue their closeness.

It stood to reason that just as she found a man she wanted to spend time with, she contemplated moving to a new city. And while a long distance affair would work for a short time, she didn’t want Luke to end up resenting her because she wasn’t there. In her experience, trying to maintain a relationship while in two separate cities led to wandering eyes and cheating boyfriends. Her college sweetheart had found an

Italian honey to cozy up to while on a semester abroad. *Once bitten ...*

She dismissed her anxiety. Everything worth doing was risky. Starting a new love affair at the same time as a new business might take her farther out on a limb than she'd be comfortable with. She had to weigh the risk versus the reward. It's what any good team leader would do. A frustrated sigh built in confused momentum until she let it gust between her lips.

At this point, her world was on hold. She had to think of her future career and what it might entail for her. She just wished she knew for sure if Luke had, or even wanted, a place in it.

Defeat settled on her shoulder, a press of uncertainty. She shook it away, forcing her thoughts to what Jules had to teach her. Leaving the dining room, Jac headed across the hall toward Jules' office. The door was ajar and the peppy chords of a popular song filtered through the opening. Funny, she'd never pegged Jules as a Top Forty kind of woman.

She knocked and waited a beat to push open the door.

Marcus danced across the space, wiggling his ass, and brushing at his shoulders as he lip-synced to the radio about shaking it off. Jac clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a chuckle. Seeing the heavily muscled man whip his head back and forth, and move his hands like he was trying to hold in his heart, was priceless.

He spun in an agile pirouette, rocking like a bobblehead. The instant he caught sight of her, he jerked to a stop.

Eyes wide, an embarrassed snigger burst from him. "Oops. Busted."

"Hey, don't let me stop you." Jac motioned for him to continue.

Marcus shook his head, quickly reaching out to hit the power button on the sound dock. "What can I say? That song gives me happy feet."

"I know what you're saying. I almost wanted to join in."

His smile grew broader. “I wouldn’t have stopped you. Looking for Jules?”

“I was supposed to meet her after dinner for a farming tutorial.”

“Ah, going to learn at the feet of the master. It’s a good decision. Jules didn’t know a thing about agriculture when she bought this place. She mostly knew about shoes and such. She did her research and learned pretty damn quick how to make a go of it.”

Curiosity got the better of Jac. “She mentioned earlier she didn’t grow up on a farm.”

“Oh, hell no.” Jules’ voice came over her shoulder. The woman in question crossed the office and shooed Marcus from behind the desk.

Jac glanced at Jules. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s okay. To answer your question a little more thoroughly, I grew up in Los Angeles. I worked in the family business for a while, but decided to get an education and leave the L.A. rat race for a simpler lifestyle. Hence the vineyard. I love wine, so it made sense.” Jules laughed. “Kind of a stupid reason. Except, once I toured the place and saw what I could make of it, I was hooked. The team building stuff is just a sideline. Our label is available in liquor and grocery stores across the nation.”

“We had to learn about distributors and state regulations, Marcus added. “It was an intense year. We got lucky and the viticulturist wanted to stay on once we took over.”

“Viti-whatsit?” Jac wasn’t familiar with the term.

“He’s the guy who really knows how to grow grapes and understands the science and magic behind crushing them into wine.” Jules gestured to the framed certificates adorning one wall. “We’d be lost without him. He’s a prizewinner.”

“Impressive.” Jac meant it. There had to be fifteen awards adorning the wall. The oldest one, ‘Best Vintage from *Food and Wine*,’ was from three years ago.

“Marcus, would you mind checking on the concert while Jacqui and I talk? I hate to not be there, but the kids know what to do. You might have to keep the insurance guys in line. Jeff was—” Jules tossed a glance at Jac before continuing—“a little boisterous at dinner.”

“You got it, boss.” Marcus saluted, then pivoted toward the door.

As he walked through, he broke out in a chorus from the Taylor Swift song he’d been lip-syncing to earlier.

“He loves his pop songs.” A rueful smile on her face, Jules shook her head. “Okay, let’s talk soil and weather conditions.”

Jac spent two hours in the office, her head spinning at the amount of information Jules shared. By the time she left, her unofficial mentor had loaded her down with Department of Agriculture pamphlets and weather charts, and sheets of reference links Jac could use to find more information. Jules had fired questions at Jac as they discussed her plan to raise herbs and spices. Before they were done for the evening, Jules had all but begged for a chance to come to Eugene for a visit once the farm started growing again.

Jac climbed the stairs and walked absently down the long hallway to her room. Pausing at the desk, she dropped off the material Jules had given her, despairing of being able to fit it all in her suitcase. As she stared at the pile of paper, representing a potential future, calm settled in her gut. She hadn’t felt this hopeful about her path in a long time.

Even when she thought she’d be getting a promotion at MedServices, she hadn’t experienced the sense of rightness she possessed at this moment.

Marching into the bathroom, she scrubbed off the last traces of the day. She walked out of her clothes on the way to her suitcase. It only took a moment to jerk on a black camisole and leopard print sleep shorts.

Sinking into the comfortable chair by the desk, Jac regarded the mussed bed, remembering the blissful hours she’d spent there with Luke.



Why had she hesitated to spend the night with him? His presence added to the belief she was headed in the right direction. She should be with him, celebrating. Instead, she almost felt like she was hiding behind closed doors. Partly, she figured, because she wasn't sure she could control her emotions or reactions if he were in the room with her. But the other part of her wasn't sure she wanted to.

Someone passing her room laughed in the hallway, a feminine giggle. A door closed. She threw her hands in the air. "I'm an idiot." Unsure of what she'd wanted before dinner, she knew now.

She wanted Luke.

Glancing at the clock, she decided it wasn't too late to knock on his door. Plucking her room key from the desk, she hustled to her door, hesitating only a second with her hand on the faceted crystal knob. She peered down at her outfit. It covered enough, but she pressed her ear to the wood. The hall sounded empty. Opening the door, she darted her head out, scanning left and right. Discovering it empty, she headed toward Luke's room. The plush carpet runner silenced her footsteps as she hurried along.

After a brief hesitation outside his door, she lifted her hand. Her knuckles barely made any noise as she knocked. Luke answered quickly, as if he'd listened for her.

God, he was gorgeous. His athletic shorts hit just above his knee and the gray T-shirt he wore looked soft as sin as it stretched tight across his chest.

"May I come in?" Her voice sounded shy.

In answer, Luke grasped her wrist and pulled her into the room. She landed against his T-shirt as he swung the door shut with a quiet click behind her. He curved his palms over her shoulders, steadying her. The only illumination in the room came from a soft bedside lamp.

"I'm not going to kiss you, because if I start I won't stop," he said.

“Oh.” She couldn’t keep the disappointment out of her voice. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

“No, you should have come. I just wanted you to know why I’m not kissing you. I feel like I need a cast iron jock strap. One with a lock.” His laugh was pained.

“I was going to ask if I could sleep here tonight, but if you’re too uncomfortable—”

He stopped her words with his fingers against her lips. “We’re adults. I think—well, I hope we can behave. Climb in.” He gestured to the queen-sized bed.

She crawled across the mattress and slid between the luxurious cotton sheets. Before he joined her, he pulled the top sheet up and tucked it in around her.

She arched a brow. Luke smiled. “Better safe than sorry, right?”

“Oh.”

He stretched out on top of the sheet and turned toward her, elbow crooked and head propped on his hand. His thighs jutted into hers. She bent her knees, allowing him to slide his under her legs.

Jac pulled her hand from under the sheet and reached up to stroke along his jaw. Stubble scratched her fingertips. As she drew near his mouth, he nipped at her wandering digit, then dragged her hand away and laced their fingers together.

“How did your meeting with Jules go?” he asked.

“I think I’m cut out to be a farmer.” Jac couldn’t hold the grin back. “She gave me a lot of tips and pointers. References. Now I just have to make sure my cousin doesn’t mind me moving into the farmhouse. She’s been looking for a reason to get an apartment in the city, so this might just do it. Jules told me about an Ag convention in Sacramento I’m going to register for. Lots to learn for sure.” She didn’t bother to stifle the yawn claiming her.

Luke released her hand. His chest brushed hers as he stretched across to snap off the light. The pressure of his body

over hers was electric, shooting sparks from the peaks of her breasts to her center. She gasped as sharp heat throbbed between her legs.

Luke paused for only a second before finding her lips in the dark. He drank tenderly, sipping at her mouth like it was an exquisite vintage of wine. He ran the very tip of his tongue over her lips, not asking for entry, but rather promising something in the future. He tangled his fingers in her hair, angling her face to deepen the kiss. Other than the hold he had on her face and his thigh under hers, he didn't touch anywhere else.

As much as she wanted to take it further, she knew she shouldn't. Too much of her future remained uncertain. When she touched a hand to his chest, he eased away and laid his head on the pillow next to hers. Whispering good night, his breath was soft on her cheek.

He draped an arm over her waist, heavy, comforting. Before sleep dropped over her like a blanket, her last thought was of how easily she could get used to curling in his arms every night.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Luke's phone rang, startling him out of deep slumber. His cock was stiff and aching, a residual from sleeping next to Jac all night. Her spicy perfume scented the room. Choosing to ignore the phone, he shifted his hand over the sheets next to him. He popped his eyes open when his hand encountered the cool fabric that should have covered Jac, and found empty sheets.

The phone rang again as he flopped to his back, searching the small room for his missing sleep partner. The bathroom door was open, the room dark. His cock stopped throbbing like a snare drum when he realized he was alone.

Disappointment flooded him as he pushed up on his elbow. Dammit, he wanted her to be in the bed next to him. A faint glow seeped through the gauzy curtains covering the windows. Close to daybreak, if he had to guess. The ringing on the phone got louder, a feature he now regretted setting.

He seized the instrument from the table next to the bed, and swiped his thumb angrily across the screen. "What?" His tone was gruff. Hell, pissed off. He wasn't sure if his anger was because some dumb shit thought it was a good idea to call at the ass crack of dawn, or because he'd woken alone.

"Good morning, sunshine. Did you get up on the wrong side of happy today?" His boss, Brian Evert, sounded freaking chipper by comparison.

"I wasn't up." Idly scratching his chest, Luke turned to glare at the clock. "Fuck, Brian, it's oh-dark-thirty. Why the

hell are you calling so early?"

"I thought you should know I've received notice the nurses are calling a sick-out today."

Luke struggled to a sitting position, cradling his head in his free hand. "I'm afraid to ask why you sound so damn happy about this."

Evert's laugh bordered on evil as it crawled down the phone line. "This puts them right where I want them. We've conceded to everything they've asked and they're still pushing. In the court of public opinion, the union will appear greedy and the hospital will come out like a fine, upstanding corporate citizen."

Shaking his head, Luke countered, "Brian, it's not going to look that way at all. The hospital still stands to lose. The last thing they asked for, the pay bonus for anyone working a holiday, away from family on a special day, was a drop in the bucket. We should have given it to them."

"I don't get bonus pay for holidays I work. Neither do you. It's a matter of equity."

As CEO, Brian wasn't paid an hourly wage. And he might not get holiday pay, but he received a six-figure bonus every year.

Luke scraped the back of his fingers down his face, the stubble on his chin rasping against his knuckles. "The lack of your bonus is not the point," he argued.

"I need you back here today. I'm calling an emergency board meeting. It's all hands on deck. Two this afternoon. The sick-out is supposed to begin with second shift. We want to form a response to be ready before it starts."

Doing a quick calculation of drive times, Luke's frustration surged. Even if he left now, he couldn't make it home much before the meeting time. And he wouldn't leave without talking to Jac. "I can't be out of here before seven. Can you conference me in for the first half while I drive?"

"Fly in if you have to. The hospital will pay any tickets. We need you here to run the numbers before we go public."

“I’ll do my best.” Luke disconnected while Brian was in the middle of saying good-bye. He stared at the empty pillow next to him. A strand of Jac’s soft russet hair stretched across the cotton. What time had she left? He’d slept better than he had since he’d accepted the job with St. Simeon. He must have been nearly unconscious to not hear her leave. Or she had some reason to sneak out. God, maybe he’d snored.

Tossing the phone to the mattress, he swung his legs over the side and arched his back. After shuffling his feet into the flip-flops he’d left under the dresser, he finger-combed his thick hair to flatten it. The shoes slapped against the soles of his feet as he moved. Cringing at the idea of making too much noise, he ditched the shoes. He was out the door and headed down the hall before he could change his mind.

Light shone under Jac’s door, painting the carpet in pale yellow. Luke tapped lightly against the wooden door and leaned his ear against it, listening for sounds of her moving within. Nothing. He knocked a little harder, gratified to hear what had to be chair legs scuffing across the floor.

He stood back as Jac opened the door. Backlit from the lamp on the desk, her hair became a fiery halo, her long legs tight and toned below her sleep shorts.

“Hi,” he whispered. “Are you okay?”

She beckoned him in. The door shut softly behind him. She pitched her voice low. “Yeah. I guess I was too excited to sleep. I came back here to send an email to my cousin. I’m sorry if I woke you.”

Luke made himself comfortable on her neatly made bed. “You didn’t. I got a call from the office.”

“This early?” She moved to stand in front of him.

Skating his hands over her waist, he maneuvered her between his knees, curving his fingers over the soft cotton covering her hips to reach the small of her back. Jac stroked her fingers through his hair. Her touch made it difficult to find his voice. “Yeah. There’s trouble brewing. Unfortunately, I’ve

received orders to get my behind back to Medford this morning.”

She frowned, her fingers stilled. “Seriously?”

He nodded as he snaked one hand up her ribs. “Problems with the nurses. The CEO thinks it will work to our advantage in the contract negotiations. He’s called an emergency board meeting. Attendance is mandatory.”

“Oh, Luke. I’m sorry you have to deal with this. But I’m sorrier to lose my teammate. We work well together.” She dropped her hands to his shoulders.

Heat jolted from the point where she massaged his muscles, to the pit of his stomach, continuing the rest of the way south. When he pulled her onto his lap, her soft bottom nestled into the curve of his hip with a burst of electricity and something more. He palmed her cheek, urging her mouth to his.

“Yes, we do,” he whispered against her lips before he claimed them.

He kept the kiss gentle, sipping softly, his mouth clinging to her lips. And as easy and gentle as it was, it was maybe the most sensuous kiss he’d ever shared. Jac responded with joy and passion, freely taking what he offered and returning it with heat and heady desire. Heart thudding behind his sternum, he gave up trying to analyze his emotions and just went with the feeling.

Pulling his lips from hers tore at his soul. He rested his forehead against hers. Each soft exhale she released brushed his face, another form of a kiss. He whispered, “I want to see you in Medford. What day will you be back?”

“Not until Saturday afternoon. Jules invited me to stay an extra night, so she could share more about easing into agriculture. I’ve already changed my flight home.”

“Do you have plans that night?”

“I’m supposed to meet Bella for dinner and a movie.”

“Damn!”

She lifted her head, staring directly into his eyes. “I can cancel.”

Hope exploded in his chest. “Really? You don’t think she’d mind?”

“She’ll understand. She was disappointed you and I didn’t have a chance to get better acquainted the last time we met. I know I was.” A happy grin played over her mouth. “I think she was secretly hoping we’d hook up while we were here.”

This was good. Not only was Jac interested in continuing a relationship when they returned to the real world, but her best friend was in favor of it. “Text me as soon as you get in. With any luck at all, this problem with the nursing staff will be resolved by then, which means,” he caressed her knee while holding her gaze, “you’ll have my undivided attention.”

Moving his hand near the juncture of her thighs, he gripped her soft flesh and reclaimed her lips. Gentle be damned. This time, he unleashed the passion he’d held in check earlier. He slipped his tongue past her lips, a promise of things to come. She wove her fingers through his hair and responded with abandon.

Blood sang through his veins and his cock stiffened under her lush behind. She wriggled against the pressure, adding more steel to his shaft.

After a minute, she eased away. “I think I’m going to adore your undivided attention.” She chuckled, the sound swirling around his heart like a gentle breeze. “How soon do you leave?”

He gusted out a heavy breath. “I should be on the road already.”

Jac scooted off his lap and backed away from him. Her gaze dipped to his groin, where evidence of his need was a solid ridge in his athletic shorts. Dragging her eyes back to his face, desire stamped her features. He resisted the urge to grab a pillow from the end of the bed and pull it over his lap, not exactly sure why he’d bother to hide his arousal from her.



They shared a mutual attraction and had already enjoyed each other's bodies.

Struggling to will his cock into submission, Luke stood and jerked his T-shirt low on his hips. He met her sweet smile with a grin of his own before he walked to the door.

She followed, resting her hand on his forearm, stalling his departure. An invitation stood out in the sultry heat in her eyes. "I'm looking forward to seeing you Saturday." She stretched up on her toes and kissed his cheek.

His heart shifted in his ribcage at the unbelievably tender brush of her lips. At the promise of what could be between them. He laid his hand atop hers and tightened his grip. "Me too. Have fun the rest of the week, and learn lots. I'll be eager to hear your plans for the future."

And with any luck, he'd figure prominently in them.

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Jac closed the door with a quiet sigh. She'd come into the week with expectations of a bright, professional future, but not such a terrific personal outlook. Now, her professional plans had been derailed—or to be fair, rerouted—and her private life, like a chrysalis, had morphed into a brilliant opportunity. She tossed herself onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, seeing hazel eyes filled with passion instead of the patterned plaster.

It was early yet. Ninety minutes before she had to be in the dining room for the scheduled breakfast meeting. The prospect of working on the team building exercises with anyone other than Luke dimmed her enjoyment of the program. But she was determined to stay and complete the course. And she welcomed the chance to pick Jules' mind again. It still amazed her the woman hadn't grown up in the industry. She'd chosen her course and done everything she could do to steer her new path.

It was what Jac wanted for herself.

Rising, she headed toward the desk to collect her iPad. Tablet in hand, she climbed back on the bed, nestled against the pillows that carried a faint whiff of Luke's distinctive scent. She already missed him. Her feelings for him had grown surprisingly fast. They'd spent the last two days nearly attached at the hip. A small grin accompanied the sweet anticipation of their date upon her return to Medford.

She checked her email to see if her cousin had responded yet. Of course she hadn't. It was much too early for a woman who typically slept until ten or later. As a self-employed medical transcriptionist, Rowena set her own hours, preferring to work late into the evening, after doctors posted their daily notes. Since the schedule worked for her, Ro had never bothered to change it to a more conventional eight to five workday. The woman was too free spirited to conform very much.

Jac launched her browser, and after a moment's thought, searched for agricultural trends in the northwest. She knew which herbs she'd grow, something with dietary emphasis on super foods. She wanted to see if her growing season and climate would be conducive to pursuing alternate crops. She was particularly interested in blackberries. *Jeez, I'm already learning.*

Staring at the photo of the vineyard on the wall, she idly wondered if she should consider growing grapes. The area around Eugene had just the right soil and conditions for the vines. She wouldn't have to open a winery if she could find a small vintner to buy the fruit.

Excitement plumped like a sun-ripened grape as she considered the idea.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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After an hour of bookmarking promising sites, Jac began shutting down the tabs she had opened. Her phone chirped with the alarm she'd set. She'd been up for two hours and her stomach was rumbling.

Walking into the dining room, knowing Luke wouldn't be there, felt a tad lonely. She shouldn't be anticipating his company quite so eagerly but she couldn't help herself. After filling her plate from the buffet, Jac joined Sally and Belinda at a table in the corner.

"You missed a fun little concert last night," Sally said. The woman wore a garish yellow T-shirt with red capris.

In contrast, Belinda's outfit could be called dour, her gray blouse straining her buttons, paired with tight black jeans. Even her voice was grim. "Jeff and Jeremy got wasted and started singing along when the quartet played 'Moon River'."

"What's a Moon River?" Jac asked.

"That song from the movie *Breakfast At Tiffany's*." Sally hummed a few bars of the song.

Still drawing a blank, Jac shook her head. "Was that a movie? I thought it was a song by Deep Blue Something."

Belinda snorted and shook her head, setting her curly gray hair in motion. "You are so young. Your generation has a lot to learn. 'Moon River' was the title song of the movie. One of Andy Williams' best works."

Jac sure as hell wasn't going to ask who Andy Williams was. And her generation might have plenty to learn, but they had a lot to offer as well. "Oh. Did the guys only sing that song, or were there others?" She could only imagine FIG and DIG singing karaoke with the student string quartet for accompaniment.

"Marcus stood right behind their chairs and laid his hands on their shoulders." A wicked grin lit Sally's face. Clearly, she liked seeing the dorky guys reined in. "Gentle, but very persuasive. Then he took their wine away. After which, the boys lost interest."

Belinda leaned back in her chair and sent a shrewd glance around the room. She dropped her fork to the plate with a clatter. "So, where's your partner?"

Sadness swarmed Jac. "He was summoned back to his office. He left before seven this morning."

"Sucks for you." Sally brightened and sat straighter in her seat. "Hey, you could join our team. Girls against the boys."

Belinda shot a sneer at her co-worker and crossed her arms over her ample bosom. "We should probably let Jules decide who Jacqui should be paired with. Don't want to be presumptuous."

Good Christ, it was as though the woman didn't want Jac on her team. Well, she didn't really want to be on the same team as the lawyers because of their constant bickering, but the idea they—or at least Belinda—didn't want her stung.

A wave of longing for Luke's company hit her, hard. She shrugged it away. "I'm sure Jules will come up with a good solution."

Jac devoted her attention to the scrambled eggs on her plate as Jules strolled into the room. After stopping to say good morning to the quieter-than-usual, green-around-the-gills insurance agents, she moved over to the beverage station. Opening a tea bag, she dropped it into a cup. Vapor steamed over the rim as she poured hot water into the mug.

A broad grin stretched across her face as she made her way to Jac's table, cup in hand.

"Good morning, ladies," she greeted them. "Jac, I'm sure you know Luke got called back to the office early."

"He stopped by my room to let me know he had to leave." She didn't add how he wouldn't have needed to stop by if she'd stayed in his room a little longer this morning. Waking up next to him had been wonderful, but it had happened far too early in their romance. Or whatever they had going.

"Well, his departure presents a dilemma for the teams, you in particular." Jules nabbed the remaining upholstered chair and sat next to Jac.

Sally's plate scraped the table as she pushed it away. "She can join our team."

Belinda cleared her throat and sent a piercing glare at Sally. Jac held back a snort. Belinda just blew her chance of being named to the Team Playing Hall Of Fame.

"Nice of you to offer, Sally, but I had something else in mind." Jules pivoted in her seat and focused on Jac. "If you don't mind, I'll be your partner for the rest of the week."

Surprise caught Jac unaware. She'd never expected this. "Really? That would be pretty darned fantastic."

"Wait just a minute. Wouldn't she have an unfair edge in the competition, if the director of the program is on her team?" An unflattering note of jealousy deepened Belinda's voice.

Jules shook her head. "Not really. Because each set of exercises today will require brainstorming to solve the problem. Since Jac and I have never worked together, your team will actually have the advantage. You and Sally are already familiar with each other's thought processes, so you should be able to work faster to achieve a solution."

"I'd love to be on your team, if you're sure." *What a relief.* Thank goodness she wouldn't have to be the lady lawyers' walking hemorrhoid for the rest of the week, unwanted and most unwelcome, at least by Belinda.

The legs of Belinda the Crotchety's chair caterwauled on the tile floor as she shoved away from the table. Grunting, she stood and propped her hands on her hips. "I still don't think it's fair. Come on, Sally. Let's take a little walk before the competition begins."

Sally was slow getting to her feet to follow. Belinda snapped her fingers and the younger lawyer leapt from the table. She nodded and scurried away.

Jac gaped at Jules, brows raised. "What the fuck? Is there a contest I don't know about? Does the woman know how *not* to be competitive? You sure you want me on your team?"

"I'm sure. I've already spoken to Marcus about it and he's taking over the instruction today. Dude all but chortled when I asked. He's going to mix it up so he can stump me. But with you on my team, we'll be fine."

She spoke out the corner of her mouth, her brows drawn in a mock-frown. "But, if it appears Belinda is getting too bent out of shape, you won't mind goofing off a little, right?"

Jac smiled easily at her companion. "I'm all about goofing off. What's the activity this morning?"

"Scavenger hunt. Which works perfectly for me to give you a guided tour of the farm. We can chat about growing seasons and fertilizers today, which will leave us free for a little girl-talk Friday night, instead of a boring tutorial."

*Girl-talk? Like we're friends.* Jac welcomed the idea. She'd enjoyed spending time with Jules last night. The woman was an exceptional second choice to having Luke as her teammate. "I'm sure it won't be boring."

"Yeah, it would, but it's a necessary evil if you're serious about getting into such a crazy business. This way, it will be more interactive for you." Jules stood and pointed at Jac's sandaled feet. "Cute as hell, but not a great shoe choice today. We'll start in fifteen minutes, so be ready to run."

Not waiting for an answer, Jules strode out of the dining room. Despite missing Luke more than she should, this day was shaping up to be surprisingly awesome. Jac carried her

dishes to the bus tub in the corner, added more coffee to her cup before following Jules from the room. She sent a nod toward the lingering agents as she passed their table.

