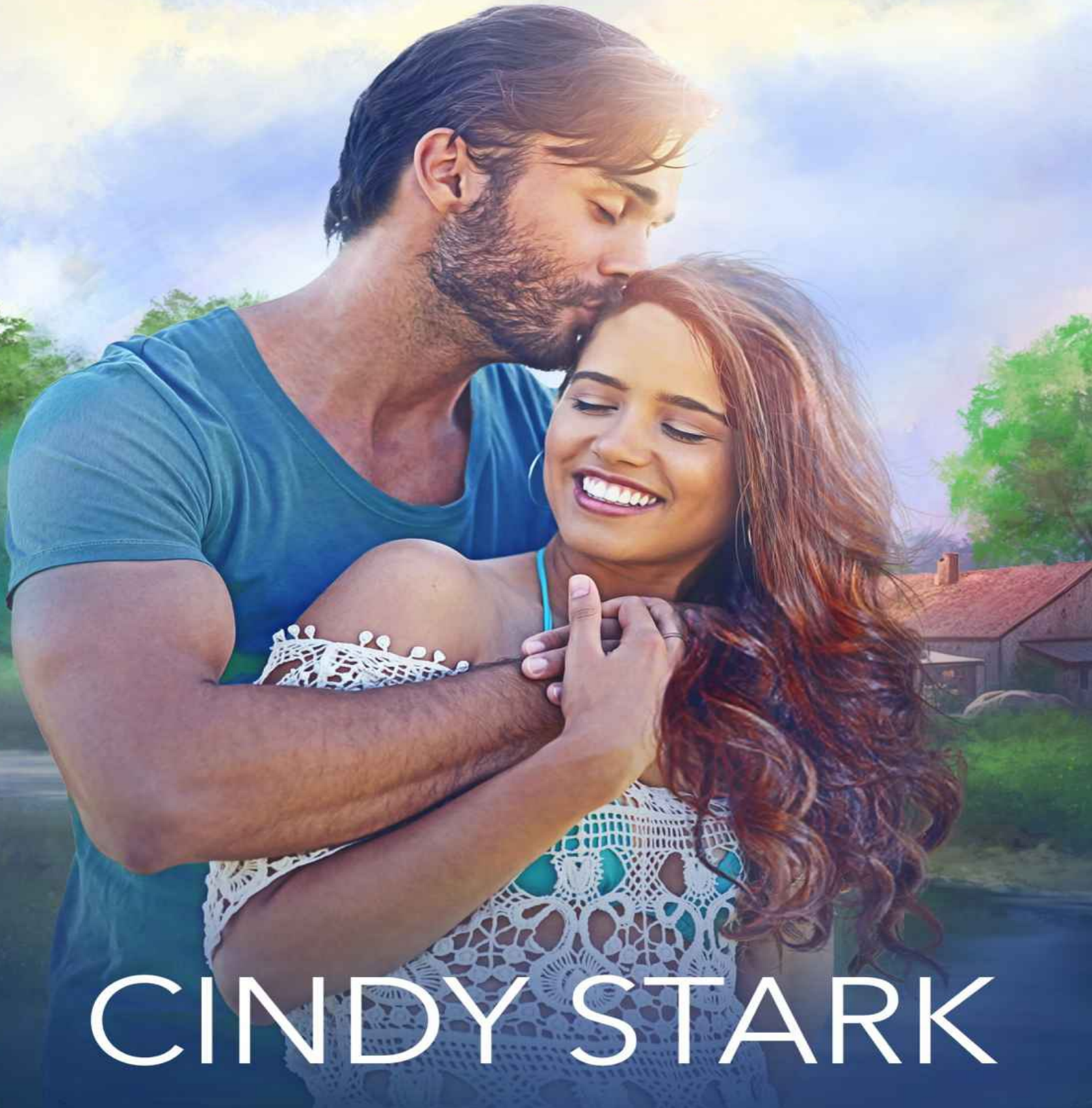


# Surrender

THE ASPEN SERIES



CINDY STARK

# **SURRENDER**

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THE ASPEN SERIES

# CINDY STARK



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If Tyler Morgan didn't know better, he'd swear someone had covered his cowboy boots with lead. Each step up the cement stairs leading to Aspen's old courthouse was a chore, and the sunny day in mid-March belied the heavy cloud that hung over him.

For as many years as he could remember, he'd looked forward to one day owning his grandpa's farm and accompanying farmhouse. Tyler had dreamed of raising a family and growing old in the same home his grandparents had. He'd planned so many changes for the farm, had implemented most of them since he'd been practically running the place for the past ten years.

But he'd never considered the emotional cost of owning it.

Not until now.

At the top of the steps, his mother waited, wearing the same floral print dress and sweater she'd worn to his grandpa's funeral. A soft spring wind tugged at her auburn hair, making her seem younger than she was.

"Hey, Mom," he said, giving her a hug, knowing the death of her father had been hard on them both. His grandpa had been the strong, solid foundation of his life, along with his father, and now he was gone.

His mother took his elbow. "Let's go in. Everyone's waiting."

The inside of the building echoed with years of history long since passed. His great-great-grandfather had been one of the founders of the little community of Aspen, and Tyler's family had roots anchored solidly in the fertile earth.

Tyler held open the door, letting his mother precede him into their attorney's chambers. His father waited there, along with his uncle and two

cousins. His sister, Hannah, was noticeably absent, but that was for the best. Out of all in their family, she'd been the one to sever her roots and look elsewhere for a place to belong. She was currently living in Salt Lake and thankfully on some meds that helped her live a more stable life.

His mom perched on the edge of a stuffed chair in front of the desk while he stood behind her. He hadn't bothered to find a chair because his unsteady emotions wouldn't allow him to remain seated for long.