Twenty minutes later, Jac met the rest of the group on the front porch. She'd added a lightweight jacket, tied around her waist, to her outfit of tennis shoes, yoga pants and a T-shirt that read *Nothing Bad Ever Ended In Tini*.

Marcus explained the rules as he passed out clue sheets and large canvas sacks. "You'll locate the items by following the clue on your sheet. Each solved puzzle leads to the next. Once you find all your items, you'll have to figure out how to assemble the final product." He handed a slip of paper to Jac with a grin and slid a sidelong glance toward Belinda. "Your clue list will be extra-long, eliminating the unfair advantage of having Jules as your partner. You'll end up with a lot of pieces you might, or might not, need."

Jules, who'd changed into jeans and a sweatshirt, rolled her eyes. "Are we allowed to know what we're building?"

Crossing his arms over his massive chest, Marcus smirked. "Everyone else will, but you'll just have to figure it out. We'll call it a handicap."

"That's a pretty big disadvantage." Jules pouted. "What do you think, Jac? Too big?"

Confidence that had dipped at the length of their list burgeoned back to full strength in her chest. "Probably not. Maybe one of us should be blindfolded as well," Jac teased.

Belinda harrumphed loudly from her seat on the porch railing. The wood creaked as she jumped off and snatched the list from Sally's hand. "Let's just do this," she snapped.

Marcus kept his expression bland. "The last clue you find will be a picture of what you're supposed to build with the pieces you find. You have until noon to find everything on your list and return to the pavilion by the gift shop to assemble." He shot a hard stare at Belinda and Sally. "There is no prize on this other than knowing you worked as a team to solve a problem and bring a product to market."

“Whatever.” Belinda pursed her lips into a very thin line. She spun on her heel and promptly tripped over Sally. Righting herself, Ms. Cranky-Pants scowled at everyone assembled and brushed past Jeff and his cohorts as she raced down the steps toward the waiting golf carts. She hollered, “Let’s go, Sally.”

Sally stared after her, sighing. “Can I get a new partner?” she mumbled.

Marcus plucked the list away from Jac as she made to follow the rest of the team builders. His dark brown eyes were filled with apology. “Sorry, Jacqui. Your handicap of pairing with Jules means the other groups get a ten-minute head start.”

Jac watched the other participants retreat from the porch. Frustrated that she wasn’t immediately allowed to follow, she arched a brow. “Really? Suddenly, having Jules as a partner is tremendously less appealing.”

“Ha. I could have penalized you with a thirty-minute time out and you’d probably still beat everyone else.” Marcus folded his arms over his massive chest.

“Damn straight,” Jules quipped. “Come on, Jac. Let’s get a coffee refill. At least we got to read the first clue. Let’s see if we can figure out where it might lead.”

The ten-minute timeout passed as they tried to reason out the convoluted clue.

“The noontime sun still casts a shadow to the west.” Jac recited the first clue. “What the hell does that mean? I thought at high noon there weren’t shadows.”

It had taken Jac throwing out the names of the few buildings she knew of on the property before the words finally made any sense.

Jules flung up her hands. “Yes!”

Ten minutes later Marcus handed the clue list back to Jules and wandered away to check on the rest of the players.

“Damn that Marcus. I bet he laughed the entire time he rewrote the clues for us.” Jules seized Jac’s wrist and dragged



her down the steps. “Come on. I know exactly where we’re heading for our first stop.”

Together they raced toward the gift shop on the opposite end of the parking lot. Jules trotted around the shop. There, they found a coil of plastic tubing tagged as Clue #1. The next clue led them to the picnic pavilion where they picked up a small mechanical device Jules called a pump. On their third stop, they found a mesh bag filled with screws, nuts, and bolts.

They continued in the same manner for two hours, seeking clues and picking up bits and pieces of one or another unknown piece of equipment. Sweat trickled down Jac’s spine as they stopped to rest at the water station set up under a large oak near the stream bisecting the vineyard. The water cooled her throat as she gulped it down.

Jules stripped off her sweatshirt and tied the arms around her waist.

Twice, they’d come across other players racing toward their next clue. They’d paused briefly, comparing notes and checking out the parts they’d all picked up. Unfortunately, their items were completely unlike what the other teams had found, leaving Jules scratching her head. From what they could tell, they’d all be building different pieces of equipment.

When they found the clue that came with two long wooden poles, Jules cursed Marcus. One clue led them to an oversized tub, which Jules resorted to carrying on her head. The canvas sack grew heavier, digging into Jac’s shoulder and bumping against her hip as they jogged to the next destination.

Balancing one of the long bars under her arm while Jules carried the other, they scurried into the cask room, where they found a wheel and a large glass jug. Block letters proclaimed this their final clue. They sprawled on the cool cement floor as they tried to decipher the final location.

It only took a moment to figure out their final destination was the yard in front of the house. Dropping their burdens, they collapsed onto the ground. The other teams had already arrived and had puzzle pieces spread out on small, square blue tarps.

While Belinda held the picture of the apparatus they were to build, Sally attempted to attach a red plastic handle to the big clear glass jug identical to the one she and Jules had picked up.

Jac spread the pieces they'd acquired over the blue tarp, then sat on her heels to study them. It would be a lot easier if she knew what they were to build. Suddenly, not having a picture loomed a larger handicap than finding twice as many clues with ten fewer minutes than the other teams.

Jules squatted next to her, a frown puckering the skin on her forehead. She shook her head, her blond hair swishing across her shoulder blades. Keeping her voice low and even, she mumbled to herself. "There's some kind of pattern here but I'm not sure ..."

Marcus joined them and checked their inventory against the cheat sheet in his hand. Jules attempted to peek at the paper.

He lifted his arm over his head and rested his hip against the railing. "At least you remembered to grab everything as you found the clues." He pointed to Jeff and Steve who jogged awkwardly away from the porch. "They forgot to pick one up and have to go back to find it."

Jules dropped to her bottom and drew her knees against her chest. "You want us to slow down and let them catch up?"

"Nah. The idea was for two people to work together as a team, to communicate. They didn't do it, and now they'll have to face the consequences." He pointed at Jules. "But did I mention that you aren't actually allowed to help Jac? She's on her own to figure out what she's supposed to be constructing."

"Wait!" Jac jerked her head up and gawked at Marcus. She wasn't truly competitive by nature ... Oh, who was she kidding? She wanted to win this in the worst way. She struggled to keep the whine out of her tone. "Without a picture and without help from my teammate, I'll never figure out what I'm supposed to be assembling. How is that team building?"

“I have faith in you, Jac. You’ve been resourceful this entire week.” A confident grin wreathed the big guy’s handsome face. “I tell you what, once you figure out what to build, Jules can help.”

“Marcus, remind me to add a note to your personnel file about being difficult to work with.” Jules dragged a finger over the palm of her hand, as if already writing the note.

A loud noise drew their attention. Sally cringed as Belinda clapped her hands together and barked instructions. “No, turn it around! It’s upside down.”

“Jesus, I hope you beat those two,” Marcus muttered. He shoved away from the railing and went over to mediate between the lady lawyers.

Jac’s knees ached a little as she leaned forward to move pieces around the tarp, hoping to find the pattern Jules had mentioned. She hated the fleeting sensation of the nearly recognizable picture being there, yet gone before her subconscious could interpret the image. Shutting her eyes, she attempted to make the picture coalesce. She gave up when all she saw behind her lids was Luke’s sexy mouth. She wouldn’t mind contemplating *that* picture all day long, but she had a goal to achieve.

Reluctantly she opened her eyes and pulled on her earlobe as she studied the pieces littering the ground in front of her. “Okay, some of this stuff is more high-tech than the rest.” She mumbled her thoughts out loud as Jules sat quietly next to her, an encouraging smile on her face. “So, if I regroup the parts by what seems to belong together ...”

She moved the coiled tubing next to the small pump, then set the gallon-sized glass jug by it. Positioning the wheel at the base of the two long poles they’d lugged all over the vineyard, she studied the pieces again, still not quite seeing the overall result.

Jeff and Steve came huffing back up the steps to the porch. Sweat stained the back of FIG’s cotton pullover shirt and beaded on his brow. As he jostled past Jac and Jules, a drop of perspiration plopped on the board next to where Jac rested her

hand. She curled her fingers into her palm, thanking her lucky stars her hand hadn't been one inch to the right, where FIG's sweat bomb would have scored a direct hit.

She forced her attention back to the task at hand and squinted at the mess in front of her. To her surprise, the answer to the puzzle took shape in her head, the way the Magic Photos images revealed themselves behind colorful blurred lines. Sudden and unexpected. "Oh, my God! Jules, it's a wheelbarrow."

"Holy crap! You're right." Jules' delighted laughter filled the cool autumn air. She reached for the mesh bag of hardware.

While she dumped the screws out of the bag, Jac upended the large tub they'd taken turns toting around the vineyard balanced on their heads. Positioning one pole over the convenient pre-drilled holes, Jac took one of the bolts from Jules and fitted it through both sets of holes, holding it in place while Jules tightened a nut down. Thirty seconds later, they had the second pole secured in place.

Jac stole a glance at the other contestants. Sally and Belinda were closest to being done, while the insurance guys still hadn't figured out which pieces they needed. Other teams were at various stages of construction on their projects, but none were closer than the attorneys. Determined not to lose to the lawyers, Jac threaded another bolt into the wheel bracket. Working as a team, they quickly added the wheel, then righted their finished product.

"Done!" Jules hollered, as she high-fived Jac and hugged her hard.

Their delighted laughter was drowned out by the groans from the other teams.

Jeff cast down the rubber gasket he'd been trying to fit over the glass jug. He leered across the porch at them. "I'd be pretty pissed off if you ladies didn't make victory hugs look so hot."

“Shut the hell up, Jeff,” Belinda barked, a scowl forming between her brows. “No one wants to hear you being an asshole.”

“Congratulations on winning despite having all those handicaps.” At least Sally seemed pleased for them.

Marcus stepped forward and bent to examine their completed project. “You did well on this task. We gave you a lot of extra pieces to work with and made sure they could work for multiple tools we use here in the vineyard. We’ll see how you do on the next task after lunch.”

He clapped his hands for attention. “Okay, you’re all dismissed for lunch. Be back on the porch at half past one for the next activity, ‘Wine Country Shootout’.”

“Finally, something I might win. I’m a crack shot with a rifle.” Steve boasted. “Although Jeff might be a handicap. He can’t shoot his way out of a wet paper bag.”

“Don’t be a douche, Steve.” Jeff grumbled.

Belinda glared at Jac as she hurried past, a trailing Sally in her wake.

“Can you shoot?” Jules asked as she set about tidying up the porch.

Jac answered with a grin. “Nope. Never learned. Didn’t need it in the city and Gramps wouldn’t let me touch his guns whenever I visited.”

“Good. There’s no way we’ll win this afternoon’s activity. Should keep the natives happy.”

Laughing, Jac dropped the leftover hardware back into the mesh bag. “At this point, even if I was a sharpshooter, I’d find a way to throw the contest. Sometimes being part of the team means letting someone else take the lead. Somehow, I’m guessing Belinda and Sally will win this event. I bet Belinda has a Concealed Carry permit.”

“You’re probably right.” Jules dusted her hands down her thighs. “I have to stop in my office for messages. You going to eat in the dining room?”

“I’ll catch up to you at one-thirty. I thought I’d grab a plate and take it to my room. I promised my boss I’d check in at noon every day.” Jac cursed herself for being such a team player.

*Ironic.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Reluctant to call her office, Jac lingered on the porch, staring at the scenery. Jules retreated into the cool shadows in the front hall and disappeared into her office. As the door swung shut, Marcus' laugh boomed out. The sound jarred Jac from her reverie, pushing her to keep her promise to check in with Ted. Still dragging her feet, she fixed a plate of food before retreating to her room.

Once there, happiness suffused her in the form of a text message from Luke.

*Stopped for a short coffee break. Almost home. Hope you are having a great team-kind-of day. Already missing you and looking forward to Saturday.*

She sent a fast text back to let him know Jules was her new partner and they'd won this morning's event. Pressing 'send' made her positively giddy. She, too, looked forward to their date. Hugging herself, Jac called her office.

Grim overshadowed giddy as she addressed the latest problems Deidre's inept management had caused.

Her lunch sat neglected on the desk next to Jac as she worked with Valerie to correct a billing issue complicated by Deidre's version of fixing. She debated calling Ted and delivering her two-week notice. Deciding it would be best to hand in her letter of resignation in person, she clenched her fist around her iced tea and fought for patience. The billing program was simple to understand, but each time Deidre got

near a client, it became a twisted, tangled jumble, reminding Jac of strands of Christmas lights not stored properly.

At a quarter after the hour, she shut down her office link with a sigh. The idea of starting over glittered with sunbeam-bright intensity on a stormy sky. Consulting the clock by the bed, she hurried to check her email for a response from her cousin.

The second her inbox popped up, excitement flourished up her spine. Rowena had responded. Fingers poised over the keyboard of her tablet, Jac hesitated. Uncertainty and second thoughts rose. Once she read her cousin's answer, her destiny could be set. It would be a sign endorsing her decision to quit her job.

Starting a new venture in Eugene was the right course of action. Unfortunately, the two-hour drive from Medford could spell the death of her budding relationship with Luke. Sure, weekends would be doable, but the commute would get old fast. He'd complained about his excessive work schedule. Add the commute time to Eugene to spend a day and a half with her might put him over the top.

How long could they last when he faced a tedious drive just to see her? How long before he found someone he liked better just five minutes away from him? Someone he could spend every night with?

And getting the farm back to working condition would be a day-in, day-out labor of love. Including the weekends she could be spending in Luke's arms. He certainly hadn't signed up for that. Truly, he hadn't signed up for anything.

Three days ago—even yesterday morning—there was nothing holding Jac in the community where she'd lived for the past three years. Yesterday afternoon, everything changed. She'd fallen into bed with the best reason to remain. And maybe she'd fallen into something else with him as well. Now she had a personal reason to stay, but no professional inclination to do so.

Her relationship with Luke was new and exciting. Even thinking his name left her with a heady feeling. So did the idea



of moving to the farm and beginning the next chapter of her life. She'd be better to end things now, before her heart got too involved. Selfishly, she buried that thought in the darkest corner of her mind.

Holding her breath, she tapped the link to open her cousin's email. And as she scanned the note, she forgot to start breathing again.

The first two sentences of the message rambled about Ro's life in general, how busy she'd been and that she couldn't wait to move from the duller-than-dust farm for a new apartment in the bustling university town.

The words in Ro's second paragraph kicked her in the gut.

*'... the county sent a letter about a past due property tax bill. The grand total with penalties was in excess of fifty thousand dollars ...'*

Rowena was prepared to let the land go to auction. She was purging "crap" Grandpa had held onto for years to get the house ready to list on the market. She'd known the taxes were due, but it had slipped her mind to make the payment on the due date.

For three years? How could anyone forget for that long?

Jac slumped in the chair, tears gathering in her eyes. Paying the tax bill was a condition of Rowena's occupancy in the house. She'd lived rent free, and only had to be responsible for making sure the property stayed current with the county. Frustration grew, squeezing the breath from Jac's lungs with the vicious force of an iron fist. The debt was ginormous, insurmountable.

A single tear trickled down her cheek. She brushed it away impatiently. She was at a fucking team building camp. Supposedly learning how to make magic happen, to face down unreasonable odds. Unfortunately, it appeared she'd be a team of one, overcoming this setback. Even if she could raise the cash in time to pay off the tax debt, there wouldn't be enough left over as seed money to kick-start planting on the farm.

*No, dammit!* Jac jumped from her chair, restless with anger and determination. She was screwed, not defeated. As she paced in front of the sunny window, she considered her options. She'd seek agricultural or small business loans. Or ask her parents for the funds, with the promise to pay them back with interest.

And she'd insist Rowena kick in some of the money. She had to have some cash tucked away since she hadn't been paying rent *or* the taxes. Ro owned that much, in return for living in the lovely turn of the century four-bedroom home absolutely rent free.

The farm had belonged to Jac's family for generations. She wasn't going to let the land or the opportunity slip through her fingers because her fiscally irresponsible cousin had farted around and not taken care of her responsibility.

She paused in front of the window and gazed at the vineyard. Jules had a sweet set-up here. She'd opened her home to visitors to teach them team building in addition to running the vineyard. Perhaps, once the farm got going, Jac could open a small inn to supplement her income. Maybe even try to work out an arrangement with the university to house their visiting faculty.

She had options and she wasn't going to allow this small roadblock to keep her from achieving her dreams. Sure, fifty thousand wasn't small. Still, nothing, even that breath-stealing sum, was going to stand in her way.

Resolving to respond to her cousin tonight, Jac shut down her email. This afternoon, she'd figure out how to pay the tax bill and start making a mental list of everything she'd have to do to move forward.

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Luke couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so out of his depth. Waves of frustration kept breaking over his head and it was becoming more difficult to swim back to the calm he needed. Negotiations with the nurses' representatives weren't

going well. Mostly due to Brian Evert's belligerent tone and bullying attitude.

For the fifth time in the last ten minutes, Luke wished he had a roll of duct tape in his back pocket. He'd tear off a strip and cover his boss' mouth in a heartbeat.

They were on a short break, opting to take a time-out after their afternoon meeting hit the four-hour marathon mark. Tension, too thick to be cut with anything less than a hacksaw, lingered in the room and pinched the back of Luke's neck.

Struggling to let go of the negativity suffocating him, he poured burned coffee into his mug. The second the bitter brew hit his stomach, it pitched and rolled like a rowboat tossed on angry waves. He grabbed a bottle of water instead and let his thoughts wander while he stared out the window at the mountains surrounding Medford.

The quiet chatter behind him receded as he pulled an image of Jac into his brain.

Warmth suffused him as he recalled how she'd looked when he had opened his door to her last night. The black sleeveless T-shirt stretching across her breasts offered a tantalizing glimpse of nipples outlined beneath the thin cotton. Her mile-long legs framed in the animal print, lace edged shorts she'd worn. Bright pink polish tipped her toes in whimsy.

He'd told her he wouldn't kiss her for fear he wouldn't be able to stop. God, how he'd wanted to. Desperately needed to.

And after sleeping curled around her all night, saying goodbye this morning had sucked. Jesus, he'd met her a month ago, had really only known her few days and already, she'd claimed a corner of his heart. Without her next to him, the world seemed less bright.

He rubbed his fist absently over the empty ache in his chest, hoping to ease the gnawing pang. A fast glance at the clock revealed he wouldn't see her for at least forty-eight hours. An eternity, possibly made longer if he couldn't resolve this stalemate with the nurses.

Without resolution, he'd be tied up dealing with this monumental problem when all he wanted was to wrap Jac in his arms, sink into her soft heat, and make love to her. As blood heated and rushed south, his cock twitched to life. He shoved his hand into his pocket, hoping to camouflage the swelling bulge. It would be awfully inconvenient to go back to the bargaining table rocking a great big stiffy. For sure, the angry union rep would slap him with a sexual misconduct complaint.

Luke scanned the room's reflection in the window. The nurses and their attorney huddled in one corner, whispering, scowls all around. The hospital's attorney had retaken her seat at the conference table and furiously scribbled notes on a legal pad. She stopped long enough to jab her pen toward the hospital's board president. The lawyer pursed her lips, the crevasses around her mouth standing out even in the reflected image. The board president laid a placating hand on the woman's arm and spoke directly into her ear.

The picture they presented was too casual, and perhaps a bit too cozy for a purely business relationship. In the opposite corner, Brian brayed out a laugh while he talked on the phone, as if he couldn't be bothered to worry about the tense negotiations underway.

Luke dug his fingers into the knotted muscles at the back of his neck, hoping to alleviate his escalating tension. With Brian's attitude, the chance of settling contract terms vanished faster than smoke in the air.

After disconnecting his call, Brian shoved the phone into his pocket and joined Luke at the window. "The only thing remaining on the agenda is the bonus situation. I've polled the board and they've agreed to meet the union halfway. We simply don't have the money to make the full concession." The smug smile on Brian's face told a different story.

Luke shook his head. "We can and should meet this demand. It's a drop in the bucket compared to the bonus structure in place for physicians. I've studied the balance sheets and if we cut executive and medical staff payouts by

one percent, the nurses get what they need to go back to work.” One fucking, measly percent could solve the standoff.

Judging by the way Brian crossed his arms over his chest, Luke’s suggestion floated as well as a submarine with screen doors. “If we bow to this demand, what will we have to offer with our next contract? We can’t give in.” His tone resounded loudly enough to be heard by the people in the next room.

“Keep your voice down,” Luke hissed. The last thing he needed was for the nursing staff to learn the hospital CEO was a bigger dick than they’d thought. Who was he kidding? Judging by the stony expressions of the people who’d sat across from him all afternoon, they already knew.

He angled his shoulder to eliminate any potential eavesdropping. “Perhaps we can negotiate a contract extension on the back end. Give the center some padding. The hospital has had several good years, so we can afford this.”

Brian squinted and compressed his lips into a thin line. “Whose side are you on here, Luke? Your job is to have the company’s best interests at heart.”

“I believe settling this amicably with the nursing staff is in the company’s best interest. If the support staff remains on this sick-out, we’ll lose patients. The loss of billings alone will cost us more than agreeing to their demand.” He pointed to the reflection of the nurses in the corner.

“Do your job, Luke. Or you’ll regret it.”

*Shit.* The last thing he’d expected to hear from his boss was a threat. Anger and disquiet seethed and boiled in his gut. His position clearly resembled that flat, uncomfortable area between a boulder and a hard slab of granite. Six months into a job and facing the possibility of being let go because of contract negotiations gone awry.

The marketing and PR departments had done a good job of hiding the negative aspects of the job when Luke had interviewed. He’d had no idea at the time what he was landing in. Even though he was expected to take a lead role in the

bargaining because of his knowledge of the budgets, he'd have to tread carefully.

Resolutely twisting the cap back on his water bottle, Luke sucked in a huge breath. "Ready to get back to it?" he asked the room in general as he moved to the black lacquer conference table.

"The nurses are." The union rep pulled out a chair and dropped onto the cushioned seat.

Luke retook his own seat, thinking if the hospital had furnished this room with hard wooden chairs, negotiations would go a lot faster. He drew on the memory of Jac's soft hand holding his, and searched for the calm needed to deal with the union and his pissed-off boss. "Okay, we've agreed on the new grievance procedure, so the only item left is the bonus situation."

Brian leaned back in his chair as if he didn't have a care in the world, eyeing Luke, waiting for him to continue. After consulting his notepad and the spreadsheets he'd brought with him, Luke opened the haggling once again.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Birds chirped and tweeted outside Jac's bedroom window, bringing her awake with their sweet song. She nestled into the pillows, pulling the quilt to her chin to ward off the late September morning chill seeping through the open window. Clutching her phone to her chest under the covers, she fought off disappointment.

Luke hadn't texted her since the previous morning. Nor had he responded to the text Jac had sent him late last night when she'd missed him like nobody's business. Even though they'd only been together in her bed once, it felt large and cold and empty without Luke in it. Phantom sensations of his hard body curled around hers tickled...an itch she couldn't seem to reach.

She was positive he'd call or text overnight. Things must have gotten rough in the bargaining meeting. *Poor man*. If the nurses stayed the course on their sick-out, Luke would most likely be in the trenches helping out. Because that's what a team player did. Unfortunately, his dedication to the team might result in their plans for tomorrow night being delayed.

Sleep had remained elusive, despite the great physical effort she'd expended during the afternoon's Wine Country Shootout. As predicted, Belinda and Sally had won the event, despite an instance of friendly fire on their team. After she'd plugged Sally squarely between the shoulder blades, Belinda delivered a profuse apology with a fat dose of contempt curling her lips.

Jac had dodged the ‘Team Lady Lawyers’ bullet. Or cork, in this case. Even FIG and company had been on the prowl to defeat Belinda. The woman had been dauntless in her efforts to win.

Jules had seemed to really enjoy her role on Jac’s team. Her infectious giggle hadn’t stopped Jac from thinking how much Luke would have relished the contest. Her cheeks crinkled in a smile as she daydreamed about how he’d ease the pain of losing to the lady lawyers.

A sweet, tingling ache took up residence between her thighs.

She jumped as her phone vibrated against her chest. Hoping it was Luke responding to her text, she pulled her hand from under the covers.

No such luck. Just a text from Bella.

*I believe I’d rather be buried in slimy frogs than go into the office today. How soon are you coming back?*

Once she moved, Jac was going to miss her daily doses of Bella’s offbeat sense of humor. She hadn’t broken the news of her imminent departure to her friend yet, although she suspected Bella already anticipated the outcome of Ted’s duplicity. Anger fought to replace Jac’s happy imaginings about Luke.

*I’m not having it.*

Shutting down all lingering thoughts of MedServices, she jerked the covers away and rose from the bed. The cool floor under her toes grounded her, helped her focus on getting through the last morning of team building camp. Only one more exercise, one more luncheon, and then freedom.

Happy anticipation kept her moving as she readied herself for the day; spending the upcoming evening talking to Jules and Marcus uppermost. She had a lot to learn and she couldn’t believe her luck in finding a ready source of information in Jules. The woman and her knowledge and experience were gifts from the gods.



As she walked into the shower, she thought it was too bad the boon didn't come with an unending supply of cash. Jac gritted her teeth and rehearsed the conversation she knew she'd have to have with Rowena about pitching in to pay the unexpected tax bill. She'd spent last night building a spreadsheet of her finances. She was in good shape, as long as she sold her condo for a profit. Her parents would lend her the cash, or at least co-sign a loan for the remaining funds.

While she showered, her phone chirped with another incoming text alert. Leaving the water running, she hopped from the tub, reaching for the phone. Her wet feet slipped on the floor and she braced herself on the vanity. Dripping and naked, she snatched the phone from the counter, hating herself for feeling desperate to hear from Luke. How had he wormed his way into her heart so quickly?

A quick scan showed it was a text from him. Her heart galloped as she swiped her way into the message screen.

*Missed you last night. Talks broke down around midnight. Going to resume today. Working with a skeleton medical staff so I'll be filling in where help is needed. Tell Jules her program works. I'm Team Bedpan today. Next session scheduled for Sat. AM.*

This didn't bode well for their plans Saturday night. The phone chirped with another text from him before she could respond to the first.

*The way things are going you might not be the only one handing in a two-weeks' notice.*

Jac typed in an answer, mumbling aloud as her fingers flew over the keyboard. "Oh no! That bad? Sorry I'm not there to make you feel better." She pressed send and snorted. "This would be easier if we just talked."

After shutting off the shower, she wrapped a towel around her body. As her finger hovered over Luke's call-back number, the phone rang.

Connecting the call with a laugh, she greeted Luke. "Great minds. I was just about to call you."

“I needed to hear your voice. Texting is fine, but a little distant, don’t you think?” he asked.

She sat on the edge of the tub, the cold porcelain shocking against her bare behind. “I’m sorry things aren’t going well with your talks. Wish I was there to help.”

“I wish I was there with you.” His voice, low, smooth, and seductive, wrapped around her senses.

Her breath shortened as heat raced along her nerves. If he were here, she wouldn’t be showering alone. Her voice was breathy as she replied, “Yeah, here would be better.”

“Did I wake you?”

“No. I was just in the shower.”

Luke’s groan scattered her already jumbled wits. “So you’re warm and wet.”

*Oh, God, yes.* And she just got wetter at that voice. “Um ... yeah.”

“I’m hard just thinking about having you in the shower. Or on the Oriental rug on your floor. Or my bed. Or yours.”

Jac stood. She couldn’t believe she was going to do this. “Hmm. How about my bed. What would you do to me there?”

Luke didn’t respond immediately. His breath rushed in her ear, fast and shallow. “Are you there? On your bed?” he croaked.

“On my way. Give me a sec.” She yanked open the bathroom door. Cool air slapped against her heated skin as she left the steamy confines. Pulling the covers back on the bed, she stood beside it. “Okay, I’m by the bed. I’m just wearing a towel. Should I drop it?”

“Yeah, baby. Take it off and toss it away.” His strangled voice came through the phone.

Jac released the towel, each nerve ending firing as the soft cotton slid down her body. She kicked it aside. “I’m naked now.”

A soft thud came over the line, as if he'd dropped the phone. She could hear fabric rustling. Finally his voice returned, seductive and powerful. "Me too. Get on the bed. Lay on your back, baby."

"One sec." Jac grabbed her ear buds and pressed them into place before plugging the cable into her phone. This was one instance where hands-free was a requirement. She clambered onto the bed, giddy excitement building in her system. Bunching the pillows together, she propped herself on the pile, the sheets cool against her bare back as she nestled in. She lifted her knees and spread them, a low, sexy pitch to her voice. "Okay. What would you do if you were here?"

"I'd touch you. My hands would knead your breasts."

Jac molded her flesh the way Luke had last time they'd been in this bed together. The heat in her palms drew her nipples taut. A sweet, pins-and-needles sensation traveled from the taut peaks, then lodged, thrumming and alive between her legs. She let her eyes drift closed and purred in the back of her throat.

Luke groaned. "Baby, next I'd pinch and tweak your pretty pink nipples, teasing them until you begged for more. My mouth would be hot and wet around them."

Raising one hand to her mouth, she licked her fingers and lowered them to trace around one sensitive crest. She squeezed and massaged the other breast. When she dug her heels into the soft mattress, her hips rose in time with each tightening of her fingers. She gasped, "Oh, God, Luke. What's next? Tell me what you want me to do next."

His words came as a low rumble, "I'd slide my hand down, exploring every inch of you until I found my target. I'd stop to play with your navel and that pretty patch of cinnamon hair, just hinting at a touch on your clit. Will you touch yourself for me, baby? Slowly. Tease your skin until need sparks in your sweet pussy."

"I do need to touch myself the way you would." She whimpered as she trailed her fingers past her ribs, tensing and flexing them over her flesh. She dipped her forefinger into her

bellybutton and made a circuit around the perimeter before continuing south. Flattening her palm, she slid her hand into the soft, springy hair at the apex of her thighs.

Her breath quickened as she teased her fingertips over her clit. An ache so sweet pulsed to life, shooting energy, electricity, to the base of her spine and upward. One hand on her breast, the other cupping her mound, she moved in a syncopated rhythm that sang to her soul. She moaned, the sound needy in the quiet room.

Luke groaned. “Jac, are you wet? I think you must be.”

“I’m ready for you, Luke,” she whispered. “So ready. Are you holding yourself? Are your fingers tight around your cock the way my pussy would be? Tight and stroking?”

“Yeah, baby. It feels so good. Move your fingers inside your body, the way I would, slow and easy.”

Jac slipped her index and middle finger inside her tight channel. Colors mounted behind her eyes, flaring and dancing with each stroke. She drifted her other hand down, found the nub between her folds, and stroked in time with the movement of her penetrating fingers. Luke’s breath rushed through her ear buds, whispering encouragement.

The only thing missing was the solid weight of Luke on top of her, the feel of his slick skin over hers as he thrust home. She whimpered as she imagined he touched her, loved her. A squeak climbed her throat as sensation built between her legs and sped over the rest of her body. She panted with need as she writhed on the bed, craving more. Craving Luke.

Tension strung her body tighter than a bowstring. Each movement of her hand between her legs strummed across the taut line leading from her womb to her brain.

Luke’s breath came hard in her ear, each guttural exhalation rasping through her. She timed the movement of her fingers and her hips with the sounds of his mounting passion. A thrill clamped down on her spine, sending tingles down her legs and up her torso to her heart.

Her climax rushed over her with undeniable heat and sensation. Driving her feet into the bed, she tensed her buttocks upward and drove her fingers deeper. The rippling of her inner muscles enervated her. She moved against her clit faster, drawing out the sweet agony of her orgasm, squeaking out Luke's name as she fell over the precipice.

"Oh, God. Oh, Jacqui. Oh, fuck me!" Luke's groan echoed harshly in her ear, prolonged and low.

Jac released a deeply contented sigh and relaxed against the pillow, languid, yet discontent. She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, one hand cupping her breast. The heat from her palm felt almost as good as Luke's had. She missed the passion she'd have seen on his face as he moved over her in the last throes of their joining.

Instead, she saw only weak, early morning sunlight slanting over the beige ceiling. "Oh, Luke. I wish you were here."

Phone sex had been a poor substitute for the real thing with her college boyfriend. At least from that asshole's point of view. Who could say whether Luke would find a warm substitute for Jac to occupy his bed? She'd seen the way other women at happy hour had tried to attract his attention. Temptation would abound.

Living almost a hundred miles from him almost guaranteed she'd end up with this hollow, empty feeling at least once a week. Would it be better to end it now, before she turned into a sad, needy woman who indulged in fantasies and masturbation for fulfillment? Her chest and cheeks burned and she covered her eyes, as if to hide from what she'd been reduced to.

"Oh baby. Me, too."

His sincere tone slipped into her heart. She'd have loved to wake next to him this morning. Holding his body, cradling him between her legs. She clung tight to the image of him in her mind's eye and swallowed the words she wanted to say. "Am I going to see you tomorrow?"

“Aw, baby. I’m going to have to improvise. We’ll be back at the table by nine. If I can get my boss to keep his mouth shut, we have a shot at settling this.” She heard rasping, as if he’d scrubbed a hand over his morning stubble. “I helped in the emergency room last night, doing what I could considering I’m not medically trained. When my shift was over, I was at my desk until three this morning, running numbers.”

“Poor sweetie,” Jac cooed. She reached for the blankets and pulled them over her rapidly cooling body. Tucking them in, she slid lower in the bed, snuggling into the pillows. “You must be exhausted. Did you get any sleep?”

“An hour. Good thing I excel at power napping. And with the wonderful way I just woke up, I’m oddly energized.”

She laughed through a yawn. “Really? Because I could nap right now.”

“If I were there, I doubt you’d be getting a nap.” His voice was low, suggestive.

Renewed sensuous fire lit her up. “Luke, be serious.”

“I am, Jac. I’m very serious.” He hesitated. “If I can’t make it for dinner tomorrow, would you mind if I came by when we get through? It might be really late.”

“You are always welcome. I just want to see you.”

“I wouldn’t want it to seem like a booty call.” Luke’s sincerity couldn’t be doubted.

His concern touched her heart. “I wouldn’t think that at all. But it’s sweet that you’re worried.”

“Good.” He sounded relieved. “I get to work on the medical floor today. Maybe you could suggest a bedpan relay as a team building exercise. Jules and Marcus could probably make that work. Hey, did you hear from your cousin? About the farm?”

Cold reason doused Jac at the mention of Rowena. She couldn’t tell Luke about the setback Ro’s ineptitude had dealt her. With everything he had on his plate, she wouldn’t add

anything else to it. Their relationship was too new for her to dump it on him.

“Yeah. She’s planning a move into town, so the house will be mine by the end of the week.” If she could pay off the enormous debt Rowena had ignored. The mere thought encouraged another bout of anxiety. She resisted the urge to sink lower in the bed and pull the covers over her head.

“You still planning to move to Eugene?” Luke asked, his voice flat.

“Not for a few weeks.”

They’d have some time together before she moved over a hundred miles away from him. *More time to lose her heart to him.*

She slammed the brakes on the thought.

“We’ll work a schedule out for seeing each other as often as we can. I have a college friend who spent the first three years of his marriage in Minneapolis while his wife worked in Dallas. We can do this. What we have is too special to let go.”

She didn’t reply. Couldn’t make the words come. Jac’s fingers tensed around the edge of the blanket. Maybe they’d make it work for a while, but with the miles and their schedules, and the unknown of starting a brand new venture, could they really make a go of it?

“It will work, Jac. You have to trust me.”

“I want to. Luke, we have to be realistic. Nothing would be sadder than trying to fit a round relationship into a square hole. I don’t want that for either of us. We should just enjoy what we have until ...”

Luke’s breath crashed out, stinging against her ear. “Don’t give up on us yet, Jacqui. Now that I’ve found you, I refuse to let you go. If we set our minds to it, we’ll figure this out.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

Her time with Luke made Jac late for breakfast. She'd grabbed a half a bagel from the sideboard, smeared a dab of honey-nut cream cheese on it and gobbled it as she walked with Sally and Jeff to the pavilion.

"You're glowing, Jacqui," Jeff observed. "You must have gotten a great night's sleep."

Heat built in her cheeks. "Um, yeah. I did sleep well," she lied. Truth was, she didn't sleep much. Waking up in such a blissful way would surely make her glow. Good thing Luke hadn't come downstairs late with her. There'd be no end to the razzing.

*Time to change the subject.* "Sally, where's your partner today?"

Sally's brows pinched together. "Don't know, don't care."

*A little trouble with the Bickersons?* Before Jac could follow up, Jules joined their group and talk shifted to the morning's challenge.

The task required the team to build a four-foot tower of corks. The exercise focused on team building through communication, support, and relationships.

Distracted, Jac failed miserably at the morning's team activity.

"I'm sorry," she apologized to Jules for their last place finish. She cast a baleful glance at Jeff and Steve who were high-fiving and booty-shaking over their victory. "I'm not



focused this morning. Lots on my mind. It kind of sucks that the owner of the team building camp placed last.”

“No worries.” Jules grinned as she wrestled a lid onto the barrel of corks. “It’s good to let the other guys win. Better for morale. Although, lunch might be a trifle unbearable if the insurance guys continue celebrating.”

“I’ll bet you’ll be glad to see the last of all of us.”

Jules let her gaze rove over the other teams as they tidied their work areas. She pitched her voice low. “Well, maybe some of you. I’m glad you’re staying an extra night. I pulled some more Ag stuff to go over tonight.”

“Is any of it about financing?” Jac regretted her glum tone the second the words were out of her mouth. She forced her next words to the brighter side. “My cousin is an idiot.”

“Huh?” Jules raised one delicately arched eyebrow.

“Nothing. I’ll explain later.” Jac shut down her negative thoughts as Sally approached.

“Too bad you guys lost. But at least you’re still talking. Belinda acts like us placing second is all my fault,” Sally grumbled. “She kept knocking over the stack of corks with her damn chunky bracelet. I told her to take it off before we started. She never listens.”

Jac doubted the lady lawyers would ever work well as a team. She murmured an excuse about checking in with her office.

Jules stopped her departure with a hand on her arm. “You’ll need to join us for the luncheon. We have one final exercise and the awards ceremony. Marcus has some great categories this time. Thirty minutes, okay?”

“Perfect. I’ll have a reason to get off the phone with Deidre. See you in a bit.” Jac waved. Her steps grated on the crushed shell path leading to the main house.

She heard footsteps hurrying behind her. When she turned, Jules trotted up to her.

“If you’re up for a little more painting, I’d love to have you join me at the cottage this afternoon. I’m painting my new living room. I’ll even supply the mid-afternoon ice cream break. I have a half-gallon of Death By Chocolate in my freezer. It really will cure whatever ails you.” She rubbed her stomach and finished on a big grin.

Tipping her head to the side, Jac asked, “How did you know chocolate is my sin-food?”

“Girl, it’s every woman’s sin-food. You get a double dip. And I have the perfect wine to go with it.”

A girlfriend. That’s what Jules was becoming. And Jac liked it. “It’s a deal. See you at lunch.”

Twenty minutes later, Jac had checked in with Deidre, who’d assured her everything was running smooth as clockwork. Valerie, one of her other co-workers, told a different story.

“That’s rich. Deedle-Dum is tripping in Wonderland if she thinks things are going well. Ted’s lived on the phone all morning long with client after client. Second cycle billing went out yesterday and big surprise! It was wrong because someone forgot to change multipliers.” Valerie released a disgusted snort.

“Wait, I left her detailed instructions on how to do this run. Why didn’t she use them?” Jac demanded. In spite of the looming issues she faced with the county tax bill, leaving was fast sliding into the ‘it’s-the-only-choice’ column.

“Oh, she used them. As a coaster for her coffee cup. You know she’s a slob. She spilled all over them.”

Shaking her head, Jac sighed. “Didn’t you offer your copy of them?”

“Hell yes, I did!” Valerie screeched. “She said she remembered the steps and she’d do it herself. Bitch is my boss. Who am I to argue with her?”

“Valerie!”

“Oops, Ted just got off the phone and he’s heading this way. Jac, speak up, I can hardly hear you. No, you’re breaking up. Jac? Jac? Damn I lost her.” the woman’s voice faded. “Sorry, Ted. The phone lines at the camp must be all jacked up —”

Jac snickered as Valerie disconnected. As soon as things started ticking along at the farm, she was definitely going to recruit the woman to join her. Lord only knew what she’d find for her to do, but she liked Valerie’s fast thinking and sense of loyalty.

The luncheon was filled with laughter. True to Jules’ prediction, Marcus had come up with a few great awards. No one was spared. Jac won Best Painted Lady. Laughter had peeled from her when Marcus bowed and gifted her with a paint stirrer dipped in whitewash, with the category and *Champion* scrawled on it in gold.

Jeff and Jeremy received toy microphones as prizes for their karaoke rendition of ‘Moon River’ at the concert Jac had missed. Belinda blushed a garish shade of red as she and Sally received the Bickerson’s award for most improved. As far as Jac was concerned, the improvement was a result of the women not speaking to each other during the final exercise.

Sweet musical notes filled the dining room as Jules tapped the end of her knife against her crystal water goblet. “I have one final thing to announce. Ordinarily, the artwork you all created on the first day is put up for sale in the gift shop. I sent pictures of what you made this week to a friend of mine who runs an art gallery in Santa Rosa.”

She sent a warm glance toward Jac. “She wants to create a local art display in her shop, with Jacqui’s and Luke’s picture as a centerpiece. She’s even willing to forego her commission since the proceeds are meant for a charity. She’s agreed to take all the pieces your teams made and display them for a month.”

“What? Oh, how marvelous.” Sally clapped her hands together.

“Hold on!” Belinda, the voice of dissent, grated out. “I never agreed to this.”

Jules' nostrils flared, but she maintained a pleasant expression. "Actually, you did. You signed the waiver to attend the sessions. You did read it, didn't you?"

How funny would it be if the lawyer had been the only one to not read the legal document? Jac had read it and signed it happily.

Belinda set her fork down with deliberation. "Your waiver won't hold up. I do not want my piece on display in a gallery. I'm a professional for God's sake, not an artist."

The slap of Sally's hand on the wooden table cracked through the air. "Belinda, shut the hell up. You've done nothing but act ornery and contrary all week long. God, you go out of your way to make it hard to work together. This is for charity. Displaying the art in a big shop in Santa Rosa will go a long way toward fetching a better price."

She frowned at Belinda and her lips went thin, before continuing. "I read the waiver Jules is speaking of and she was generous enough to make sure participants can use the proceeds from any sales as a tax-deductible charitable contribution. Did you read any of the clauses? Besides, no one in this part of California knows who the hell you are."

Jac shoved her hands under her thighs to keep from applauding Sally's sudden outburst. Sally could stop looking for a spine donor. She'd grown one all by herself.

Belinda opened her mouth, but snapped it shut without saying anything. The chair creaked as she slumped back in it. Same as any bully, once she'd been called on her bad temper, she wasn't sure how to behave.

It surprised Jac how tough it was to say goodbye to her fellow team builders. She'd gotten to know them fairly well in the past week. At least well enough to be able to remember names for FIG, DIG, and the rest of the insurance agents. Overall, they were a fun group. It didn't surprise her to see a wedding band on FIG—rather, Jeff. She noticed it when he gripped the handle of his luggage.

He stopped by the chair Jac had claimed on the porch right after lunch and gave her a card emblazoned with contact information. “If you ever need insurance, I hope you’ll give me a call. I’ll help if I can.”

She studied the card. It read *Jeff Sloan, Property and Casualty Insurance*. “Do you offer crop insurance? Are you licensed in Oregon?” Would she even need crop insurance?

Shaking his head, he said, “I don’t, but I know a guy.”

Of course. Guys like him always knew guys. “Thanks, I’ll keep it in mind.”

The screen door banged against the wall. Belinda burst through it as Jeff moved down the stairs to the path. She nodded curtly as she strode onto the porch rolling her suitcase after her. The large black designer duffle bag bounced drunkenly down the steps, clattering all the way. Jeff leapt off the path and let her speed past him.

Sally dropped her bag by the porch railing and came over to Jac. She bent over and wrapped her arms around Jac’s shoulders in an awkward bear-hug. The woman’s bony shoulder dug into Jac’s windpipe when Sally tightened her grip. Jac wheezed in a breath when Sally finally released her.

“It was so great meeting you. You are a true team player, even covered with paint.” Sally cast a gimlet eye toward her traveling companion, who cursed loudly as she struggled to load her bag into the trunk of the black Mercedes. Sally hitched her laptop bag higher on her shoulder, her knuckles white around the strap. “I think I’d have enjoyed this more if you’d been my partner after Luke left. I’m going to have to pretend to work the whole flight home to New York.”

Not knowing what kind of response was required, Jac settled for saying, “Travel safely.”

Steve walked out the door and saluted them with two fingers. He stopped by Sally’s luggage and shifted his own suitcase to his left hand. “You want me to carry your bag, Sally?”

“Sure, thanks.” A broad grin illuminated Sally’s face as Steve bent and grasped the red handles of the bag.

As the noise of the departing cars faded, the rustle of the leaves in the vineyard took over, leaving Jac with a sense of peace and contentment she’d only ever found in a rural setting.

Excitement for the next chapter of her life flared lightning bright and irresistible.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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“I’m telling you, Bella, if I don’t get this thing with the county assessor worked out, I won’t have a farm.” Jac hated the whiny taint in her voice, it frustrated her almost as much as the debt. She’d called her friend for moral support before she had to report to Jules’ cottage for painting detail.

After the initial shock of the amount of money Jac needed to come up with, Bella tossed suggestions out, rapid-fire style. “Can you get an investor? Someone who will front the money in exchange for your expertise? Or how about a small business loan? Maybe the university in Eugene has some kind of start-up incubator program with grants.”

“All great suggestions, Bella. Even a few I hadn’t thought of myself.” Jac huffed out a discouraged breath. “Without experience and knowledge of growing herbs, it’s doubtful any backer would consider my operation as a solid investment. No one in their right mind would find my skill level adequate.”

“You can’t give up. Now that you’ve decided to ditch Ted’s company, you can’t go back there.”

Jac gazed out the window in her room, the pretty scenery merely a blur. “This is just a setback, Bel. It isn’t the end of my dream. I have some money saved. At the very least, with whatever Rowena can kick in, and maybe a loan from Dad, I can raise half the funds. If I don’t sell the condo, I can take a second mortgage on it for the balance.”

Unfortunately, paying the debt out of funds she’d earmarked for start-up expenses meant she’d probably have to

work for MedServices, with Deidre as her boss for at least another year. She shuddered at the thought, turning from the window.

“I freaking hate this!” Bella exploded. “I wish I had an extra fifty grand laying around. You know it would be yours.”

Jac imagined the belligerent glower on her friend’s face. A warm glow of affection suffused her. “And I love you for that, Bella. But the only way you’d be allowed to help is with redecorating the farmhouse once I move in.” Bella had exquisite taste and had helped Jac decorate her condo when she’d first bought it.

“Paint, carpentry, moving furniture. Whatever you need, Jackay!”

Her friend’s use of the pet name she’d dubbed her with made Jac’s smile even bigger. “Yeah, well, Belleesima, speaking of painting, I’m supposed to help Jules paint this afternoon, so I’d better get going. I can’t wait to introduce you two. I know you’ll hit it off. Maybe you and I will come back here in the spring for a girls’ weekend.”

After disconnecting their chat with assurances she’d call if plans with Luke fell through tomorrow, Jac changed into jeans and a sweatshirt, wiggling her toes into a pair of flip-flops until they fit comfortably. Light-hearted for the first time since she received Ro’s email, she made her way to Jules’ charming little cottage.

After the second hour of rolling paint onto the stucco wall in Jules’ living room, Jac’s arm and shoulders ached. The cottage was small, with two bedrooms off an open-concept main area. There were clear sight lines from the kitchen and dining room into the cozy living room. At the moment, all the furniture had been pushed to the center of the room and covered in clear plastic drop-cloths. From the sound dock on the kitchen counter, Mumford and Sons encouraged them with lyrics about a little lion man.

Jules had picked a rich cinnamon color for one wall. Too bad the paint wasn’t going on smoothly.



Jac set her roller in the drip pan. After arching her back, she rolled her shoulders to ease some of the strain building at the base of her neck.

Next to her, Jules tilted her head and worked her jaw back and forth. “Man, I’m stiff.” She eyed the wall. “Don’t know what I was thinking to choose this dark of a color. Must have been out of my mind.” She laid her brush across the top of the paint can.

“It’s a lovely color. Priming the walls first would have helped. Especially since it’s so vibrant. Every little imperfection will show.” Jac stepped back and scanned their work. It was streaked, but not horribly. “Um, we’re going to need another coat.”

Jules jammed paint-splattered hands on her hips. “I think we need an ice cream break now.”

Wiping her fingers on a damp rag, Jac nodded vigorously. “I’m game.”

Jules swept into the kitchen, and after scrubbing off most of the traces of reddish-brown paint, she pulled two colorful bowls from the glass-fronted cabinets over the quartz counters. Jac washed her hands in the black, farmhouse sink. A cool breeze bathed her back when Jules retrieved the tub of ice cream from the stainless-steel freezer compartment.

Jac’s mouth watered as Jules scooped generous portions of frozen vanilla riddled with ribbons of chocolate and caramel and chunks of peanut butter and dark chocolate.

Jules added a spoon to one bowl and pushed it across the counter. “So, you want to tell me what’s going on? You barely said five sentences in the past two hours. If I knew you better, I’d say you were brooding.”

“Hmm.” Jac let a spoonful of the delicious treat melt on her tongue before answering. “Brooding is pretty close to right.”

“Is it Luke?” Jules mashed her spoon into her bowl and stirred. “Sorry, I don’t mean to pry, but you guys seem, I don’t know, kind of close.”

“Not Luke. We’re fine. I’m seeing him tomorrow night, back in Medford.”

“Oh, good. You’re perfect for each other.”

Jac laughed. “Matchmaker and team builder? Pretty impressive résumé.”

“It doesn’t take a matchmaker to realize Luke’s over the moon for you. I saw the way he couldn’t take his eyes off you at dinner the other night.” Jules licked caramel off the back of her spoon. “Like you were a delicacy he wanted to sample.”

He had done some licking before the dinner Jules was talking about. Heat climbed Jac’s cheeks. “Um, making me a bit uncomfortable here. I think I’d rather talk about finance or politics than whether Luke Rossi wants to lick me.”

“Okay, but I bet he can do great things with his tongue.” Even white teeth peeked out of Jules’ wide, teasing grin. The grin faded to a more serious look. She lowered her brow. “If you aren’t going to talk about Luscious Luke, tell me what’s bugging you.”

Surprised laughter ripped from Jac’s mouth. “Oh, my God. My friend Bella calls him Luscious Luke. Apparently, all the ladies at hospital call him that.”

“Aw, dang. No points for originality.” Jules smiled as she vigorously swirled her spoon in the bowl, turning her ice cream into frosty soup. “For real, though, what’s got your panties in a twist?”

“I spoke to my cousin yesterday. She’s living at the farm, pretty much rent-free. All she had to do was pay the taxman. Seems she forgot. For three years.”

Jules’ spoon clinked against the ceramic bowl. “What the hell? How do you forget for three years? I can’t believe someone didn’t call her on it before. Like maybe someone with the county. Don’t they send bills or something? My county does.”

Jac tried to downplay her cousin’s stupidity. “Apparently, she’s ignored the reminders. So now, with the original bill and

late fees and penalties, I have to come up with fifty grand soon, or the property will be sold at auction.”

“Oh, no!” Jules resumed stirring the contents of her bowl. “How horrible. How long do you have? What are you going to do?”

Crossing her legs under the counter, Jac squirmed on the stool and shrugged. “Ask my parents to lend me some money. Apply to the Small Business Administration for a loan. Sell my condo in Medford. Great options, if I can work it all out. Still, they’ll barely cause a ripple in this particular sea of debt.” Her dream of running the farm grew dimmer as she rattled off her options.

She carefully set her spoon into the bowl, the chocolate and peanut butter ribbons of her dessert suddenly turning to cold defeat in her mouth. “I could try to find a partner, or get contracts with some spice company who will agree to advance me the funds in exchange for the crops I grow. But I doubt any corporation would be willing take a chance on a newbie operation. I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

Jules patted the back of Jac’s hand. Then she reached into a drawer and retrieved a wine opener. Scooting over to the wine chiller by the sink, she dug through the bottles resting there, finally pulling out a dark green bottle.

She held it aloft. “One of our best whites. Unoaked chardonnay. You can do the honors.” She set the bottle and opener down in front of Jac with a *thunk*. From one of the glass-fronted cabinets, she pulled out two supersized wine glasses. “We’re knocking off for the day. I know it’s only three, but if ever there was a time for wine, now would be it.”

“What about cleaning up?” Jac gestured to the mess in the living room. “We should take care of that first.”

“Do you ever get sick of being the responsible one?” Jules tone was filled with fun. Rooting under the sink, she snagged a roll of black plastic trash bags. “A little trick I learned from the painter who redid the dining room at the big house. Go ahead, pour the wine. I’ll take care of putting this other shit away.”

She pulled two bags off the roll and snapped one open, tucking the other under her arm as she strode to where they'd left the paint trays. Jac poured a good measure of wine into the goblets Jules had furnished, while her new friend maneuvered the still loaded tray inside the trash bag. After squeezing out extra air, she efficiently knotted the bag closed.

Jac took her first sip of the superior wine, watching as Jules slipped the other tray, complete with the roller, into another bag.

Jules upended the contents of another small plastic bag. Brushes, stirrers, a pack of sandpaper, and an extra roll of clear plastic drop cloths scattered over the floor at her feet. She collected the brush she'd been using and wrapped it tightly in a Home Depot bag.

Parcel and covered paint trays stacked neatly, she tapped the lid back on the opened paint can, righted herself, and dusted her hands together. "Done. Easy, easy clean up."

"I've never seen it done that way before," Jac marveled. "But I'll remember the Jules method next time I have something to paint. With any luck, it will be the kitchen in the farmhouse. It was covered with dingy, dirty yellow paper last time I was there."

Jules joined her at the counter. She picked up the second goblet and saluted before taking a large gulp. "If you're really nice, maybe I'll come for a weekend and help you. It's only fair, right?"

"You're on." Jac knew the grin on her face was dopey. She couldn't help it. It would be good to have Jules on her team again. Jac rinsed the ice cream bowls then laid them in the dish drainer.

Bottle in one hand, her wine stem in the other, Jules jerked her head toward the door. "Come on. Let's go sit on the porch at the big house and savor this delicious vintage. Right now is the best time to relax there. The light is just perfect in early fall."

"You don't have to ask twice."

Jac followed Jules to the golf cart they'd left parked in front of the cottage.

Marcus came out to the porch as they walked up the crushed shell path to the house, laughing like drunken schoolgirls. "Weren't you ladies supposed to be painting?"

Jules threaded her arm through Jac's as they climbed the steps. "Painting is for people who don't have wine to drink."

When Marcus smiled, his face crinkled like ripped open wrapping paper. He looked pointedly at the high-tech black watch on his left wrist. "Isn't it a little early in the day for what appears is going to be copious amounts of wine swilling?"

They hit the top step and Jules stretched up to pat the man's cheek. "Marcus, Marcus, Marcus. Don't be a buzzkill. This is still our first glass. We've only just begun."

He lifted one brow and tipped his head, the gesture silently screaming *oh, really*.

Jules' lighthearted laughter echoed off the bead-board ceiling of the porch. Jac set her mostly-full glass and her cell phone on a table nestled between two cushioned Adirondack chairs. Perched on the porch railing, she watched Jules, so warm and easygoing, interact with her assistant manager. Hell, she'd even treated Belinda with cool dignity and professionalism. Jac had battled the constant urge to salute the lawyer with her middle finger.

A text alert sounded on Jac's phone, the crystal tone pinging prettily. Pushing from the railing, she dropped onto one of the chairs to consult the display, uttering a silent prayer it would be Luke.

Ah, prayers were answered occasionally. She dragged her finger across the screen and accessed the message.

*Do you need a hired hand on the farm? Boss being a douche and nurses' rep isn't buying it. Quiet life in country looks very attractive right now. Especially if you're there.*

A part of Jac was sorry that Luke wasn't having a good day. But the section ruled by her heart and the hidden place

between her legs throbbed at the idea of a rural lifestyle with Luke. Plus, having him in Eugene would solve the problems associated with a long-distance relationship, including a chance to stray.

She smiled as she replied. *Always room for someone with mad Excel spreadsheet skills.* And his mad skills in bed didn't hurt either.

She sent another text to Luke. *Negotiations not going well?*

While Jac waited for a reply, Jules grasped Marcus' arm and dragged the beefy man to the other side of the porch. He bent to hear as she whispered fiercely into his ear.

A wren in a nearby tree trilled its sweet song. Jac sipped her wine, her glass gleaming as it caught the mid-afternoon sun. She leaned against the back cushion of the comfortable chair and closed her eyes.

As she let her mind drift back to their conversation ... their adventure in phone sex this morning ... heat bloomed over her skin from chest to hairline. Imagining his hands on her body was good, but not nearly as good as the real thing. Her breasts tingled with the memory of his hands and lips on them. She covered her eyes with her free hand and breathed slowly, deeply ... pretending that each time her chest rose, his hand cupped the soft flesh there. Thank heavens for her excellent imagination.

Her phone chirped, pulling her back to the present. *Nope. Done for the day. Heading to the med floor to help. Back to the table @ 9 tomorrow. Wish me luck.*

She typed in a reply.

*Good luck. Love you.*

Her finger poised over the 'send' button, she hesitated. *Love you?* It had felt completely natural as she'd typed it. But the words hit her in the diaphragm, shortening her breath as she'd scanned for typos before sending. How had she meant the phrase? The way she'd sign off on a text to Bella? Hadn't she just told her friend she loved her on the phone? It would be easy enough to say it to Jules, like she'd talk to a good

girlfriend. If she said it to Luke, was there deeper meaning in those two little words?

She'd only known him for a short time. She couldn't count the five minutes at the bar where she'd originally met him. Had she already lost her heart to him? With such uncertainty in her future, she wasn't sure she could follow through on the relationship. It wouldn't be fair to either of them. He'd just started his job at the medical center. She was ending her employment to go in search of something that made her happy. Happier than her current job situation.

What if staying in the same town at the same dead-end job—there, she'd finally admitted it—with Luke made her just as happy as the idea of living on the farm? Was it possible?

The spring on the screen door twanged as Jules and Marcus disappeared into the house, the sound reminding her of summers on Gramps' farm, and of opportunity.

Jac's impending move to Eugene felt right, set within the month, if she could get the stupid tax bill paid. On one hand the dilemma of where she'd find the cash seemed dire. It was a hell of a lot of money. On the other hand, the months it would take to scrape the funds together could extend her life in Medford with Luke. With enough time, maybe those words, *love you*, could come to be true in their meaning.

With a sigh, she backspaced over the last seven letters. Replaced them with *looking forward to seeing you tomorrow night. Doesn't matter what time. I'll be home*. She chewed on her bottom lip as she pressed 'send.' Maybe, at some point in the future, she'd be more comfortable with her original response.

She stared at the small display, but no reply came. Noting the time, Jac opted to believe he'd already pocketed his phone and headed to the nurses' station to report for bedpan duty.

Cool breeze kissing her skin, she sat on the porch, sipping her wine, musing about her future, and waiting for Jules to return. The narrow leaves in the olive tree to the left of the path rustled soothing, natural music, competing with the birdsong emanating from the branches. The peace of the

moment called to something deep inside her, taunting and tempting with a promise of a great future.

Hopefully, one where she and Luke worked out.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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The screen door banged against the wall, startling Jac from her reverie. Wine glass in hand, Jules dropped onto the chair nearest the table. She set down a spice grinder and sank back against the cushions. A glow lit her vivacious blue eyes, the breeze gently stirring wisps of her hair around her face. Jules' grin widened as she stared at Jac. She nodded once, surveying the vineyard.

Curiosity got the better of Jac. "What?"

Jules stared out over her property. "I didn't know anything about winemaking. I'm the proud owner of a Communications degree from the University of Northern California in Santa Rosa. This area called to something inside me. When it was time to move back to L.A., I couldn't do it." She scanned the hills on display before them and released a contented sigh. "I took a job with a small local produce co-op which enabled me to stay here. This property came on the market and I borrowed money. I bought a vineyard."

When she fell silent, Jac prompted her. "Nice story. And you're telling me ... why?"

"I'm getting to it." Jules dragged her eyes from the scenery and focused on Jac. Before she spoke, she took a deep sip from her glass. "God, I love this wine."

Jac lifted her glass in salute. She took a sip, but remained silent, content to wait for Jules to continue her story.

"I received a lot of help and guidance from other vineyard owners in the area. The first year I didn't do anything but

study and learn and pick people's brains. It's a tightly knit community and I couldn't get over how generous the other owners were with their time and assistance." Jules tucked one foot under her thigh and wiggled around in her chair to face Jac. "I also wrote a couple of business plans. One was for this team building camp. Launched this venture the second year. I'm pleased to say it's a raging success. People come from all over the country to attend."

"Well, I came from Oregon." Jac grinned. "And I'm glad I did."

"Me too." Jules shook her head, as if clearing away any gooey emotion. She scratched a finger on the arm of her chair. "I promised myself I'd repay the favors I'd received to get my business off the ground. The second plan I wrote was for a charitable foundation aimed at other small businesses requiring the same kind of help I'd gotten."

Not completely sure of where Jules was heading, Jac tilted her head quizzically. "I don't understand. Don't you have to have a lot of money to open what essentially amounts to a venture capital firm?"

"I had a trust fund from some, er, investments made on my behalf when I was younger. My folks are successful and shared the wealth with their only daughter." A shadow flitted over Jules' face but was gone in the blink of an eye. "That's not important. It's what I chose to do with the money once I turned twenty-five that's important. I started investing in start-up companies in the area. Kept it low key, more word of mouth. Most people don't know about this part of my corporation, which is the way I want it."

"Jules, really, it's great that you are able to do this for businesses here. But where are you going with this story?"

Jules pulled a folded slip of paper from her back pocket. She toyed with the edges before pinning Jac with an earnest look. "I want to invest in your spice farm."

Jac dropped her gaze to the scrap of paper as Jules unfolded it. Her eyes shot back to Jules' face. "What? Why—"

“Because I can. Your ideas for the farm work perfectly into the plans of another of my investments. A lovely woman who runs a small Italian deli in Santa Rosa is branching out to retail spices.” She gestured to the spice grinder she’d placed on the table between them. “She’s looking for new sources of product, and she’d prefer to work with a small business that incorporates sustainable farming practices. Marcus and I have helped her establish a great distribution network in Southern California, and demand is high. Only going to go higher based on her projections. But she can’t get there without businesses like yours. And your crops won’t be available if you don’t pay off the tax bill.”

“Hang on ... You want to give me money to pay the taxes so I can become a supplier for your other investment?”

“No. I’m not giving you anything. I’m investing in what I can tell will be a sure bet. Gourmet spices are kind of the rage now. Have you ever wandered through the herb and spice section of an upscale grocery store? People are eating them up. Your venture is destined to succeed.” Jules folded her hand in her lap. “Especially if the connection between you and Sophia takes. You have a built-in customer, she has a ready supplier, and I have the satisfaction of knowing I’ve helped two people realize their dreams.”

Hope for her future rose. Jac squashed it. “Jules, I can’t ask you for fifty grand.”

“First, you didn’t ask, I offered. It’s good business. If it helps, you can consider it an investment from which I hope to earn some interest. And second, it isn’t fifty grand.” She glanced at the check, a satisfied smile on her face. She flipped the paper in her fingers, offering it to Jac.

The check had a fifty on it, but a two preceded it.

Moisture collected in the corners of her eyes. Jac blinked hard. “Jules, this is far more than the amount I need for the taxes.”

“The funds aren’t necessarily earmarked for taxes. If you choose to pay that bill with this, it’s up to you. I still think your cousin should pony up at least the amount of the tax

itself, if not extra for the penalties and fees. However, her obligation is a family matter. Your call. My investment will give you a cushion, so if you don't sell your condo right away, you'll still be all right."

Jac swallowed the lump in her throat. "I don't deserve this."

The snort ripping from Jules' mouth caused her to press a hand against her lips, her eyes wide. "Bullshit. In just three days, I've already seen a stronger work ethic and drive to succeed than most people display in three months. You earned that money. I have a standard contract I'll require you to sign. I only ask for a half percent of any profits, which I'm sure you realize in agriculture won't amount to much."

She nodded toward the check in Jac's hand. "And the term of the contract is only eighteen months. After that, you can renew for another infusion of cash to expand if you want. If not, we both walk away from the deal with whatever we've earned on it." Jules lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "I have to say, I hope you'll renew. But even if you don't, I think we'll continue to be friends."

Admiration and affection for the woman flooded Jac with a warm, happy burst of light. "I can't believe how generous you are. Oh, my God. I wish I'd met you when we were younger. I want to be you when I grow up."

The corners of Jules' eyes creased as laughter trilled from her. "Maybe the 'me' I am now. You would have run screaming away from me as a teen. It wasn't pretty."

"Oh, fiddle. Everyone was cringe-worthy as teens. Your parents must be so proud of the successful woman you've become."

Jules made a non-committal sound at the back of her throat.

*Dammit, I said the wrong thing.*

Another dark shadow flickered in Jules' eyes before she dropped her gaze. She grabbed the wine bottle setting by her

feet and added more to both their glasses. Clearly, Jac had steered them into murky waters with her comment.

Before she could say anything even remotely apologetic, Jules straightened her shoulders, as if shaking off any bad thoughts.

She lifted her wine stem to clink against the goblet in Jac's hand. The setting sun sparkled on the rim of both glasses. "Here's to a great partnership. Cheers."

"Cheers." Jac took a sip, relishing the buttery taste of the wine. "To our success."

The screen door creaked again as Marcus stepped out of the house. "You about ready? We're due in town in thirty minutes."

Jules drained the last of her glass, unfolded her long body from the chair, and offered Jac a hand. "Come on. Marcus is going to drive us into Santa Rosa. We're eating with Sophia at her deli. I'm eager to introduce you to her. Marcus will be joining us for dinner. I hope that's okay. He's a silent partner in the deli and agrees this is a great opportunity for everyone."

Jac took Jules' hand and let the woman pull her to her feet. She liked the idea of Marcus being another partner. Glancing down at her jeans and sweatshirt, she asked, "Do I need to change?"

"Nope. We're fine just as we are, paint splatters and all. We'll leave in five minutes."

Jules wrapped her arms around Jac's shoulders in a spontaneous gesture. The display of friendship touched Jac's heart. She returned the hug, patting Jules' back.

As soon as Jules released her, Marcus stepped forward. "My turn." Sliding his large arms around her, he squeezed gingerly. "It's going to be awesome being in a partnership with you. I hope this means we'll get to see more of you."

Jac stepped out of his arms and tapped his broad shoulder with her fist. "Just let me know when it's safe to go another round with a paint brush in the cask room. I'll be there."

“Go on, girl. You made a mess in there last time. No way will I let you anywhere near those casks again. Had to deal with—what’d you call him, FIG?—in the aftermath.” Laughter rumbling, Marcus gave a mock shudder. “But any time you want to come back and teach the teams how to make fine art with corks, you stop on by. I know we can use your skills. Plus, any artwork you create will automatically go on display at the gallery in town.”

Jules piped up, “It’s one of our investments as well. The first one, actually. Now Denise is the toast of the northern California art scene. Ah, the sweet smell of success. Marcus, I think in the future, success is going to be scented with basil and rosemary.”

“And don’t forget, thyme and parsley,” Jac quipped as she followed Jules through the screen door. “Got to say, I feel a song coming on.”

Marcus started humming ‘Scarborough Fair.’

Jac’s future, slightly dim and tarnished only an hour ago, was suddenly shiny and bright again.

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The rolling chair scooted a bit and groaned as Luke threw himself into it. After eight hours at the negotiating table and another eight on the medical floor, Luke’s moan overrode the sound the chair emitted. His legs ached from walking up and down the ward during the night, assisting the pared-down staff of nurses and the few aides who crossed the imaginary picket line created by the nurses’ sick-out.

Maybe, if Brian helped on the floor, the jerk would be more sympathetic to the nursing staff’s demands. As it was, they were headed in the wrong direction. Brian had reintroduced a previously negotiated demand as a bargaining tool in the last session. Instead of settling this thing, he’d dug the hole deeper.

A pit Luke couldn’t fathom finding his way out of. He slumped over the counter-height desk and pulled a keyboard

toward him to enter the last thing he'd done for a patient. His eyes were so bleary from sixteen plus hours in the fluorescent lighting of the hospital, it took him a second to focus on the right computer screen. A couple of keystrokes and one huge yawn later, he navigated his way into the patient record and added the note.

Footsteps, accompanied by the whine of rubber wheels, squeaked on the highly polished linoleum floor. Luke craned his neck over the desk to see a new patient arriving from the emergency room. Bella Robins was at the head of the gurney, guiding it toward him.

Luke's back twinged as he shoved out of his chair. "Hey, Bella. They recruited you to help too?"

Her smile was grim. "We were told it was all management hands on deck until the sick-out is settled. Didn't realize until they pointed at me that I was considered management." She flicked her gaze over him. "Whoa! You're still in the same clothes I saw you in this morning. Have you been home yet?"

"Nope." Luke unhooked the patient's chart from the holder at the foot of the transport bed. He scanned the moaning man's name and compared it to the record in the computer. "He's in four-three-oh-five. I'll help you move him down. What about you? Get any rest yet today?"

"I had a couple hours off at the end of my regular shift. I signed up for eleven to seven since I can sleep late tomorrow. Can you hurry up and fix this?" Bella dug in her feet and grunted as she pushed the gurney forward.

Luke grabbed the side rail to help, jostling the patient. The man groaned again and Bella expertly stuck a basin under his chin and gently maneuvered his head to the side. All without breaking their forward momentum.

With his stomach rolling queasily, Luke focused his attention on the last door on the left side of the hallway. If he could guide the cart without seeing the man spewing the contents of his stomach, he'd be okay. "I'm doing the best I can. For what it's worth, I'm on the nurses' side." He wanted to explain to Bella he had a way to settle the dispute in the

next ten minutes, if only Brian would listen to reason. But he didn't want to be disloyal or act sketchy.

"Bet you're wishing you'd stayed in Florida." Bella's tennis shoes screeched as she tried to slow the bed so they could navigate the over-wide door to the patient room. Why hadn't he thought to bring tennis shoes to change into? His feet might not ache so much.

"I like it here. I think the opportunity is good, but it does rain a lot." Luke opted to omit his career with St. Simeon's could be numbered in months, or weeks. "Hey, about your friend, Jacqui. We were teammates at the camp."

Bella tossed him an assessing glance. "Yeah, she told me. Right before she canceled our dinner plans for tomorrow night. So, you guys have a date?"

He should feel bad that Jac had cancelled an evening with her friend for his sake. He didn't. His heart accelerated at the knowledge he'd be with Jac in eighteen hours, if everything went well at the bargaining table. Luke pulled the foot of the bed through the door and wheeled it around to slide into place against the wall. "We do. Wish I'd gotten to know her better when we first met. I like her. She's great."

"She is. But she's going through some shit with her cousin right now. I don't know where Jac's going to get the funds to pay off the farm's tax bill with the county."

Luke's shoulder wrenched as his feet stopped but the bed didn't. "What are you talking about?"

"Her cousin, Rowena, neglected to pay the taxes on the farm. Didn't Jac tell you?"

Luke clenched his jaw until the muscle popped. Why hadn't Jac told him? Granted, they barely knew each other. Well, other than a really glorious couple of exchanges of bodily fluids. Since he'd left Team Vino, he'd only whined about the contract talks, bitching about how much he missed her. Maybe that was why. Jac didn't want to bother him with it. Or maybe she didn't feel inclined to share private



information with a guy she was just fucking until it was time to move away. The idea soured his gut. “No, she didn’t.”

Bella glanced at him, eyebrows raised at his sharp tone. “I know she really likes you, but this is money we’re talking about. Plus, the contract negotiations have kept you a little busy.”

“Not too busy to help if she needs it. I’d give her the money. She should know that.”

“Really? You’ve got fifty thousand dollars just taking up space in your bank account?”

“Fifty grand? How big is this farm?” Jac had led him to believe it was fairly small.

“Scatterbrained Rowena didn’t pay the bill for three years. Even though the taxes aren’t high, the fees and penalties have really added up.” Bella twitched the scratchy sheet and pale green blanket higher on the bedridden man’s chest.

Luke battled the urge to race from the room, grab his phone, and call her. “Oh, hell, she must be devastated.”

“Jac wouldn’t take your money anyway, even if you did just happen to have a chunk of spare cash lying around. She’s fiercely independent and wants to do this her way. She’ll work it out. She’s smart and methodical. Once she sinks her teeth into the farm life, she’ll succeed. She isn’t really good at failing.”

“Just one more reason to love her,” Luke said as he escorted Bella from the room.

Then he slapped a palm against the doorjamb, screeching to a halt.

Bella turned, a curious smile lurking on her lips. “Love her?”

Wonder replaced every other emotion weaving around his chest. “I ... yeah. I think I mean it the way you took it.”

He loved her. Her gorgeous body, her spirit, but most importantly he loved her brilliant, sexy mind. The confidence she displayed never seemed to end. The quiet manner she’d

used to soothe him when he'd whined about his boss, the labor dispute, and the shitty hours he'd had to work. This morning, Jac had taken it all in, put a positive spin on it, and then rocked his world with her playful, adventurous spirit.

Bella gave him a knowing look and tapped her fist to his bicep. "I'll never tell her you told me first. Best thing I ever did was introducing you two at happy hour. Took you guys long enough to discover it. For the record, I think it's freaking awesome that you two found each other. With any luck, you'll continue building a team for the next fifty years."

Fifty years of Jac? Hell yeah, he'd take that. Suddenly, the fatigue of double and even triple shifts at the medical center disappeared in a blaze of brightness. His step lightened as he walked with Bella down the hall.

A glance at the clock over the nurses' desk told him he only had twelve hours to wait until Jac returned to Medford. If he managed to stifle Brian's contentious attitude toward the nursing staff's demands, it would be only another six after that before he could race to her condo, hold her in his arms, and kiss the ever-loving daylights out of her.

The agonizing wait would be worth it. Especially if Jac returned his feelings.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Saturday dawned cool and cloudy in northern California, perfect jeans and sweatshirt weather. During a leisurely breakfast with Jules and Marcus in the kitchen at the big house, Jules presented Jac with a standardized contract. The straightforward document definitely favored Jac.

“Jules, eighteen months isn’t long enough to come anywhere near to repaying the investment,” Jac pointed out over coffee. “I won’t even plant a new crop for six months.”

Jules insisted she considered it fair. “Actually, I’ve found it more than sufficient. Most of the businesses I’ve invested in hit their stride within a year. I think the owners work harder to repay my investment because they appreciate my trust.”

“But have you ever funded an agricultural operation? The variables are uncertain at best. I can’t control weather and pestilence.”

“Well, no. But I do own a farm of my own.” Jules swept her hand toward the view of the vineyard from the kitchen windows. “I’m not worried. I think you’ll do great. Did you already schedule an appointment with the county Ag extension service?”

She’d made the call this morning, figuring the man would be at his desk and accessible to farmers who dropped by on a weekend. “I’m driving up next Friday to sit down with the farm specialist. He remembered my granddad. He seemed very encouraging when I explained why I wanted to speak to him.”

Jac patted the front pocket of her jeans, where Jules' check resided. "I'm also going to run a payment to the Assessor's office. Getting the bill paid is the first priority."

The grin on Marcus' face was blinding. "You've certainly got all your ducks lined up. But just remember, should you change your mind, or not be able to get the farm off the ground, there was an escape clause in the contract."

Jac had noted that item. It allowed an additional eighteen months to repay the investment with a minuscule one percent interest fee in the event things went south. "I'm not going to change my mind, but that clause is a very comfortable safety net."

Marcus rapped his knuckles on the table. "Are your bags packed? I'll bring them down and stow them in your trunk."

"Everything is good to go. Thanks," Jac said as she handed him the key to her room. She could get used to this type of service.

Marcus stood, pocketed the key, and drained the last dregs of his coffee. He carried his empty plate to the big farmhouse sink and waved as he left the room.

Jules picked up her copy of the signed contract, lounging against the slats of her ladder-back chair. "Lots of changes going on for you."

Jac sipped her lukewarm brew and simply nodded. "All good ones."

"Especially Luke. Did you talk to him yet about the situation with the farm? About our deal? I mean, not that you have to. You're not exactly dating yet, or anything."

"I know, but I feel I've known him forever. And will know him forever." Jac marveled at the truth underlying her words. He was exciting, intriguing, sexy as all get out, and comfortable. "I texted him good night after we got back from Sophia's deli, but I didn't hear back from him. I'm sure he was busy working. My friend, Bella, told me everyone in an administrative position at the medical center was asked to

pitch in to make sure patient care didn't suffer during the dispute.”

“Wait, after they work a full day at their regular job, they take an extra shift to help out in some other area?”

“Yep. It's good because they do get strike pay. It's bad because they have to work some really long days. Poor Luke probably hasn't seen the inside of his place other than to nap and shower.” Except there'd been time for some really great phone sex yesterday morning. The memory sent a steamy rush of desire to her center. Jac's cheeks heated and she hid behind her cup as she gulped the hazelnut coffee. Only sheer discipline kept her from squirming in her chair.

Eagerness to see Luke roared to life in the deepest recesses of her heart. To kiss him. To lay with him and let him love her. To love him back. She wanted to hold him close while she faced this new challenge. Despite the fact that he'd be several hours away, she hoped they could work out some sort of schedule so they could continue to be with each other. *Please don't let me be kidding myself.*

The sound of Marcus banging down the steps with her luggage pulled Jac from daydreaming of the future. After taking her dishes and flatware to the counter, she traded a warm hug with Jules, promising to text once she arrived back home. This woman and Marcus had handed her a way to the future. She owed them so much. Tears of gratitude misted her vision. She blinked the moisture away.

Before she climbed into her car, Marcus wrapped his arms around her again, patting her on the back. “Gonna be great being your partner.” His smooth bass voice came out as comforting and cozy as a warm blanket on a cold night.

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Six hours later Jac cruised into her parking space at MedServices. On the flight home, she'd decided to stop by her office first and begin the process of clearing out her desk. Just the personal things she'd brought in over the three years to

make her cubicle more comfortable. The blanket she used almost daily because most of the staff had voted to keep the thermostat set in the freezer section zone. The pretty Tiffany-style lamp she'd bought to combat the glaring fluorescent lights overhead. The African violet she'd faithfully watered for a year hoping it would bloom again. A change of scenery might be just the thing to trigger new growth. *Just like me.*

As she shifted into 'park,' she noticed three other vehicles in the lot. Valerie's Corolla and Allergy Allen's Camaro were in their usual spots. A shiny new, black Lexus sat in the slot Deidre normally parked in. Lips pursed and eyes squinting in the sun, Jac pondered the new vehicle. Deidre hadn't wasted any time spending her raise. The raise Jac should have collected.

Debating whether she should go in or not, she lifted her gaze to the second row of windows. Framed in one of the windows, Deidre stared straight at Jac's car, arms crossed, an unreadable expression on her face.

Jac huffed a resigned sigh. Too late to back out of the space and blow out of this parking lot like a leaf on an autumn breeze. No hope for a hasty retreat since Deidre had seen her. Twisting the strap of her purse around one hand, she jerked on the door handle. Cool, humid air slapped her in the face as she made her way from the car to the five-story office building.

Inside, the air was still cool, but devoid of the damp that characterized September days in southern Oregon. She took the stairwell, refusing the elevator for just one floor. Even so, the small, dimly lit space creeped her out, especially when the building was mostly deserted. She wouldn't miss this when she was gone. The staircase at the farmhouse might be similarly narrow, but an oversized stained-glass window about halfway up brightened it.

Taking the steps two at a time, she made it to the top in short order. The panic bar on the door banged as she pushed it open.

She wasn't going to miss this long hallway with its industrial grade carpeting either. The soles of her shoes

scraped along the ultra-low, tightly woven pile, each step snagging on the nasty stuff. The pale green color reminded Jac of pond scum. Was it stimulus awareness; now she knew she'd be leaving, so everything about the office annoyed her?

After letting herself into the MedServices suite with her key, she headed to the corner where she worked. Jac strode past Deidre's new office door on her way to her cubicle. It was closed. With any luck Deidre would remain sealed off from the rest of them. Probably relishing her new ability to play *Candy Crush* or *Trivia Crack* without risk of discovery or interruption.

Jac rounded the corner to the cube farm she'd called home for the past three years, stopping at Valerie's desk. "Hey, why are you guys here?"

"Slaves to duty? Bat-shit crazy? Lonely spinsters? Well, me at least." Val leaned away from her computer monitors and stretched her legs under the desk. "Seriously, we're still recovering from the last billing cycle fiasco. Allen and I are on forced overtime to get it solved."

Over the top of the padded cube, Jac heard Allen clear his throat. *Not going to miss that either.*

She asked, "Couldn't say no, huh?"

"Not given the option," Val replied. "Why are you here?"

She couldn't tell Val she was planning to clear out her desk. Without having the opportunity to talk to Ted, Jac didn't feel right about telling anyone else about her decision. Yes, her loyalty was misplaced, but informing him first was the professional route. She rested her hand on the top of the open frame of the cubicle. "Just figured since I was out all week, I'd try to get my inbox to a more manageable level."

"Good luck," Allen quipped from his spot on the other side of Val's cubicle. He cleared his throat again and continued, "Dingbat Deidre forwarded most of her emails to you to handle."

"No surprise there," she mumbled.

Val snorted but continued in a subdued voice. “We all feel your pain. With Deidre in charge, the rats will be leaving the sinking ship. Poor Ted doesn’t have a clue.” She brightened, her smug look a mix of delight and devious. “Hey, there’s coffee. And I brought Amaretto creamer in. Not the real stuff, but we can pretend. Help yourself.”

Jac moved down the row of cubes to her own, larger than Val’s and Allen’s because her space housed several cumbersome file and storage cabinets. The space was still miniscule by comparison to, say, the great outdoors that would be her workspace in the future.

One corner of her mouth lifted as she dropped her purse under the desk. Coffee cup in hand, she trooped past Deidre’s office to the kitchen.

Dirty dishes were piled in the sink and on the counters. Jac worked with a bunch of cleaning-schedule challenged people. This state of the kitchen explained why she always cleaned her cup and took it back to her desk at the end of each day. Always cleaned the coffee pot so it was ready each morning. Usually, the kitchen resembled a gross college boy’s apartment. It was one hundred times worse today because she’d been gone all week.

As she poured a cup, she glanced at the calendar taped over the machine. Deidre was on the schedule for the past week. No wonder the place looked like pigs had taken up residence.

She added a dollop of cream to her cup, wishing it were alcohol-laden Amaretto, not just the flavored not-quite-real cream. She carried the mug back to her desk, tiptoeing past Deidre’s office door which now stood open. The woman wasn’t in the room. Shit, her absence could only mean two things. Either she’d headed to the restroom or, more likely, she waited at Jac’s desk.

“A word, please.” Deidre’s sooty voice held an edge. Her tobacco stench breath was an assault to Jac’s nose as she re-entered her cube. “The bills you prepped came back all fucked up. You need to fix this.”



“Good afternoon to you, too.” Jac squeezed past the woman and claimed the black faux leather chair at the desk. She carefully set her mug on a coaster before saying, “Those bills were correct before I left, but do you remember the discussion about changing the date and the multiplier before you sent them out?”

“You never told me that.”

Allen cleared his throat and the keys on Val’s keyboard went silent. No damn privacy in this office.

“Deidre, we talked about this face-to-face before I left the office on Monday. I also printed the instructions for you. And for good measure, I emailed them to you as well.” She wasn’t going to mention copying Valerie on the email. She couldn’t bear the idea of Deidre throwing Val under the bus for something she’d neglected to do.

Deidre’s mouth opened and closed, resembling a baby searching for the elusive nipple. “I ... you ... I never got an email. I certainly don’t remember a conversation about it.”

*Dammit, I knew I should have read-receipted that message.* Perhaps if Deidre hadn’t been on a shoe shopping website while they were talking, she might remember the conversation. “Next time I’ll tape it to your computer screen.” Although Deidre would probably just rip it down and use it as scratch paper to scrawl confirmation numbers from her online purchases.

Besides, they wouldn’t have a new cycle ready to go in two weeks, all the notice Jac was prepared to give. Eagerness to launch her new career as an herb farmer in the country trumpeted in her brain. As Deidre flounced down the cubicle pathway, Jac scanned the fabric-covered walls of the place where she’d spent one-third of her life during the last three years.

What she saw, however, was the rolling hills she’d rambled around, following her grandpa as he went about his chores. She saw the dark paneled room in the farmhouse Gramps had used to do paperwork and keep track of crop rotations and delivery schedules.

Jac pushed the memories away as she waited for her computer to boot up, instead shifting her thoughts to Luke. Daydreams about the kind of memories they could make in the coming months invaded her imagination. Both on the farm, and in the farmhouse. She planned to claim the master bedroom as hers, with its king-sized bed. From that bed, they'd wake to the line of windows framing a view of rows upon rows of herbs, rolling away up the foothills of the Cascade Mountains.

And the best part would be the nights she'd get to snuggle next to Luke in the big four-poster bed. Being kissed awake by him in the morning might become her new favorite pastime.

Good heavens, she was getting ahead of herself. The computer flared to life, revealing a desktop picture of the mountains she'd just fantasized about. Would Luke want a place in her life once she moved? Or was she easily replaced? Combatting the doubt threatening to crash over her, she shut down the ramblings of her chaotic mind and focused on the work she needed to deal with.

And counted the hours until Luke knocked on her door later tonight.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Jac's frustration mounted until it sat on her shoulders, heavier than a two-ton gorilla. Her head ached as if said gorilla was using it as a bongo drum. Sitting at her desk, she chewed her bottom lip almost to the point it bled. Freaking Deidre stayed behind closed doors in her office until nearly four.

Valerie and Allen stayed, too. Jac's plan to drop by the office to start collecting her personal effects evolved into solving the issues caused by Ditzzy Deidre's negligence.

She finalized the modified billing just before Deidre exited her office, gave her overworked staff a cursory nod, and sashayed down the cubicle alleyway. Allen popped his head over the top of his cubicle, prairie dog style, watching the woman's retreat. Within minutes he strode to the window as if to confirm that her car was no longer in the parking lot. The absence of his annoying throat clearing indicated he'd snuck out without bothering with a goodbye.

*Seriously not going to miss that dude in the least.*

Valerie sat in Jac's cube to help her double check the accuracy of the billing. Right after they submitted the billing records for delivery, Valerie had hustled out of the building as well.

Finally, Jac had the privacy she'd wanted since she'd arrived in the office nearly three hours previously. She wandered to the storeroom and found a cardboard box large enough to load some of her personal effects. She hesitated to

take too much for fear it would be noticed and reported to Ted before she had the opportunity to speak to him.

Before she did inventory of what she could take without it being noticed, she checked his online calendar. A few keystrokes later, she added a meeting for first thing Monday morning. No sense holding off delivering her notice. She had a hefty check in her purse, a ready-made customer ... and some big-balled plans to be her own boss.

Carrying out the box, containing files and books she'd brought in over the years, was liberating. The grin on her face felt as big as a house as she stowed the box in the trunk of her car. Taking the scenic route home, she drove past St. Simeon's Medical Center.

Giddy excitement about seeing Luke almost made her detour to surprise him at work. Only his four o'clock text caused her to rethink the idea. *Contract still not finalized. Heading to the Surgical floor to help. Off at 11. At your house by 11:05?* As if he needed permission to come by.

She sent back a simple message. *I can't wait.*

After she made two stops, one at Chung Fat's for takeout, and she arrived home, deciding to fill the intervening hours by purging her rooms of things she didn't need. She'd eliminate anything not required for a move to Eugene, which constituted nearly half the contents of her bookshelves. Saving her book collection for the local women's shelter, Jac scooped up the trade magazines she'd hoarded since college and tossed them into the black plastic garbage bag at her feet.

The knickknacks she'd received over the years, and a glass bulb filled with confetti, went into the bag with a clunk. Then the six coffee mugs emblazoned with customer logos. She had a lovely set of matched coffee cups she'd bought when she first moved into her condo. Plus, she knew Gramps had a collection of his own she'd get upon her move to the farmhouse. Providing Rowena wasn't taking them when she moved out.

The phone rang and Jac glanced at the display. Rowena finally decided to return her call. Her cousin opened the

conversation by pledging to pay the original amounts on the tax bills she'd ignored.

"You're right," Ro conceded. "I should have paid better attention. Unfortunately, once I reimburse you, I won't have the funds for a vacation I have planned. I don't suppose you'd let me pay you back in installments?"

Her wheedling and whining about the expense raked on Jac's eardrums. Jac dropped the magazine she held, sat on the floor, and propped an elbow on the coffee table. "Rowena, I love you like a sister. Really, I do. But the tax bill came in installments you *forgot* to pay."

"I won't forget this time. And besides, we'll see each other for holidays. You can always remind me."

"Ro, I don't want to be in a position as your creditor." Rowena *was* family, and by rights they should try to work this out. Jac stroked a soothing circle around her temple before continuing. "Look, these are the best terms I can afford to offer. You pay for two of the years up front, and by March first, you reimburse me for the final year. Would that be easier?"

"I'll have to scrimp a little on my vacation, but yeah. Thanks, Jac. You're the best." Rowena's breath heaved out in a rush. "I can't believe you're quitting your job to move to the boonies. I hate it here."

Jac went back to sorting through her magazine collection, dropping another issue into the trash bag. "Jeez, Ro. Why did you stay so long? We could have found a tenant for the house and you could have lived in the city."

Her cousin laughed. "I know, right? I just never found an apartment I wanted enough to go through the hassle of moving again. Now I have and I'm ready to go. I'll be out by next Saturday. What are you going to do with Gramps' farm?"

"I'm going to make it productive again. The soil is great for herbs, and I've got an agreement in place with a client. Business is already good." And with Jules as an investor, it

was bound to get better. “Providing I can get up to speed quickly on the whole agriculture end of things.”

“You know Gramps set money from the estate aside in case either of us wanted to restart the farm, right?”

Jac sat up straight. “What?”

“The estate attorney told me. Gramps set up a separate trust fund for the possibility. If neither of us tried to tap the fund within five years, the money was supposed to be donated to the county fair board to fund an exhibition hall in Gramps’ name.”

An exhibition hall? The trust fund had to be pretty hefty. Even the most basic pole building must cost nearly fifty grand. How had she not known about this fund? “Rowena, could you have used the funds to pay off the tax bill?”

“Unfortunately, no. I talked to the attorney and Gramps was adamant the money could only be used to restart crop production. Talk to the lawyer. You should have the cash for seed money.”

“Do you know how much is in the account?” Jac tried to keep her hopes grounded. With access to the trust fund, she could use Jules’ money for expansion instead of start-up.

“No clue. I’ll text you the attorney’s contact info. You should try to see him while you’re up here next weekend.”

For the next ten minutes, Rowena chattered on about the details of her upcoming move. As her cousin settled in for an extended conversation, Jac shoved to her feet. Listening with half attention was all Ro required, so Jac moved into the kitchen to do inventory of what she needed in Eugene and what she could purge.

It was after ten-thirty before Rowena had exhausted her word supply. With another promise to send details about the trust fund, she disconnected. True to her typical form, Ro hadn’t asked Jac a single personal question, like how Jac’s love life was going. For once, Jac would have had an answer that didn’t begin with a scoffing laugh.

Back in the living room, she set her iPhone on the table and took a seat on the soft area rug in front of the couch. Leaning back against the sofa, she drew her knees up to her chest to take a break.

Jac let her thoughts meander to her new home. Since she couldn't really plant until spring, she planned to redecorate the interior. New paint, window treatments, and maybe she'd refinish the gorgeous maple floors. All projects she could do on her own. In her imagination she pictured Luke by her side. Joining her on weekends to help with some of her to-do list. Working side-by-side during the day ... sleeping with him curled around her by night.

Would he help happily? Or would his visits taper off over time? She rested her cheek on her knees, gazing out the balcony doors at the night sky. In the distance, lightning danced over the mountains, reminding her of the heated electric sensation of Luke's fingertips gliding over her skin. Sparks of desire lodged under her heart, sizzling and crackling the way water would as it hit heated rocks.

When was the last time thoughts of a man had ever aroused her the way thinking of Luke did? She couldn't guarantee she'd be able to restrain herself once he finally arrived. A quick glance at the clock revealed he'd show up soon. She gazed down the hall, catching sight of her neatly made bed, certain they'd be in it mere minutes after he arrived. She doubted she'd be able to wait to get her hands on him.

To feel his skin against hers. To be together the way they couldn't be for the past few days, due to distance and lack of condoms.

*I'm such a Girl Scout.* Planning ahead, she'd stopped at the drugstore just before she'd picked up her dinner. It felt a little strange dropping the eight-pack box of condoms on the counter manned by a kid who was barely eighteen. The leer he'd given her after checking out her ring finger sent fiery heat to her cheeks. But she held the kid's gaze. She was an adult and could buy what she wanted.

For a brief instant, Jac considered adding a pregnancy test and tampons to her purchase, just to freak the kid out. Instead, as she accepted her change and the bag from him, she winked. With a grin, she'd swished her hips from side-to-side as she left the store. *Take that, insolent little shit!*

If the condition of her body at this moment was any indicator, she'd be ready with very little foreplay. She fervently hoped Luke would feel the same way. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the cushions, relishing the tingly pulses brought about by imagining his body pressed to hers, hard and demanding to her soft and melting.

The intercom buzzed, shattering her quiet reverie. He was here. She scrambled to her feet and raced to the front door, pressing the *Talk* button. "Hello?"

"It's Luke. Can I come up?"

God, his voice sounded sexy even through the intercom. The nerves jumping in her system escalated. In response, she slid the *Lock Release* lever to the side and held it for a moment, to be sure. She eased the door open and stared at the elevator, willing it to rise as fast as her level of excitement.

The doors at the end of the hall slid open, revealing the man of her dreams.

Luke slumped against the back wall, one hand in his pocket, the other holding the bag slung over his left shoulder. He was wearing navy scrubs, which accentuated the blue of his eyes. His right hip jutted to the side, bearing all of the weight of his casual stance. A tired smile illuminated his face as he simply stared down the hall at her.

As the doors began to slide shut on him, he leaped forward and thrust his hand toward the opening, stopping their progress. The move reminded her of a cat, smooth and efficient, despite the exhaustion evident in his casual posture. He prowled on nearly silent feet toward where she waited, not taking his gaze from her face. With each step, his expression grew lighter, until the moment he reached her. His huge grin was the last thing she saw as he enveloped her in a bear hug worthy of the name.



Wrapping his arms around her waist, he squeezed tightly, snuggling her against his hard body. He buried his face in her neck and breathed deep. Warm breath tickled the sensitive skin beneath her ear as he groaned on his exhale.

“Good Christ, you smell wonderful.” He tightened his grip and leaned backward, lifting her until her toes dangled over the gray patterned carpet.

He flexed his fingers on her hips. The soft pressure sent shivers whizzing up her spine. Her voice came out on a breath. “You look exhausted. Poor baby.” She nuzzled the crook of his neck as she stroked her fingers through his disheveled curls.

Luke kissed his way along her cheek, seeking her mouth. When he skimmed her lips, a groan rumbled deep in his chest. Jac felt the vibration below, where an erotic pulse pounded, communicating urgent need throughout her body.

His lips were demanding on hers, the dark scruff on his cheeks a combination of scratchy and soft. Their tongues collided, stroked, probed. A moan built in the back of her throat as he cupped her butt and nibbled on her lips. The kiss eased to gentle, worshipful.

Luke lifted her until she could wrap her legs around his waist, locking her feet behind his back. The motion opened her center. The hard ridge of his erection pressed into her right where she wanted him. As the angle of their kiss changed, Luke walked through the door to her condo. The door banged as he kicked it, crashing into the doorjamb, shutting out the rest of the world.

His bag clunked as he dropped it to the floor. He tightened his grip on her behind and pulled her closer, rocking his hips as he did.

She held his head between her hands as a wave of sensation washed over her, beginning at the base of her neck and building until it crested into flaring sparklers behind her eyelids. Had anything ever felt this wonderful?

Without releasing his lips, she unlocked her legs from his waist and slid down his body until she found her feet. His

erection throbbed against her stomach and his solid, unmovable chest cushioned her breasts. Liquid heat swirled in her veins as she reached behind him to twist the lock. Then she pushed his shoulders until his back hit the hard wood behind him. She slipped her fingers under the hem of his scrub top to caress the hard ridges defining his waist.

Flattening her palms on his abdomen, Jac started to slide them up, stopping when he grasped her arms.

Chest heaving, he pulled his mouth from hers, gripping her wrists. "Wait."

His single word tore through the haze of lust fogging her brain. She eased away and slanted her gaze up at him. "You don't want ...?"

Oh, God. What if he didn't want? What if the ardor and passion she felt for him, that she thought he felt for her, wasn't reciprocated? Maybe he'd only meant for their time together at Team Vino to be a vacation fuck, and this would be their last hurrah, so to speak.

Jac jerked her arms from his grip and took a hasty step backward.

"Aw, shit. I'm handling this wrong."

*Damn straight.* No one in their right mind started a break up speech with a soul-searing kiss like the one they'd just shared. He reached for her hand again, pulling it toward his body and pressing it against his hot, straining cock. He gasped and thrust his hips forward, grinding against her hand, and groaned. "Jac, you can tell I do want."

Yes, she could, and thanked her lucky stars for it. This wasn't a let-her-down-easy chat. She molded her fingers over his rock-hard shaft. "Why stop?"

With a laugh that bordered on embarrassed, he relaxed against the door as he pulled her wrist up, lacing their fingers together and resting their joined hands over his heart. Jac felt each hard thud in the side of her hand. The rapid tattoo resonated in time with her own heartbeat.

He drew her closer, until she was nestled between his spread legs. “I want you more than I can find words to express at the moment.”

“Then don’t articulate, just take.” She nipped his chin and followed the bite with a lick to his lush lower lip.

He tangled his tongue with hers until he’d sucked it between his teeth. The pressure was delicious. When he released her lips, he stroked his hand along her back, from the swell just above her butt to the nape of her neck.

“You’re distracting me.”

Her chuckle was low and breathy. She caressed his cheek with her free hand. “That’s the idea.”

“And as ideas go, it’s stellar.” He nibbled her lips. “Baby, I’ve been working for nearly twenty-four hours. I was hoping I could impose on you for a shower. I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m a little ripe.”

What she’d noticed was the intoxicating blend of Luke’s unique scent of spice and pine. If there was an aroma of sweat underlying it, she found it more of an aphrodisiac. He worked hard, unafraid to stick with a job until it was done. “I didn’t notice, but you are more than welcome to use my bathroom. Do you want me to soap your back?” She slipped her hand behind him, and rubbed his sexy ass, giving it a squeeze for good measure.

His breath caught, hitched back out. “You can if you want, however, that isn’t my back. But consider this, I’ll be in your bed—in you—quicker if I go it alone. At least before. Maybe later we can shower together.” He waggled his brows.

Jac eased her hold on his backside and moved away from him. She pointed to her bedroom, where her mattress beckoned them. “Bathroom is at the end of the hall. Are you hungry? I can fix scrambled eggs while you’re in there.”

“Baby, I’m only hungry for you.”

Her eyes nearly crossed as she held his gaze. “You say the nicest things.”

He laughed and bent to scoop up the bag he'd dropped.  
“See you in five?”

“Or sooner.” She watched him saunter away from her, his legs slightly bowed.

Oh, he definitely wanted.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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The second Luke disappeared through the door to her room, Jac pulled her thin cotton T-shirt over her head in one smooth motion. She chucked it toward the wall. Kicking off her flip-flops, she followed him down the hall.

Water rushed through the pipes. He'd left the bathroom door cracked and she caught a tantalizing glimpse of his bare ass. Jac's mouth watered at the sight of his tan line, dusky skin above, paler below. She caught her tongue between her teeth. Honest to God, she wanted to lick the divots hollowing out the sides of his cheeks.

With efficient movements, she unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans. Hooking her thumbs under the stretchy lace of her panties, she shimmied out of everything, leaving it in a bundle at her feet. Next came the bra, straps falling off her shoulders. She dropped the scrap of lace she'd donned especially for Luke's pleasure to the growing pile of clothes next to the bed.

Water stopped running in the shower and she heard the swish of the towel as Luke pulled it over the glass wall surrounding the tiled enclosure. The last drops from the rainwater showerhead dripped, nearly masking the sound of Luke drying his body. Jac flipped her decorative pillows into the corner and pulled the comforter down to the end of the bed.

She climbed on the mattress. Knelt in the middle. Sat back on her heels.

Waited.

With a towel wrapped around his waist, Luke emerged from the bath, droplets of water shimmering in the halo of light from behind. The sight of the pale yellow towel riding low on his hips made her nipples pebble. She longed to explore the muscular cuts on his sides, to trail her fingers down the gorgeous line of dark hair plunging below the edge of the fabric.

The expression on his face went predatory and hot as blazes when he caught sight of her, naked on the bed. Lips quirked in a half smile, he stalked toward the bed. His erection tented the front of his towel.

“Much better. And look, my shower gave you time to unmake the bed.” Grinning, Luke rested one knee on the mattress.

He reached for her, stroking the back of his fingers down the slope of her breast. Catching the taut peak between his index and middle finger, he squeezed. When he rolled the pad of his thumb over the tight bud, fire arced through Jac, zeroing in on her pussy. She grew wetter with each swipe of his thumb.

She grasped his forearm, trying to ground herself through the touch. “It’s nicer to unmake the bed than ...”

His lips replaced his finger.

“Oh, God, Luke, that’s wonderful.”

The tug, nip, lick rotation of his mouth, tongue, and teeth continued, sweet torture to be sure. Jac fisted his hair, holding his mouth in place as she eased backward. Luke followed her down, hips nestling between her thighs. Through the towel that somehow managed to stay on, his erection prodded her.

Giving her nipple one last lick, he shifted his attention to the other breast as he slipped a hand under her and pulled her leg around his hip. Molten lust sparked to life at the feel of his fingers trailing through her folds. He slipped two inside and continued to run his thumb over her clit, mimicking the action there with the lash of his tongue on her nipple. Each exquisite

touch of his lips and fingers created cascading light behind her eyelids.

Raking her nails over the smooth skin of his back, Jac gave herself over to the pressure and pleasure building to a fever pitch in her body.

He pushed her to the brink of reason, the point where she ceased thinking and simply flowed with sensation. He licked a circle around her areola, then whispered a breath over the wet surface. She shivered. He slid his fingers out of her, leaving her feeling momentarily empty.

The lonely sensation didn't last. Shifting off to her side, Luke stroked his hand along her raised thigh. His movement loosened his towel, and it puddled on the bed, partly draped over her knees. She released her grip on his head and pulled the towel away, dropping the damp material over the side of the bed. Her muscles clutched as his fingers filled her once more. He buried them deeply within her as he claimed her lips. Bolts of need pinged from her head to her toes.

Jac rocked her hips up to meet his questing hand. "Not enough, Luke. I need you in me."

"I'm getting there," he murmured against her lips as he pressed long fingers deeper and twisted them, stroking the ribbed muscles inside.

"Now."

Not waiting, she pushed on his shoulders until he lay flat on the bed, his thick erection bobbing against his stomach. Holding his wrist, she trapped his hand between her legs as she rose to her knees to straddle him. The muscles in his forearm flexed with his every movement.

Offering more of herself to his touch, her breath hitched in her throat with each wiggle, each thrust of his fingers. He dropped his other hand to her hip and stroked small circles over her skin until his fingers slipped into the cleft between her cheeks. She arched her back as he pressed his fingertip to the tight, puckered opening. Jac thought her body might just implode.

She stretched over his chest for the condom she'd left on the bedside table. Luke surged up, muscles tensing, to claim her breast again, his hands and lips everywhere, prodding, stroking, pulling. With unsteady fingers, Jac managed to tear open the wrapper and pull the latex circle from the foil.

She grasped his shaft at the base, reveling in Luke's groan. She smeared a drop of come on his hard flesh as he circled his fingers in her sheath and dipped his other hand between her cheeks. Heady sensation rose like fireworks along her spine.

Jac rolled the condom into place, then rose on her knees and he replaced his fingers with his hot length. Passion flared brighter with the feeling of fullness, of completion. Jac set a rhythm, bobbing on his lap, rocking her hips forward on the rise, rolling them back on the descent. Each time she slid down, Luke pressed his finger deeper.

His other hand flexed on her hip, encouraging her movement, helping to guide her pace.

"That's it, baby," he mumbled against her breast and thrust his hips up hard. His body slapped against her as he buried himself deeper. He growled and dug his fingers into her flesh. "Ride me, honey."

She couldn't form any words. Never before had she felt the moment growing and expanding in her this way. Increasing her pace, erotic quivering started deep within her. It built with every stroke against his groin, every dip of his finger, and the bite of his teeth on her nipple.

Color exploded behind her eyes as her orgasm crested. She couldn't hold in her scream. Straining, arching against him, her trembling limbs echoed the shivering deep inside at such a powerful climax. "Oh, Luke. Oh my God!"

Luke's muscles tensed and bunched under her hands as he flipped her to her back. Elbows resting on either side of her head, he gripped her hair in knotted fingers and drove into her with wild abandon. The weight of him, the demanding nature of his thrusts, prolonged her orgasm and rebuilt it until sensation swelled again. The pleasure bordered on sweet



torture until she came a second time as Luke groaned his own release.

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Luke's heart thundered like a freight train in his chest. Arms trembling, he ground his pelvis against hers until he was buried balls deep inside her. The tight muscles of her pussy rippled along his length, wringing everything from him. Jac flexed her fingers deep into his hips, urging him closer still. He dug his knees into the mattress between her legs, rocked back, then surged forward, pressing his forehead to hers.

A breath squeaked between her lips, caressing his cheek. "Yeess! Oh, God, yes." She arched, quivering, and contracted her inner muscles hard around him.

Something awakened in him, something he'd buried so far from the surface, he'd lost sight of it himself. When he collapsed against the heated flesh of her breasts, the slow melt of his heart, his soul, puddled in his brain. With lips barely able to form words, he whispered his thoughts. "I love you, Jac."

Her quick intake of air hissed against his ear as her hands stilled on his backside. "What did you say?"

His heart sped up again. This time strong emotion was the cause. He loved her. In the span of just days, he'd tumbled head over ass in love with this woman whose soft, delicious body still cradled him, the muscles of her channel still working in a sensuous rhythm on him.

Positioning his lips by the side of her head, Luke inhaled her spicy scent. "You heard me." He swirled his tongue around the shell of her ear, from tip to lobe, continuing along her jaw with tender kisses.

He lifted himself from her body, resting on his elbows, and let his cock slip from her. Yet he didn't move from his prime spot between her thighs. From this position, he held her gaze as he lowered his mouth to hers.

Moving her hands to his head, she held him still, prolonging the deeply poignant kiss. She licked her way around his mouth, and he felt her lips curve up, saw little laugh lines crinkle around her eyes. Those brown stunners turned to liquid heat as he sucked her tongue, stroking his along its velvet surface.

She pulled away slowly, breaking the seal between their lips. Devilry danced on her face. “I know. I just wanted to hear it again.”

“Hear what?” He leaned on an elbow. With a smile, he lifted a strand of her silky hair, rubbing it between his fingers.

“You know. What you said before.”

His heart kicked against his ribs. “I. Love. You.” He punctuated each word with a kiss. “Happy now?”

“Delirious.” Heat left her eyes and her smile dimmed.

*Doesn't look so delirious to me.*

“What?”

“It's just ...” She covered her eyes and huffed out a breath, but didn't continue.

Didn't take a rocket scientist to know something wasn't right.

“It's just what?” he prodded.

Her chest heaved, her throat worked, but she pursed her lips, holding back whatever was bothering her.

He settled alongside her, dropping a kiss on her shoulder. “Jac, are you crying?”

“Trying not to.” Her voice shook.

“Tell me why, baby. Have I done something wrong?” Luke rolled to his back and gathered Jac close, cradling her head on his chest.

She shook her head, her chin bumping his body. A tear splatted on him. Dread claimed a corner of his soul. He'd reduced her to tears with his profession of love. What the fuck

was wrong with him? Way too fast. Skating his finger over her spine he stared at the ceiling, waiting for her answer.

Her body was stiff against his, at odds with his wish for soft, spent pliancy.

Her shoulders lifted, her palm spread on his pecs. “It’s all sunshine and lollipops right now, Luke. But what happens when I move? Eugene is a long, tedious ride away. Your schedule is demanding.”

“Yeah, so?”

“I don’t see how this can work, Luke. How *we* can work. My last long distance relationship died a painful death.” Her voice quivered. “It would be smarter to not get involved, with me moving away so soon.”

She wanted to say goodbye before she moved?

He stilled his hand on her back, tightened his fingers on her upper arm. “Hell no, it wouldn’t. We have something special.” In his experience, love was rare. Once found, it was worth fighting for. “I love you. I’ll do whatever it takes to make us work.”

The laugh she released was bitter. “Heard that before.”

Digging for patience, he tucked his finger under her chin and lifted. He held her gaze. “Whoever you’re thinking about right now, this bed is already occupied. Only room for me and you.”

Her eyes fluttered shut.

Swallowing was difficult with the big lump clogging his throat. He wasn’t giving up without a fight.

With a gentle prod, he encouraged her to look at him again. “Talk to me, baby. Help me understand why you think we won’t stick.” *Please let it be something I can fix.*

Resting her head on his chest, she sighed. She hesitated so long, he feared she wouldn’t talk to him. To his relief, she finally spoke. “I’ve been in a long distance relationship before. My college boyfriend spent a semester abroad. It should have worked. We were solid, strong. We’d been a couple for a year

before he moved to Italy. Our future looked bright.” Her fist clenched on his chest. “Within a month, he met someone else. Someone he could touch ... who could touch him back. That was pretty important to him. Suddenly, having a girlfriend five thousand miles away wasn’t desirable. The dirtbag broke up with me by text message.”

Anger at the nameless fuck-tard hit Luke like a tidal wave. “He sounds like a douchy bastard to me.” He sucked in a calming breath and drew circles on her back. “But I’m not him. Cheating isn’t my style. Neither is screwing someone just to get my rocks off. I’d never do that to you.”

“The distance and your schedule still present problems.”

She was doing her best to rationalize why they wouldn’t work.

Barreling forward, he tried to explain why they would. “Gonna disagree, baby. I’ll come up every weekend. Even if I can only swing a day trip, I’ll be there. A hundred miles is nothing. I can come up after work some days. Things won’t always be this crazy at work. We’ll be together. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

“You won’t end up resenting that you have to drive to me all the time?”

He pressed a kiss to her hair, the scent of her shampoo filling his senses. “Baby, every day I get to see you will be bright and shiny, no room for resentment. You’ll come to Medford when you’re able. I know you’ll want to see Bella.”

“I don’t know.” But he felt her lips curve into a smile against his chest.

“Jac, shut up.” He cupped her head, stroking her russet hair. “I’m fighting for us. I’d love for you to fight as well. Together we’ll win. We’ve already proven we’re a great team.”

She pressed her palm against his heart and raised up to give him a soft, almost shy glance. “I love you, Luke. I fell hard when I threw my drunken self at you, and you declined.

So sweet and endearing. And frustrating.” Her wicked grin lit a glow in him. “You certainly redeemed yourself later.”

“I plan to keep redeeming myself for a long, long time.” He chuckled. “I knew I loved you when you laughed after I doused you with paint. Bad situation, made worse later by crap going on at work. But you weren’t daunted. I love how you know your own mind and aren’t afraid to steer a new path.”

Luke traced Jac’s shoulder and pulled her up for a kiss, relieved they’d worked out what bothered her. He wanted her, her laughter, her love in his life.

He slipped from the bed and made his way to the attached bathroom, where he stripped off the spent condom and disposed of it. After snapping off the light, he returned to the bed, where Jac reclined in a dim pool of light from the bedside lamp.

He drifted his gaze over her creamy skin, knowing how satiny it felt under his fingertips. Long, coltish legs, bent slightly at the knees, drew his attention next. He licked his lips, imagining tonguing his way from pink tipped toes to the place hidden under the thin strip of dark russet hair at the apex of her thighs. Eyes closed, a soft smile on her face, with one hand resting on her hip, the other against her lips, as if holding in their kisses.

“God, you are stunning.”

Her eyes fluttered open. Extending her hand, an invitation to come back to bed, she asked, “Are you hungry?”

His chest heaved and blood rushed back into his cock. Damn straight he was hungry.

Jac’s soft, sexy chuckle and pointed look at his groin wove through his system like a shot of whiskey. She cleared her throat, drawing his gaze as she lowered her fingers to her rose-tipped breasts. “I meant for food.”

Luke shot a look at the analog alarm clock by her bedside. After midnight. Disappointment over the way time had spun away swamped him, colder than a bucket of ice. He sat next to her on the bed and leaned gingerly against her leg, his arm

between her knees and his hand over her calf. “As much as I’d prefer to simply climb into bed and slip back into you, I have to be at the medical center in two hours. I still need to go home and get a clean suit.” He squeezed his fingers around her ankle. “God, I hope we reach an agreement today. This bargaining has gone on too long.”

Jac sat up at his side and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “You’re not even gone and I miss you already. This is what I mean about being apart. It’s going to be hell.” Sliding her hand to his jaw, she prodded his face toward hers and pressed a soft kiss to his lips, which felt better than a slice of heaven and tasted of sweet nectar. “But a picnic compared to hell without you.”

She dropped her hand to his chest, toying with the short, scattered hairs. “I’ll fix you breakfast before I send you on your way. But you have to promise to come back with everything you need for a few days. I want to spend as much time as possible with you before I head to Eugene. So come back, even if it’s during booty-call hours.”

“Baby, you’re as far away from being a booty-call as the hospital is in settling these damn talks.”

Her lips pulled down, her eyes sad. “I’m confident you’ll work it out.”

Yeah, he would. Once he got his dipshit boss to quit stalling. “Come on. Let’s go fix some food. I *am* hungry.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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In the tiny kitchen, Jac steered Luke toward the breakfast bar and pushed him down onto a stool.

“Only room for one in here. You sit, I’ll work.”

Luke yawned and scrubbed his hand through his hair. “Can we start with coffee?”

“I take it you don’t want decaf?”

The stool rocked beneath him as he shook his head vehemently. “Hell, no.”

Her sweet, light laughter filled the small space, bouncing off the low ceiling. She set about filling the space-aged single cup brewer with water. Luke rested his elbow on the counter, his chin on his hand, and watched her sure, economical movements.

The little coffeemaker gurgled to life, water hissing as it started to warm. Jac held out two small pods. “Regular breakfast blend or put-hair-on-your-chest dark roast.” She lowered her gaze to his pecs, arching an eyebrow.

He flattened his palm to his torso and rubbed, his chest hair rasping under his fingers. “Dark roast, please.”

Less than a minute later, Jac deposited a bright red mug with pink lips on it in front of him. Fragrant, smoky steam wafted into his nostrils as he lifted the cup and blew on it. After taking a sip, he closed his eyes and heaved a contented sigh. Sure, it might be the middle of the night, and watching Jac’s rounded ass shifting under the thin cotton wrapper she

wore sent signals to his cock that it was desperate to be inside her. But he was relaxed and happier than he'd been in the past forty-eight hours.

Quiet domesticity filled his senses. The fork Jac wielded clattered against the ceramic bowl as she whipped the eggs into froth. The microwave dinged as it finished nuking sausage patties. The delicious aroma of Italian spices conquered the scent of his coffee.

Jac hummed as she worked, a catchy tune he didn't recognize, but one he decided instantly was his new favorite song. She set a couple of small Mason jar glasses on the bar and filled them with juice.

After filling two plates with heaping mounds of scrambled eggs, toast, and sausage, she laid them on the granite and rummaged under the counter for flatware. Carefully retrieving a second cup from the coffeemaker, she skirted the counter and climbed onto the stool next to him.

When she crossed her legs, she exposed a creamy expanse of thigh. Luke found it difficult to tear his eyes away from the view. He dropped his hand to the satiny skin, fingers itching to climb higher and disappear under the edge of the navy-blue fabric hiding the rest of her from view.

Dipping his head to hers, he captured her mouth under his, laving the plump lips with his tongue, fingers flexing on the smooth skin under his hands. Finally ending the tender moment, he murmured against her cheek. "Thanks for cooking for me."

"You're welcome. Now eat before it gets cold." Her voice was breathless as she cupped her hand over his jaw and turned his focus to his breakfast. "Here." She pressed a fork into his hand.

Luke cut a bite of sausage and forked it up. He chewed thoughtfully, swallowed, and asked, "How did your talk with Jules go?"

Straightening, Jac beamed at him. "Oh my goodness. I nearly forgot to tell you. I ran into a bit of a snag. My cousin



hasn't paid the land taxes on the farm. I had to find fifty grand or the farm was going to auction."

This was what he'd talked to Bella about. It was a huge chunk of change, though Jac didn't seem as stressed about it as he'd expected. "Bella told me."

"When did she tell you?" Jac paused, her fork halfway to her mouth.

"I ran into her on one of the wards last night. We talked about you. You should know she's taking all the credit for us being together." He knew his smile was sheepish. "Must have been right after you'd talked to her. She mentioned you were a little panicked."

"She was right. At the time, I'd been staring at my budget, trying to borrow from Peter to pay Paul. I didn't want to have to go so deeply into debt to launch a new life."

"What are you going to do? I have some cash saved from the sale of my house in Tampa." He leaned against the counter. "I can swing a loan, if you need. Not fifty thousand, mind you. Maybe half." He hadn't planned on offering to help her, but it felt right. It felt solid.

Jac set her fork on her plate and swung on her stool to face him. Her eyes glistened. "That's so great of you. And so unnecessary. I found the money. Or rather, it found me."

"I know it's late, but you aren't making much sense here." He swiped the pad of his thumb under her eye, clearing away the drop of moisture that had trickled out.

"Sorry." She blew out a breath. "Luke, Jules Rosetti has a corporation. She lends money at a ridiculously low interest rate to start-ups like mine. Not even really a loan, more an investment." Jac hopped off her seat and strode to the hall table, where her purse lay. After pawing through the bag, she turned back to him, a check clutched in her hand. "She insisted on investing in my spice farm and brought me my first customer."

"Are you kidding?"

“Nope. Cross my heart.” Her fist slashed in an *X* over her chest, the paper she clutched dragging on the fabric of her robe. “Plus, my cousin Rowena is going to pay the original tax bill, minus the fees and penalties.” Jac bounced on the balls of her feet. “Oh, and get this. She told me earlier today, Gramps left a trust fund to be used if either of us wanted to restart the farm. Luke, I have money coming out my ears.”

She raced to the counter and threw her arms around him. He grabbed her and surged out of his seat. Her exuberant laughter rang sweetly as he spun her in circles.

He stopped turning and lowered her to her feet. “Everything is falling into place for you.”

A shadow flitted in her eyes and the corners of her mouth drooped. “Except ...”

A moment passed before he prompted her. “Except?”

“Eugene is two hours away.”

“And we hashed this out before, didn’t we?” He raised his brows, waiting.

She dipped her head, hiding her face from his view. “I’ve only just found you.” Her voice was small, quiet. Filled with uncertainty.

He tucked his finger under her chin and lifted until he could see her eyes. “Baby, I told you we’d make it work. And even though we’re about so much more than this one little thing, we’ve proven to be pretty damn good at phone sex.”

Color flooded into her cheeks. A tiny smile bloomed on her lips. “Yes, we are. But we’re even better at making love in person.”

She stood on tiptoes and pressed her lips to his, her tongue invading his mouth in a kiss both spicy and sweet, a mixture of the coffee and juice they’d drunk. Moving her hands to his shoulders, she pushed him until his back was flush against the wall by the breakfast bar.

Heat and blood shot to his groin, and his cock swelled at the pressure of her nipples tightening and rubbing against him

as she snuggled in closer.

Luke bent to wrap his arms around the backs of her thighs, lifting so her legs caged his waist. He groaned at the contact of her pussy against his straining dick.

Nipping at his lips, Jac whispered, “Take me back to bed, Luke.”

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Jac used the daylight hours of Sunday to sort out her affairs, assuring come Monday, she’d be ready to submit her resignation to her boss. She also made a trip to Gold Hill for lunch with her parents. The drive up the interstate was sunny and dry, allowing her to open the sunroof.

Dad sat at the kitchen table to keep them company while Jac helped her mom get their meal on the table. As they worked, she explained her plan to them. A plan they heartily favored.

“So exciting for you to restart the farm,” her dad said. “It will be nice to see you happy at something you love. Not working for that—”

“Brad!” her mom scolded.

“Jac hasn’t been happy at MedServices since the last time Ted screwed her out of promotion. I’m thrilled she’ll be out of there.”

Her dad beamed at her, pride glittering in his eyes.

Mom clucked, but said, “I’m happy too. Jacqui, I’d love to help you redecorate. The first thing to tackle will be the wallpaper in the kitchen. It was lovely when my dad put it up thirty years ago.”

Jac shuddered. “You’re right. That’s a lot of years to accumulate grease and grime.”

Tears gathered in the corners of Mom’s eyes. “Not much has changed since I was a girl. Dad always promised, but there

never seemed to be time. I'd give anything to have him still here, choosing new wallpaper."

Jac missed the old man almost as much as her mom.

"Your Gramps has been gone for three years. That's long enough for the soil to lay fallow. It's time to make the farm pay again." Mom's voice shook slightly.

Dad had talked about the markets and which spices and herbs he thought would be more in demand. "Are you planning to venture into Brassica crops?" He'd surprised Jac with the depth of his knowledge.

They'd spent the rest of her visit discussing the pros and cons of different options. Conversation had been lively and peppered with laughter.

Luke had shown up at her condo just after sunset. When he'd walked through the door, his level of frustration had shot high, leaving him in a foul mood. "The bargaining session didn't go well," he complained. "Brian was belligerent in the face of the nurses' demands. They still refuse to return to work."

"Poor baby," Jac crooned. It was the only thing she could offer, to be supportive.

"I stayed after negotiations to work a short shift in the emergency room. The second Bella shown up to relieve me, I blew out of there."

He decompressed over a quiet dinner, actually relaxing. By the time they'd finished off a loaded pizza, Luke was laughing at her stories about Deidre.

Jac spread a blanket on the floor and ordered, "Okay, take off your shirt."

The heat in his eyes burned hot as an autumn bonfire. He tossed his pale blue button-down over the back of the sofa, and didn't resist when Jac pushed him to the floor and made him lie on his stomach.

She straddled his hips, sitting on his butt, and massaged the tight knots in his shoulders and back, his groans of

contentment the only reward she needed.

After she'd finished rubbing him down, Luke led her to the bedroom, where he kissed her slowly and stripped away all her clothes. His lovemaking was sweet, seductive.

In a word, perfect.

Afterward, he held her, hands stroking soft circles on her back. Using his chest as a pillow, she drifted off and slept soundly until the alarm buzzed them awake.

A sense of peace, of love and domesticity, swept through her while he fixed breakfast. Still, Jac cautioned herself against getting used to having him there every morning. Sadness loomed at the idea. He'd be having breakfast at his home, while she'd be living apart from him.

Impatiently she pushed away the negative thoughts and forced herself to focus on the time they had together.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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**O**n Monday Jac arrived at work early, counting on no one else arriving before her. Peace reigned in the cube farm, steadying the severe case of nerves bounding around her stomach.

Doubts about the course of action swamped Jac as the clock on the corner of her desk ticked away the minutes until her meeting with Ted Fleury. Panic fizzed like a bottle rocket. *What if I'm making a bad choice? A decision based in anger because he didn't give me the promotion he promised?*

She pulled her purse onto her lap, searching for the check she'd shoved in her wallet. Practicing yoga breathing helped, as she flicked her thumbnail over the corner of the eight-inch strip of safety blue paper. It didn't take long for her jittery nerves to settle.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text message. Two seconds later it buzzed again. Jac swiped her finger over the screen to reveal a message from Luke.

*Not that you need it, but good luck with your meeting.*

His next message melted her heart all over.

*I love you.*

Okay, it came on a text, not uttered through his gorgeous, talented mouth. But the sentiment was far from impersonal. In her mind, she heard the echo of his whispered profession of love not only from Saturday but again last night.

As she was typing her return message, the phone buzzed a third time. Pressing ‘send,’ she switched to the new message. Her smile grew larger as she read Jules’ text.

*I’m Team Jac all the way. Go kick some ass.*

In the next cube over, Allen cleared his throat for the tenth time in the past five minutes. The irritating noise overshadowed the sound of Jac’s laugh.

From the window in her cube, a flash of yellow captured her attention. Ted had arrived in his canary-colored Corvette a mere fifteen minutes before their scheduled appointment. He eased into his reserved slot in the ‘rock star’ parking section, front and center by the main door. Right next to Deidre’s new ride.

Crap, when had she arrived? Jac popped up to peek over the fabric-covered walls toward Deidre’s office. As expected, the door was closed against intrusions.

A little nervous and a lot sick to her stomach, Jac beat a fast retreat to the ladies’ room. She lurked there, practicing her speech, until it was nearly time for her appointment with Ted.

Drawing a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and smoothed an errant strand of hair behind her ear. Time for a short pep talk. *I can do this. I made the smart choice.*

Everything had aligned for her; the loss of the promotion, the unexpected windfall of funds, the support from friends and family. And Luke.

Her fingers slipped the first time she grasped the door handle. Scrubbing her damp palms over her straight red skirt, she breathed deeply again, trying to slow her racing heart and calm the boiling churn in her gut. Jac exited the bathroom, head held high.

Confidence accompanied her to her desk where she retrieved her formal letter of resignation. With another deep, calming breath, she headed to Ted’s office.

Before Jac had time to reconsider—not that she would—she stood outside his solid wooden door, fist poised to rap on the portal. Suddenly, down the corridor Deidre’s office door

flew open, crashing against the wall as she barged into sight. Lips pursed together, eyes narrowed, the woman stalked toward Jac.

“What are you doing? Get back to work,” she barked.

The woman needed some serious lessons on winning friends and influencing people. It appeared power had gone straight to her bleached blond head. Deidre oozed impatience as she propped her hands on her hips and tried to stare Jac down.

“I have a meeting with Ted,” she replied, despite the fact it wasn’t any of Deidre’s damn business. Tension gripped Jac’s neck in a painful vise. She shrugged her shoulders in an attempt to roll the sudden tightness away.

Dismissing Deidre, she concentrated on knocking on the door. Her heart clutched at Ted’s gruff, “Come in.”

A quick flick of her wrist later, Jac was past the point of no return. Deidre tried to crowd in after her. Jac didn’t bother to hide her irritation. “This is a private meeting, Deidre.”

The woman continued to splutter as Jac shut the door in her face. Heart racing, she pivoted to address Ted. Every word she’d rehearsed in her head, each damn syllable, vanished at the sight of his stern face. A lifetime passed while Jac stood still as a sentry next to the door.

“I’m very busy today. Let’s hear it. What can I do for you this morning, Jacqui?” His sparse smile appeared forced, as if inconvenienced to have to meet with her.

*What the hell is wrong with everyone this morning?* She was a good employee and should be treated with some degree of respect. Ted and Deidre deserved each other.

Anger trumped good sense. She did what she’d promised herself she wouldn’t do. Instead of the speech she’d practiced, she blurted, “I’m done, Ted. I quit.” Temper gave way to dizziness. Her head spun like a top as she nearly lost her breath. She eased back against the door, grateful for the solidity of it. Pressing her lips together, Jac focused on breathing in and out through her nose.



She'd done it. She'd followed through and quit her going-nowhere-fast job to pursue her avocation. Her dream.

Ted's brows lifted toward his receding hairline. He unfolded his lanky body from his chair and stood, his knuckles whitening against the blotter on his desk. "What the hell does that mean?"

"As of two weeks from now, I will no longer be working for MedServices. I'm sure Deidre will be just fine on her own."

Although his expression didn't change, a shadow passed through his eyes. The concept it might be panic made Jac inordinately happy.

The chair squealed in protest when Ted dropped into it, his posture defeated. He propped an elbow on the armrest and rubbed his temple.

For a moment he stared out the corner windows toward the trees lining the parking lot. "Is it the money? I'm sure you were counting on the extra income you were expecting with the promotion that went to Deidre." He swept his gaze back to her. "I can probably work something out."

The words of her speech came flooding back. She straightened away from the door and stepped across the room. Slipping her formal letter of resignation onto his desk, she rested her hands on the back of the chair across from him. "I won't lie and say the extra cash didn't matter. God, who doesn't want more money? But me quitting isn't about the money. It's about respect, Ted. You promised me that promotion."

Hell, he'd dangled the carrot for so long, it had practically sprouted roots. "I'm ready for the responsibility, the clients like me, and I'm damn good at solving problems. For whatever reason, you gave the job to Deidre. For crying out loud, Ted, I've spent the last few days cleaning up a half-dozen messes she's already created with her incompetence."

"I appreciate your contribution to fix the things Deidre has messed up. I'm worried if you leave, she'll never learn."

*For fuck's sake.* Jac wanted to rail at him that the woman started working for MedServices at the same time she had. Pretty much the only thing she'd learned in all that time was how to cheat at 'Words With Friends'. And really, who needed to cheat at an online game of 'Scrabble?'

Instead, Jac kept her voice even. "Deidre should know the job inside and out by now. No one held my hand, yet I learned the billing system anyway. Surely you have confidence in her. You promoted her."

Brows lowered, Ted couldn't hold her gaze for long before he shifted his eyes away. In that moment Jac realized he truly regretted his decision.

He scrubbed his hand over his chin. "Can you give me more than two weeks?"

"I'm sorry, Ted. I can't. I'll be moving to Eugene soon." Jac shot her hip and rested her palm on it, tipping up her chin. Cutting the strings here was liberating. So why was the awful weight of disloyalty sitting on her shoulders?

Because she wasn't the type of person to leave anyone in a lurch.

Her work ethic, and the need to help, rose on a cloud of disgust. "I'm willing to work as a consultant of sorts for the next two months if it helps."

"Thank you. I do appreciate the offer." Ted's voice was tight, his face somber. "Am I going to lose any more employees over Deidre's promotion?"

"You'd have to ask them." Jac sure as hell wasn't about to tell him she was certain everyone in her unit was actively job-hunting. "You should consider sending Deidre to the team building camp I attended last week. It's a class operation and she'll learn a lot. It wouldn't hurt."

Ted rolled his eyes and folded the letter on his blotter in thirds. When he finished, he stood and offered his hand. "I made a mistake. I'll probably regret it for a long time. But my sister can be a dog with a bone. To keep peace in my family, I

had to promote Deidre. I'm going to miss you. What are you going to do?"

Stunned by his admission, Jac took his hand. "I'll be restarting my family's herb farm. I've already lined up a wholesale customer. The learning curve is steep, but I think I'm up for the challenge."

He gave her a genuine smile, one that reached into his eyes. "Jacqui Bishop, I have no doubt you'll be a success. I hate to lose you, but I'll wish you good luck anyway." Picking up her letter of resignation, he circled round the desk and escorted her to the door.

Once there, he turned in the opposite direction and his shoulders slumped as he stepped into Deidre's office, shutting the door behind him.

As Jac slipped back into her cubicle, happiness charged through her. She'd closed another door on her old life, and the new career she'd chosen stretched in front of her the way the vines at Team Vino had marched over the hillside.

Pulling her phone from the drawer, she typed in a text.

*I did it!* She added a smiley face and pressed 'send' to shoot the message to Luke.

Nerves jumped in her tummy and adrenaline blasted through her. She'd done it. Jac had everything she'd wanted. A new job, a new home.

A new love.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---

Despite being dog-tired, Luke's spirits rose like a banner being hoisted on a flagpole. Three days ago, the nurses had presented their best and final offer in the negotiations. By sheer dint of will, he'd browbeaten Brian into accepting the terms outlined in the bargaining agreement.

He'd convinced his boss, the attorney, and the HR rep that a full-on strike wasn't in the best interests of the center. A picket line would make the nurses' sick-out this week look like a picnic in the park.

Once they'd done a final review on the numbers and the budget, he'd shoved the pen in Brian's hand and stood over him as the man scrawled his signature on the dotted line. Since then, Brian had barely spoken half a dozen words to Luke.

This morning, Luke had run into him in the cafeteria. Clearly pissy, Brian had pointedly stood, picked up his tray, and stomped off, leaving Luke standing with a steaming cup of coffee burning his fingers. He would have thought the cold anger seething in his chest at the intentional snub would have instantly iced the brew.

Brian's behavior rivaled a pouting three-year-old, which in turn pissed Luke off. The guy's demonstration of his displeasure escalated during the weekly staff meeting. At one point the so-called professional CEO of the medical center yelled across the room for Luke to "shut the fuck up."

It had taken every ounce of willpower Luke could summon not to vault over the wide conference table and plant his fist

right on Brian's snarling snout. A glance around the table confirmed Luke's theory that most everyone present thought Brian Evert was nothing more than a dick with ears.

Luke typed a virtual reminder on his laptop to find the business card of the recruiter who'd placed him at St. Simeon's. Her services would certainly be needed again.

At the end of the regular Thursday meeting, Brian smacked his pen down on the table. His belligerent tone grated worse than sand in board shorts when he growled, "Luke, stay a moment. Everyone else, please give us the room." He shoved his chair away from the table and stood, feet planted wide.

Luke couldn't remember ever seeing a group of people moving so fast to stow their belongings into briefcases. Brian stood by the door, arms crossed, bouncing on his toes. To call his stance combative was an appropriate choice of words. The legal staff, the doctors' representative, the facilities director, and the Director of Nursing evacuated the room.

Luke should have been concerned about the prospect of this impromptu meeting. He was fairly certain he'd be getting his ass handed to him. At the very least, he was heading for probation, all because he did his job. He refused to feel bad that he'd helped the management team negotiate a contract which ensured the ongoing financial success of the hospital.

Wasn't that what the exercise at Team Vino was all about? Hadn't he just learned the importance of getting along with co-workers and maximizing the team's efforts? He'd taken to heart the lessons he'd learned there. He just hoped Brian saw it the same way.

Luke took a stance next to the conference table, hands propped on his hips, and waited for whatever line of bullshit was about to spew from Brian's mouth. Once the douche had shut the door after the last person, he did an about face, leaned his back against the wall, and gave Luke what amounted to the stink-eye.

Since he hadn't called the meeting, Luke said nothing while he waited for Brian to pronounce sentence on him.

He didn't have to wait long.

The man's breath erupted like a premature ejaculation. "Rossi, your negotiations with the nurses' union cost the company a million dollars."

"Really? Because I thought my negotiating saved us two million." Luke spoke around the knot in his throat and struggled to keep his tone even. He didn't want to continue working here, but he hated the stigma of getting fired.

"How do you figure? You reduced bonuses by forty percent. Your creative accounting will result in an average five percent cut in pay for administrators in top management."

While the average was five percent, Brian's reduction came in the highest at fifteen percent. Luke was pretty sure the personal pay cut was motivating his boss' aggression.

Luke jammed his hands into his pockets to keep from reaching for Brian's throat. Of course the dickhead would be concerned about his own pay. "We polled the staff before we ever began the talks with the union and every one of them agreed to the pay cut. We'd stand to lose better than forty percent of our revenue if the medical staff went out on strike. The way I see it, I didn't fry up your bacon. I saved it."

"The board agreed to hire you because of your reputation as a negotiator."

"A reputation I lived up to during these contract talks." Luke narrowed his eyes and stared Brian down. "We managed to avert the strike, a feat you went out of your way to make damned hard. What, you thought I'd negotiate in favor of management's side? The only thing I was interested in achieving with these talks was the ongoing success of St. Simeon's. I believe I accomplished that particular goal."

"I disagree. And I'm sure the board will also. As soon as I speak to them, I predict your services will no longer be required. Our attorney is drawing up a separation agreement." Brian pivoted to stare out the window.

The damn jackass couldn't even make eye contact while telling a valuable employee he was going to be fired.

“I have a contract.” Luke squashed the anger rising in his gut. He’d expected this, but it was still a shock. He’d gone above and beyond in the time he’d been here. The staff liked him, and he was fucking great at his job. “Breaking that will cost you even more money.”

Brian pushed off the wall, but didn’t move away from the door, as if afraid to approach Luke at the table. “Your contract will be taken into consideration when we draw up the papers. Seriously, Rossi. What did you think would happen? That the board would just roll over when they find out you jacked around with executive compensation? And what about the doctors? Your bonus cuts affect them, too.”

That was bullshit. Luke had an email message trail where the doctors’ ombudsman suggested the cuts as a way to contribute to the bottom line. Luke had shared the proposed offer with the board and the professional staff. Not a single one of them had said no. And the percentage cut was tiered so the docs would hardly notice their bonuses were a bit less.

Luke crossed his arms over his chest. “Wouldn’t the board rather see the nurses compensated justly? I thought that was the directive they sent three weeks ago. We’d have started in a better negotiating position if the arrogant doctors had behaved like professionals around the medical staff. That’s what brought this to a head.”

Brows lowered over glaring eyes, Brian raised his voice. “Don’t bring the doctors into this discussion. In fact, don’t say anything else. I’m convening an emergency meeting of the board on Monday morning. I’d do it this afternoon if all the members were in town. You’ll be informed of our decision.”

He raised his left arm and made a show of checking his watch. “You should consider clearing out your office. I don’t believe you’ll occupy it for much longer. Oh, and I need your proposed budget for the accounting staff’s compensation package. We’ll be examining it very closely. I believe there were some irregularities.”

*No fucking way.* The jackass thought Luke was cooking the damn books? Frustration reared its ugly head in the form

of a curse Luke couldn't keep from blurting out. Which earned him one final scowl before Brian jerked open the door and scurried out without another word.

Luke dropped his chin to his chest and expelled a harsh laugh. This entire week was all jacked up. He'd worked like a dog, not just at the bargaining table, but helping out on the wards. He hadn't had more than three hours of sleep during the negotiation phase. And he'd finished a new budget to present to the board for a vote in record time. Getting that ready had cost him and his staff twelve-hour days.

Four extra hours for three days of his life that he could have spent with Jac. All because Brian Evert decided playing hardball was *not* a dick move.

*I've sacrificed enough, goddammit. It ends now.*

He shoved his laptop into the case; crammed his spreadsheets into a side pocket. He focused on the table littered with pens, crumpled papers, dirty water glasses, and coffee cups. "Fuck it. Housekeeping will clean it up."

At least he did stop by the coffee maker in the corner. As he flipped off the power switch, the grow-hair-on-your-chest aroma from the already burned brew slapped him in the face. The smell alone was enough to make him quit drinking coffee forever. As he snatched his briefcase from the table, the conference room door eased open.

The Director of Nursing, Roberta Fleming, stood in the door. "Got a second, Luke?"

Christ, now what? A vein in Luke's forehead throbbed angrily to life. If she wanted to bitch about the agreement, he thought his head might just explode. She'd probably lurked in the hall, waiting for Evert to leave so she could take her swing at haranguing him.

Huffing out a breath, he said, "I was just on my way out."

She didn't take the hint. A quiet snick filled the air as Roberta pushed the door closed. The heels of her shoes scuffed on the tiled floor as she sashayed across the room. "I wanted to



thank you for everything you did for my staff during these negotiations.”

Luke blinked hard and dropped his briefcase onto the nearest chair. It wasn't even close to what he'd expected her to say. “You're welcome. At least you appreciate the effort.” He slanted his gaze away from her earnest expression.

“Uh-oh. Evert threatened your job, didn't he? I could tell he wasn't happy with what was unilaterally a fair agreement.”

“I'll deal. They hired me for my negotiating skills. I'll work it out.” Luke despised the note of forced confidence he heard in his own voice.

She stepped forward to rest her hands on the back of the chair across from him. “You know, I've watched the events of this past week unfolding. I've seen everything you've done to help out. You've pitched in on the wards, and I've heard through the grapevine that after you finished your fill-in shifts, you retreated to your office to work some more on the bargaining agreement.”

“I've only done as much as any other management employee.”

Her laughter was derisive. “Not all of them. I didn't see Evert on the line or in the office, slaving through late hours with you. He shot a ten over par on the golf course Saturday, and later ordered filet and a bottle of white for dinner, according to my sources.”

Of course he'd gone out to play while there was work to be done. The snort that had built for the better part of the past five minutes finally escaped. “Really? White? Everyone knows you order red with steak.”

Roberta laughed and waved a hand as if dismissing his boss as inconsequential and inconvenient. Maybe incompetent would be another 'I' word to describe him. “Brian's leisure pastimes are not what I wanted to speak to you about. As part of the process for hiring you, I've read your résumé. I was impressed.”

“No idea where you're going with this, Roberta.”

“Ever think about being a Duck?”

Luke laughed. “Only when it rains.” He was still unsure what she was trying to say.

“A friend of mine is the administrator at the University Health Center. They serve students at the University of Oregon. The Ducks, you know?” At his blank expression, she shrugged and continued. “Anyway, the health center is hiring a new CFO. There will also be some teaching opportunities associated with the job. You came to mind.”

“In Eugene?” This could be the answer to his dilemma. If St. Simeon’s broke his contract, he’d be a free agent. He could go anywhere he wanted. And with the kind of severance settlement he planned to negotiate, he’d have time to make up his mind.

If he took a job in Eugene, he’d be with Jac. At the moment, being with Jac topped his list of priorities. Certainly the prospect of being able to teach again just sweetened the appeal of a job as a Duck.

“Yep. I kind of figured once our agreement was ironed out, you might be in a position to have to find a new job.” Roberta’s observation stopped Luke’s wandering thoughts dead in their tracks.

“How’d you figure?” he asked.

“History repeats itself around here with entirely too much frequency. Brian fired the last CFO to negotiate a union contract. Too bad you accounting types aren’t union. Your jobs might be a bit more secure.”

“Well, shit. I’d have expected this outcome if I’d known that. Probably not the kind of info Evert would share with prospective candidates.” Would the knowledge have changed Luke’s decision to relocate here? *Maybe*. But he’d never have met Jac if he’d known. And meeting her might be the luckiest thing to have happened to him.

Rebecca shifted her weight to one leg and juttred her chin. “My take, after years of working with him, is that Brian Evert is selfish. And a selfish man would never share anything

capable of making him seem less than ... well, attractive, for want of a better word.”

Damn straight the bastard was selfish. He'd more than amply displayed the trait during the negotiations, with all his digs about the bonus structure modification. It wouldn't do Luke any good to mention that now. “No comment.”

“There's another thing I like about you. You're discreet.” A smile stretched across Roberta's face, lighting her pale blue eyes and creasing deep lines into the skin around them. “What I wanted to ask is whether you'd mind if I forwarded your qualifications to Dan, my friend at the health center.”

“Actually, I believe I'd like that. I'm wondering why I haven't heard anything about this on my association's loops. Normally, this kind of plum opening would be all over the place.”

“Job isn't listed yet. They've held off.” She drummed her fingers on the chair and studied her feet before meeting his gaze again. “The truth is, I've already sent the résumé I had. They're holding off listing it until they knew the outcome of our talks.”

“What?”

“I like you, Luke. I like your work ethic, the way you interact with staff. The way you've handled yourself in this situation. I figured Evert would stay true to form and cut you loose once everything was over and done. He is such a d-bag,” she snorted, then covered her mouth and continued with a sheepish tilt to her lips. “I want to see you land on your feet. Especially since I'll be joining the OU health center next month as their new Director of Nursing. I'd kind of like to keep you in my corner.”

He couldn't help it. Luke's chest puffed up like a helium balloon. “Really, you're leaving too?” There, he'd admitted he was out of here. Even if the board opted not to fire him, he'd break the contract himself for an opportunity to live in Eugene with Jac.

“Yeah. I haven’t handed in my resignation letter yet, but my last day will be in mid-October. I wanted to stay through the contract negotiations to make sure my nurses got the best deal. They did. Now I’m outta here.”

Her dedication to seeing her staff get a livable deal made Roberta a freaking great D.O.N. in Luke’s opinion. “And the University Health Center has my résumé?”

Roberta nodded. “Yes. I’m driving up next week, if you want to go with me. Dan told me he’d clear his calendar if you’re interested enough to make time for him.” She dug in the pocket of her white lab coat and pulled out a business card, offering it to him. “Give him a call, then let me know.”

Luke studied the bold green and gold lettering on the card. He lifted his eyes to find Roberta with a triumphant expression on her face. He smiled. “Thanks. I’ll call him. If you speak to him before I reach him, please let him know I’m interested. Very interested.”

“I will. Now, I’ll let you go, because I know you’re dying to get to work. Highly motivated to make Brian resemble the jackass he is by taking the high road.” She paused. “Hey, Luke?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks again for everything you’ve done for the nurses of St. Simeon. I’ve enjoyed working with you here, and I’m eager to continue working with you.”

A cheery whistle eased from Luke as he grabbed his briefcase. He strode across the room and followed Roberta from the conference room.

For the first time in two days, Luke found he had a positive outlook on his future prospects. Personal and professional.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Jac nudged the moving box with her toe and sent it under the kitchen table. Good thing it was lightweight, holding just linens and plastic containers. She straightened for the first time in the past hour and arched her back, easing the kinks that had developed as she'd boxed up the contents of her kitchen. It was Tuesday evening, and with Luke out of town, she'd hit the grocery store and cleaned out their supply of cardboard to start packing up her life in Medford.

There seemed to be a war going on inside her. Part happy to start her new career, part unhappy to face the separation from Luke necessary to move on. She still marveled at how quickly her love for the man had grown. They'd spent the whole weekend together, and tears had built behind Jac's eyes after he'd left Sunday night. She even missed the mysterious, secretive smile she'd come to expect whenever he thought she wasn't looking.

She'd asked him what was up, only to have him distract her with a kiss each time. Kisses that led to much more. In spite of the stiffness in her back, thinking of their lovemaking sessions melted her bones as heat rushed through her body.

From the next room, Bella hollered, "Are we done yet?"

Her friend had come under protest. Or so she'd declared. When Jac had broken the news of her impending move, Bella cried as she hugged Jac. And loudly cursed Ted Fleury for being an idiot. Quick to forgive, Bella had dragged Jac to the neighborhood pub and ordered dirty martinis to celebrate.

Jac was going to miss her friend dearly. “Are the books all boxed up?” she hollered back. Fists propped on her hips, she glanced at the mountain of boxes crammed with plates, pans, glasses, and everything else she’d emptied from her cabinets.

“Yes they are, you slave driver.” A thud echoed over the hardwood of her living room floor. Bella must have dropped an overstuffed box.

“We’re done, then.” Jac walked to the fridge. Waiting inside was a bottle of white wine from the case Jules had shipped to her, and a plate of fruit and cheese. She grabbed both items and deposited them on the counter, then collected the opener she’d left there and shoved it into her back pocket. Tipping a couple of plastic drinking glasses over the bottle, she picked everything up and left the kitchen.

Bella lay sprawled on the area rug amid the boxes. She lifted her head when Jac approached. “Oh, my God. You have wine!”

Jac sent her friend a grin. “Of course I do. And snacks. We can order curry later, if you’re still hungry.”

“My hero.” Bella’s laughter tinkled gaily.

Jac set the wine and cheese on the coffee table before sinking to the floor next to her friend. She grasped the neck of the bottle and quickly opened the wine. After sniffing the cork and passing it to Bella, Jac separated the two cups she’d brought and poured a liberal amount for them both.

Bella’s eyes drifted shut as she inhaled the bouquet lingering on the cork. “Smells delicious. This came from Jules’ vineyard? If all her wine is this good, we need a road trip soon.” She struggled to sit up to accept the glass Jac offered.

“She said we’re welcome anytime. I think she wants us to spend as much time there as we can. You’ll adore her. She told me she has a break in her schedule in late October and she’s planning a trip to Eugene to check on her investment. You should come too. We’ll have so much fun.” Anticipation of her

friend's visit already approached Kid-at-Christmas level for Jac.

"I can't believe it. You're leaving. Luke's leaving. Roberta's going, too. Everybody's deserting Medford like zombies are about to invade." Bella frowned and took a noisy slurp of her wine.

"Whoa! What do you mean, Luke's leaving?" Jac gaped, confused. He hadn't said anything to her about going somewhere else.

Bella's eyes widened. She set her cup aside and plastered her fingers over her mouth. "Aw, heck! He didn't tell you yet?"

Jac shook her head mutely.

Bella sighed. "The board released him from his contract yesterday."

Yesterday? God, being fired was a big damn deal and Luke hadn't mentioned it to her. "What the hell?"

"Oh, damn. I thought you knew. Although, I should have guessed not when the subject didn't come up."

Jac gestured impatiently, hoping to speed up Bella's story.

"That douchy CEO convinced the board it was time to cut ties with Luscious Luke," Bella began. "Apparently he cost St. Simeon's too much as a result of the contract talks. I'm in HR and I can tell you Luke negotiated a fair deal. Everyone but his boss is happy with the new agreement."

"When did this happen?" Jac's voice sounded hollow even to herself. Why hadn't he told her? Was the distance between them already widening?

"I guess it happened late yesterday afternoon. The official email just went out this morning." Bella's thick blond hair bounced on her shoulders as she shook her head. "I stopped by his office to wish him good luck, but it was already vacant. Even the cork picture he brought back from the team building thing last week was gone."

Jac was really confused now. "What picture?"

“It was of a barn with vines marching away into the horizon. I noticed it when I dropped some papers off for him earlier week. He said you’d made it together.”

When had he purchased it? Jac had thought about buying it herself but held off after Jules had told her it was going on display at the gallery in town to raise money for charity. Luke had scooped it up to hang it where he’d see it every day and be reminded of how they’d met. If she wasn’t already in love with him, she’d have fallen hard and fast right then and there.

“So, Luke’s gone. Roberta, the Director of Nursing, is leaving at the end of the month. But the one person who really needs to be gone will stay here.” Bella’s brows drew together fiercely. “Damn Brian Evert. I don’t know why the board doesn’t fire him.”

Before Jac could respond, the intercom buzzed. Hopping to her feet, she raced across the room. She expected Luke. It had to be him. She pressed the *Talk* button. “Yes?”

“It’s me.” Luke’s voice sounded garbled through the speaker.

“Come on up.” Jac slid the release mechanism over for a few seconds, then opened the door so Luke could let himself in once he got off the elevator.

Turning, she discovered Bella had also risen to her feet and swilled the contents of her wine glass. Depositing the glass back on the table, Bella grabbed a cube of cheese to pop into her mouth. As she chewed, she retrieved her handbag from the table by the door.

“I’m outta here. You don’t need me around right now. For what it’s worth, I’m sure Luke has a valid reason for not telling you yesterday.” Bella swept her arms around Jac and kissed her cheek.

With a cheery salute, she sauntered out the door and down the hall to wait. The bell pinged and the elevator doors swept open, revealing Luke with a huge grin on his face.

The grin dimmed a little when he spied Bella waiting to jump on. His voice was wary. “Hi. I hope I’m not interrupting.



I can come back.”

Bella waved him off. “I was just leaving.” She cast a glance over her shoulder and winked at Jac.

Luke stepped off the elevator and held the door for Bella. “I guess you’ve heard.”

Bella slipped past him in the small space. When she turned, her face was somber, but her eyes snapped and sparkled. “About what a waste of skin Brian Evert is? Old news, my friend. I didn’t get a chance to talk to you before the board, in their finite wisdom, kicked you to the curb. For what it’s worth, they’ve made a huge mistake. They let the wrong guy go.” She reached forward and pressed a button. “I believe you’ll land on your feet. Let me know if you need a reference.”

Eyebrows raised, Luke glanced from Bella to Jac. “I appreciate the offer, but I think I’m good. I’d be happy to provide a reference should you ever find yourself on the wrong side of the board.”

Bella laughed. “Thanks. Good luck, Luke. Bye, Jac.” The doors slid shut.

Luke headed down the hall toward her door. Raising her arms, Jac wrapped them around his shoulders, holding on as he swung her around in the narrow corridor. Her dizziness wasn’t just a result of the motion, but also caused by the brush of his chest, hips, and thighs to hers.

A jagged bolt of electricity shot down her spine, lodging low in her center. She should be hurt that he hadn’t shared his news with her yesterday. But she couldn’t summon much more than token ire.

“Put me down, you big dope. I think I’m angry with you.” She thumped her fist on his shoulder blade.

In response, he twisted until her back was to the wall, sandwiched between the exposed brick and his solid body. “Don’t know why you’d be mad.” He nipped at her lips, then eased the tiny sting with his tongue.

She returned the questing kiss, her mouth molding to his for endless moments before her lips tore from his. She leaned her head against the wall and gazed into his blue eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me about being let go?”

His breath caressed her cheek as he exhaled. “Probably for the same reason you didn’t tell me about the tax bill. I didn’t want you to worry on my behalf.”

“I’m sorry you lost your job. Bella told me the staff isn’t very happy with the board at this point. She said the nursing director is leaving too. Is her departure related to yours?”

“About that ...” He scooped her up and lifted, tucking his arm under her thighs. Carrying her, he walked into her condo. The door banged as he kicked it shut. He didn’t stop walking until he reached the couch.

He sat on the cushions and settled her in his lap. Contemplating her, a Cheshire cat grin broke over his lips. “Actually, Roberta is going to work for the University in Eugene as nursing director for their student health service. I went up there this morning for an interview. Spent most of the afternoon apartment shopping. See, I’ve just accepted an offer from them as their new CFO.”

Elation, buoyed by hope, rose in her chest. She grasped his cheeks between her hands, framing his huge smile. “You’re going to be working in Eugene? Really?”

He nodded and started to speak, only to stop abruptly when she captured his mouth under hers. Arms wrapped tightly around his neck, she put every speck of happiness she felt into her caress.

His hands roved the length of her spine, then came back to her shoulders as he eased away from her.

“I’m glad you’re okay with me following you there.” His tone was hesitant, his brows raised. “I didn’t want to take it for granted that you’d welcome me there. I found a place on the same side of town as your land. I think it’s about ten miles away from you.”

“Oh my God. Luke, of course I’m overjoyed we’ll be in the same town. I couldn’t be happier.”

“I’m relieved. The job is great and pays well. Plus, they’ve requested my help in developing a new curriculum in health care administration. I’ll even get to teach a couple of classes.” His eyes shone, his white teeth flashing between his smiling lips.

“I was wrong. I am happier. This is your dream, Luke, to teach. I’m so thrilled for you.”

They were two peas in a pod. Pursuing the goals and aspirations, which only a week ago were nothing more than ideas. She’d move to Eugene, and Luke was going with her.

He traced the track of tears leaking from her eyes, his fingertip soft and gentle on her skin. “I’m thrilled for *us*, Jac,” he said, his voice as soft as his caress. “We haven’t known each other very long, but you’re already a permanent fixture in my life. We’re meant to be together. Knowing we’ll be living in the same town means we can see where this road takes us. I love you.”

He sealed his words with a tender kiss.

Jac pulled away and frowned. “Not good enough.”

His mouth went slack, and he sucked in a harsh breath. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Jac fought to keep her face stern. “Living in the same town with you isn’t good enough for me. I want to live in the same house with you. I want your face to be the last thing I see each night. And nothing would make me happier than to greet each day by looking into your eyes. I love you, too, and I want you to move in with me.”

She covered her mouth with her hand, shocked that she’d asked him to live with her. “I can’t believe I just asked you that. Don’t answer. I’m sorry to have put you on—”

He laid his fingers over hers, pressing both their hands to her lips. “I know you’ll be working hard, getting the business off the ground. I’ll help where I can. If you want, I’d even keep the books for you. I do have some accounting skills. I’d

love to live with you, Jac. Because now that I have you on my team, I want to spend every available minute with you.”

She slipped her hand from under his and laid it on his chest. As she stared into his eyes, she let the love she saw reflected there shine back to him.

He was right ... they were a team.

## SNEAK PEEK: HIDDEN IN THE VINES

Growing up in the supersized shadow of a famous mother led Jules Capelli to retreat far from the glamorous lifestyle. She owns and runs Team Vino, a team building operation based in a working vineyard. In the midst of a seminar, her high-profile, high-maintenance mother insists Jules shelter her among the vines after recent plastic surgery. Keeping the woman hidden will require a monumental effort, especially with two reporters from an entertainment magazine in the attendance.

Alex Dixon has known from the minute he checked into Team Vino for employer mandated team training, that Jules is hiding something. Learning her secret is key, but he's more interested in getting to know the appealing woman. Jules's secret is a great distraction, but once discovered, making sure it remains hidden from his bottom-feeding co-worker is even more of a challenge.

Working together as a team, Jules and Alex discover a mutual attraction and a common goal ... keep the secret, build a team and uncover love among the vines.

# HIDDEN IN THE VINES

## CHAPTER 1

Jules Capelli's happy, quiet, far-from-the-madding-crowd life tumbled straight into the shitter in the time it took her assistant to utter eight fateful words.

"I thought you told her she shouldn't come."

Marcus Jepson's ominous words clanged through her consciousness like the foghorn at Point Reyes. Loud, blaring, caught-by-surprise scary.

Snapping her attention away from the activity schedule she'd been buried under for the past hour, she followed his gaze out the office window. Oh hell, an ostentatious Rolls Phantom glided to a stop in the vineyard's parking lot. Not in a space, mind you. In the freaking center of the traffic lane. As if by divine privilege, this car wasn't required to adhere to mundane traffic laws or niceties.

Gitta Grimes had disregarded Jules' request that she stay away from Team Vino. Probably should have told the woman to stay the *fuck* away, but the language would have only earned Jules a scolding for using profanity. Her stomach clenched. The unreachable spot between her shoulder blades itched worse than when she'd had a cast on a broken wrist and the summer temperatures had soared. She'd kill for a knitting needle or chopstick or something long and sharp to ease the discomfort. Or maybe put herself out of her misery.

The chauffeur hopped out and jerked his black vest into place. He practically danced around the front end of the car. Jules pressed trembling fingers against her lips, as if to hold in

a scream at the driver to stop, get back in his goddamn status symbol, and drive away. Biting her tongue, she watched the driver lay his gloved fingers on the chrome-plated handle and yank the door open. He extended his arm toward the interior.

Peyton Channing, Gitta's glamorous assistant, alighted—*yeah, that's the right word*—from the back. Cigarette-fit black jeans molded to the woman's bulimic-esque frame. A fuzzy chartreuse sweater was the perfect backdrop for the waterfall of Peyton's long, curly blond tresses. The length was six inches longer than it had been two months ago, confirming Jules' suspicion the extra hair was really expensive extensions.

Peyton flipped her pretty-girl tendrils as she pranced across the lot toward the office.

Jules peered through the darkened windows of the limo to see whether Gitta had accompanied Peyton. Maybe the planets were aligned harmoniously and she'd be lucky. Or maybe not. Movement in the rear compartment solidified her incipient dread into a giant sour lump in her gut.

As Jules stood, her chair groaned in solidarity with her attitude. "Damn, damn, damn! She never listens."

"Well, I ... uh, I have to go see about ... something." Marcus slammed his desk drawer shut. Horror muddied his normally chocolate-colored eyes. Leaping from his seat, he beat a path to the rear exit.

"Don't you dare—"

The slamming door cut off her words. Jules cast a frantic glance between his vacated chair and the main entrance. She was too late. The clack of Peyton's spiked heels warned she had climbed the stairs of the front porch. Barring the door, and pretending no one was in, was no longer an option.

With her usual flair for the dramatic, the string bean flung the door open, and breezed through it.

"Julia, darling. We're here."

Peyton swooped in for an air kiss, lips pursed in a smile as fake as her boobs, Botox-ed brow frozen in place.



Jules deftly put her rolling chair between them. “I told her no.”

A shake of the head sent Peyton’s hair into motion. *About the only thing on her head capable of moving.* Hesitation crept into her eyes but she blinked it away. “She knew you were kidding. It’s your duty to take care of her in her time of need.”

The acrid ball resting in the pit of Jules’ belly melted into immediate, choking steam. “What the hell, Peyton? Why is it my responsibility to provide a hiding spot while she recovers from plastic surgery?”

Peyton tsked her tongue against her overly bright, veneered teeth. The sound reminded Jules of the incessant song of a cicada; creepy, disgusting bugs. “There was nowhere else she could go. She had to get out of Hollywood. The gossip rags caught wind she’d had a procedure.”

Jules raked her fingers through the short wisps of her hair and snorted. “A procedure? Only one. That’s novel.”

Miracle of miracles, Peyton’s chemically frozen lips thinned into a straight line. Jules had scored a direct hit. “There’s no need to be snarky.”

“Yeah, going to check number one on that statement ... strongly disagree.” Jules shoved her hands into her back pockets and leaned against the corner of her desk.

Impatience and a miniscule amount of panic flared in Peyton’s eyes. “Jules, I’m begging you. She needs to be completely out of the public eye for at least two weeks. This is the most remote location we could get to in a vehicle in one day. Traveling isn’t easy for her right now. She’s in pain.”

A giant sucking hole melted in the steel sheeting enclosing Jules’ heart. Her job revolved around helping people work better in teams. Even though it bothered her to say no, when Gitta had called to ask about staying with her while she recovered from her surgery, Jules had been unmistakable in her denial. Which blew, because a tiny piece of her wanted to help. She wanted to be in the role of caregiver and make a

difference. If only she could get past the petty resentment lurking in the shadows of her life.

As usual, Gitta had ignored her wishes. The famous actress lived with the attitude it was good to be queen and lorded her position over all her minions. Knowing the woman was in pain had taken some of the sting away.

Jules trained her gaze on the limo and chewed her lower lip. After surgery, Peyton had called her to say everything was fine, but that Gitta was hurting.

She drew a huge lungful of air and blew it out slowly, reciting *I can do this, I can do this* in her mind. “God, Peyton. Why did she do that to herself? She sure as hell doesn’t need to. Gitta’s beautiful. She looks to be in her upper thirties, not her actual fifty-ish.” It wasn’t long ago that Gitta had beaten a twenty-something actress out of a role portraying a thirty-year old widow. Gitta’s performance had generated some Oscar buzz.

Peyton shrugged and looked away. “She was offered a role as someone’s mother.”

“Ah. Well, that explains so much.” Knowing Gitta, the casting decision had to be devastating.

Jules studied the limo again. Marcus strode across the lot and approached the driver, who lounged against the front end, Winged Victory poking him in the butt. Marcus’ years of providing security for Gitta showed in the way he swept his head from side to side, scanning the area for paparazzi or other threats. Jules pondered which was worse; crazies with cameras, or the just plain crazy.

The silence in the room grew heavy as Peyton waited for an answer. Jules continued to study Marcus. He moved to the back door of the vehicle.

“Don’t do it, don’t do it,” Jules chanted under her breath. She scooted over to the window and pressed her fingertips against the glass. “Ah, shit! He’s done it.”

Marcus had opened the door and stuck his head inside. Gitta probably already had him wrapped around her little

finger. From her vantage point, Jules caught the concerned expression on his face when he looked over his shoulder to the window where she stood.

Spinning away from Marcus' frown, she pressed a hand to her midriff, currently twisting into a painful pretzel. "Her staying here is going to be a logistical nightmare. I have a team event beginning tomorrow. There will be six, no ... wait, I had some add-ons this morning, so eight total strangers roaming the property."

Victory bloomed in Peyton's eyes. At least Gitta's assistant graciously refrained from yelling, "Bingo!"

Annoying, take-charge Peyton surfaced the second Jules didn't say no. To Peyton it probably sounded like capitulation. "We don't have to stay in the main house. We'll stay in that little cabin in the valley. No one will ever see her there. You'll have our meals sent down to us, right? She won't have to come to the dining room."

Jules' shoulders rose toward her ears. Peyton had a point. The little house was extremely remote. Nowhere near the large facility where Jules accommodated her overnight guests. Problem was, Jules had just finished renovating the space and had planned to move her own belongings to it tonight.

Forcing tension out on a solid, resigned breath, Jules concentrated on lowering her shoulders to a neutral position. "The kitchen is stocked. You'll have to cook. With eight guests scheduled, I won't have time to get meals for you also."

Due to the frozen nature of Peyton's face, Jules couldn't be sure, but she thought the woman's expression might be horror.

"Fine, but Gitta hates my cooking. Says I burn water."

"Not going to work, Peyton, so just give it up. I'll be too busy trying to keep the teams on the opposite side of the vineyard, away from you and Gitta."

Jules crossed back to her desk. With a couple of fast key strikes, she locked her computer, scooped up her keys, and gestured to the door. Following Peyton outside, her feet grew heavier, as if she had weights strapped to her ankles, more

reluctant as she approached the limo. As Marcus backed away from the door, she curled her lip, hoping to convey her contempt for his betrayal as well as her intention to get even with him. Maybe she'd lock him in a bedroom with Peyton.

Drawing a deep breath to fortify herself, Jules bent down to look into the darkened interior of the car. "Hi, Mom. Welcome to Team Vino."

\* \* \*

"Dixon! Rawlings! Get your asses in here," Mike Simon bellowed from the door of his fishbowl office.

Alex Dixon smothered his rising anger. The rude summons wasn't unexpected. Bad enough he was getting called to the office. To have to go there with Todd *the jackass* Rawlings chafed like a bad case of jock itch on a sweltering day. Behind him, Rawlings swore profusely under his breath.

Throwing his pen down, Alex shoved up from his desk. On the way past, Rawlings bumped into Alex's chair, jarring it into the backs of his knees. Alex slapped his palms on the desk to steady himself. Rawlings shot an irritated glance over his shoulder, eyes narrowed and upper lip curled as he moved toward Simon's office. The doofus barely missed running into the copy machine. *Dipshit*.

Alex shook his head, sending a *what-the-fuck* look after Rawlings. The bastard had started the war; wining and dining one of Alex's key sources with the intent to scoop a story. It hadn't made a lick of difference to Rawlings that Alex had cultivated this particular contact over months and months. His patience had paid off, he was one meeting away from swaying the guy to agree to provide access to the studio's finance people.

Part of the master plan to concentrate his reporting skills on the business end of Hollywood, as opposed to the talent side.

When he'd taken the job with Entertainment Access, that had been his goal. He didn't give a fuck about what actress had just broken up with her beau. Or which actor had gone off

the deep end and been arrested for public intoxication or domestic abuse. He didn't care to intrude into the gritty details of the lives of the rich and famous. All Alex wanted was a chance to break into the world of business reporting. And Hollywood was basically a business machine. Lots of money. Lots of moving parts.

But Rawlings had destroyed the relationship Alex had painstakingly built. Alex's credibility with his source ended up shot to shit, due to his co-worker's stupidity. Alex had guaranteed confidentiality to the studio representative. Rawlings hadn't felt inclined to honor that promise and blabbed the name of Alex's source to the studio boss, along with the evidence he'd somehow collected, implicating the boss in an affair with an underage actress.

Twenty-four hours later, the source had been terminated and Alex had not one, but two black eyes. The first came from his contact, which Alex considered misplaced but justifiable. He winced when he touched his fingers to the bruise under his left eye. That one was courtesy of Rawlings when confronted about how far he'd stepped over the line.

The SOB had gotten right up in Alex's face so he'd shoved him away. Rawlings roared back and leveled him with a right hook Alex hadn't seen coming. It was the last time the asshole would have an opportunity to catch him unaware.

All of this had gone down yesterday, while their boss had been out of the office. The staff still chattered about the incident this morning, shutting up whenever Alex was in earshot. It hadn't taken long for Big Mike to get wind of it. In between phone calls, he'd glared from under bushy graying brows at the pair of them all morning long.

Trudging toward the office, Alex let his stare bore holes into the back of Rawlings' head. Eyeing the rigid set of the man's shoulders, he couldn't imagine why the Toad was angry. Alex was the wronged party in the entire mess.

"Take a seat," Mike ordered. The glass walls of the office rattled when Mike banged the door shut. The soles of his boots thudded harshly against the concrete floor as he marched

around his desk, each step sounding like a hammer against nails in a coffin.

Rawlings leaned forward in his chair. “Boss, none of this was my—”

“Shut the fuck up.” The bark in the editor’s voice was a big clue about just how pissed off he was. He scrubbed a hand down his face, clenched his fist, and dropped it to the arm of his chair. He stared at a spot over Alex’s head.

Alex waited silently, a negotiating tactic Rawlings hadn’t learned. The dude’s mouth opened and closed, reminding Alex of a freaking large-mouth bass. Tension rose up Alex’s spine like one of those Pharaoh’s Serpent fireworks. The kind that, when lit with a match, created an oily black snake reeking of fire and brimstone. Much like the current situation.

Mike rested his hands on his protruding stomach and lowered his gaze to focus on Alex’s face. “Looking kind of colorful there, Butch. Nothing broken, I hope.”

“Nah, just bruised.”

Avoiding eye contact with Rawlings, Simon concentrated on drawing a circle on the scarred desktop with one blunt finger. Rawlings’ knee bounced like a kid who’d waited too long to run to the bathroom. An upholstery tack dug into Alex’s fingertip as he gripped the edge of his chair. Otherwise, he remained motionless, waiting for Simon to mete out punishment. Undeserved as far as Alex was concerned.

Mike gusted out a breath and continued to stare at the desk. “I can’t have fistfights in the office. We’re a team here. You’re supposed to help each other, not try to beat each other to a pulp.”

“He shoved me. I had to defend myself,” Rawlings said in his whiny little bitch voice.

The Toad’s tone raked across Alex’s shoulders. Repressing a shudder, he leaned back in his chair, choosing to not reply. Judging by Mike’s thinned lips and lowered brow, it wasn’t necessary for Alex to say a damned thing.

Slapping his palm on the arm of his chair, Mike bellowed, “I thought I told you to shut the fuck up! I’ll talk and you will listen.” He drew a breath, held it then sighed it out, as though expelling poison. “Rawlings, you crossed a line when you went after Dixon’s source. Confidential sources are protected. You damn well know that.”

Alex tightened his grip on the edge of his chair. The unspoken *but* at the end of Mike’s sentence boded ill for him. Rawlings shot a death glare at him across the small space between their chairs. Alex smirked back at him and waited for Mike to continue.

“But ...” Yep, there it was. “You did uncover a larger, juicier story. We managed to scoop every other entertainment media outlet in the country. Unfortunately, that is the only reason I’m not firing your ass for violating the sacred nature of a confidential source.”

Mike chewed a fingernail and leaned his head of unnaturally brown hair against the oily stain on the chair’s leather headrest. He pinned Alex with an inscrutable look as he waved a hand in Rawlings’ direction. “Why did you have to shove him?”

Alex squashed the sick feeling in the pit of his gut. “The prick deserved it. I’d worked my source for too damn long. He blew the relationship out of the water in less than an hour.”

Rawlings’ stunt ruined not just Alex’s reputation, but had probably destroyed the career of a studio executive. The public would be outraged to hear the sixty-year-old family man had been slipping the salami to a teenage starlet. The exec deserved whatever he got, but the scandal was going to hurt the company’s sales for years. The studio’s chances of survival looked grim from where Alex sat.

“Maybe. But I can’t condone violence in the work place.” Mike shifted his glance out the window like there was some kind of mythical creature hovering just beyond the glass. Shaking his head, he looked back at them. “HR has informed me they’ve signed you both up for remediation. You’re relieved of duty until you complete a team building course.”

Rawlings spluttered, “What? I can’t take off time now. I have to follow this story.”

Mike growled, effectively shutting down Rawlings’ protest. “We’re giving the story to Renner. She’ll cover the fallout and get an interview with the actress.”

Shit. Renner was a lightweight. The studio was going to eat her for lunch. Alex bit back a curse. Losing his story hurt, but being forced to go through a team building exercise with the jackass sitting next to him pegged the needle on the suckage meter. But, he still held his peace. No need to make Mike any angrier than he already appeared to be.

“Clear your calendars for the rest of the week. We’ve made arrangements for you to go to Team Vino. While there, you’ll both receive counseling from a psychologist to help with your anger management issues.”

He jerked papers from a file folder and spun them around, revealing the title. *Disciplinary Action*. Double damn.

Mike dropped a pen on each form. “You’re both being written up for your little escapade yesterday. Completion of the team building exercise, and a positive report from the shrink, are conditions of your continued employment with Entertainment Access. You leave first thing tomorrow morning. Travel has booked you on the twelve-thirty flight to San Fran and rented you each a car for the trip to Santa Rosa.”

At least Alex wasn’t required to sit in a car with the fuckwad from the airport to the hotel. He’d have his own vehicle. Alex rolled his eyes heavenward, thankful for small courtesies.

“I have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow morning. I can’t leave that early,” Rawlings grumbled.

The muscle in Mike’s jaw popped convulsively. “Fuck, what are you? Seven? I’ll have Travel rebook you on a later flight. But the session starts tomorrow evening with a team dinner and you had better be there. Now sign the form and get the fuck out of my sight.”



Jesus, the Toad was a whiny bitch. There was a serious danger Alex would choke to death trying to swallow the rude comments he was dying to make. He grabbed the pen, knuckles turning white when he gripped the thin instrument. Ten seconds later, he'd scrawled his signature on the corrective action form.

He walked out of the editor's office without a backward glance. The next few days were going to be hell.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gemma Brocato's favorite desk accessories for many years was a circular wooden token, better known as a 'round tuit,' and a fortune from a fortune cookie that said she was a lover of words; someday she'd write a book. It took a transfer to the United Kingdom, the lovely English springtime, and a huge dose of homesickness to write her first novel. Now, with almost 30 books written, she finally feels like an author.

For more information, visit

<http://www.GemmaBrocato.com>

To keep up Gemma's details, like sales, new releases, and her general clumsiness (come on, who hasn't tripped up stairs?), please subscribe to her newsletter. [Click Here](#)