"I'd like to thank everyone for coming," Ted Bowers said. He looked more like a country farmer than an attorney with his white-buttoned down shirt tucked into a new pair of jeans. "I know Henry is looking down on all of you, very proud of his legacy. You're a fine group of people."

"Thank you, Ted," his mother said. "I know he always admired you, too."

Ted nodded his appreciation, smoothing his long, white mustache before he sat and flipped open his briefcase. "Let's get down to it, shall we?"

The attorney pulled out a file folder before glancing at the group. "I'm afraid Henry left more intangible assets than tangible ones, but that's the kind of man he was. He'd give the shirt off his back to help his neighbor, and he never amassed a significant amount of wealth. To his daughter, Sondra, he left the family jewels. Again, not much market value, but they have sentimental value, to be sure."

Tyler's mom nodded and dabbed at her eyes. "I just really wanted mom's wedding ring," she said to her husband.

The attorney continued. "To his son, Timothy, he left his truck. He knew you weren't interested in the family farm, but he said you'd always commented on how much you liked his truck."

Tyler's uncle laughed. "That old piece of shit? He was always trying to get me to work on it. Now I guess I have to."

The entire group laughed. His grandpa had spent far too many hours tinkering with the old classic, but he'd loved it.

"To Kassie and Kennedy, he left you each two thousand dollars. Another two thousand for Hannah," he said to Tyler's mom. "He hoped it would be a down payment on a house or pay for part of their weddings."

His younger cousins seemed happy with their share of their grandpa's inheritance. Tyler was sure Hannah would be as well. She'd never been close to their grandpa, but his sister was at a point in her life where she could use a little help.

Ted focused his sharp gaze on him. "For Tyler. Your grandpa left the

farm and house as expected.”

Tyler nodded as painful memories squeezed his heart. No one would ever replace his grandpa. He was proud the old man had trusted him to take care of his home and property, but he'd miss sitting on the porch shooting the breeze in the summer evenings when Tyler had finished working the land.

“The belongings of the house can be divided as your family sees fit. The farming implements belong to Tyler.” Ted stood. “That concludes the reading of Henry’s will.”

His mom sniffed as the members of his small family stood and hugged each other again.

His mother turned to his uncle as the group headed for the door. “You’ll stay for dinner, won’t you, Timothy? Before you head out?”

Before his uncle answered his mom, Ted called out to him. “Tyler? Could I speak to you alone for a moment?”

He remained behind as the rest of his family left the room.

The attorney gestured toward the stuffed chair Tyler’s mom had just vacated. “Have a seat.”

Tyler sat, his nerves stiffening with unease. “What’s up, Ted?”

The older attorney heaved a deep sigh. “I’m afraid your inheritance isn’t as cut and dry as we’d like it to be.”

He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans. “What does that mean?”

“It means your grandpa left you in a bit of a bind.” He pulled another sheet of paper from inside the file folder and laid it before Tyler. “I wasn’t aware of this until after your grandpa died, but he hasn’t paid taxes on the place for a couple of years. Now, we could force the girls to give back their money to help pay for it, but that didn’t seem right.”

“No, I don’t want that, either,” he said absently as he glanced at the sheet and zeroed in on the amount listed at the bottom. He tried to swallow, but couldn’t. “*Twenty-thousand dollars?* How the hell was he twenty-thousand dollars in debt?”

A sad look crossed Ted’s face. “Your grandma’s hospital bills. The loss on the crops three years ago and nothing in savings to cover it.”

“He never said anything. He told me he was doing okay.” Tyler stood, no longer able to remain seated. “*Damn it.*”

“I’m sorry, Tyler. I know this is hard news on top of your grandpa’s death. But I have a solution.”

“What?” he practically yelled. Ted widened his eyes, and Tyler tried to



rein in his feelings. “I’m sorry, but there *is* no solution. I don’t have twenty thousand sitting in the bank.”

Ted stroked the short hairs on his chin, and Tyler was sure he was gauging what kind of reaction he’d get. “Let the government take the house so you can pay the back taxes and keep the property. You’ll receive the remaining funds.”

The anger deflated from Tyler like the leaky tire on his dad’s truck. It *was* a solution. Just not one that he could consider. “I don’t want to lose the house. It’s my grandparents’ home. It’s where I was practically raised, and it’s where I want to raise my family.”

Ted threaded his fingers together on the desk between them. “I know, son, but at this point, you don’t have much of a choice. Those taxes have to be paid before the title can be transferred. There could be a possible silver lining in this, though. First, how much do you have in savings, and second, how much do you expect to make from your crops this year?”

Tyler exhaled. “I’ve got maybe five thousand.”

“Then that’s only a fifteen-thousand-dollar deficit.”

“*Only fifteen-thousand?*” Tyler scoffed as he rolled his eyes and began to pace, knowing their conversation was going nowhere fast.

“Think about it. Who’ll want to purchase a house that’s sitting squat in the middle of surrounding fields that are owned by someone else? No one in Aspen. Who in their right mind would even know about Aspen if they didn’t live here? Let them take the house. Let them list it. If it stays on the market until the crops come in, you can put that money toward it and buy the house back. The IRS gets paid, and you get your house. It’s a gamble, but I think the odds are in your favor. You only need to earn fifteen-thousand from your crops this year. I know you’ll get far more than that.”

He nodded, the tightness in his chest easing. “That sort of makes sense.”

“Of course it does. Have I ever steered you wrong?”

“No.” Tyler studied his family’s attorney for a moment, searching for other options. Short of taking out a loan, which he couldn’t until he’d paid more on the new farming equipment, Ted’s advice seemed to be his only alternative. “It looks like this decision’s been made for me.”

Ted stood, indicating their meeting was over. “Don’t worry, son. In the end, everything will work out. It always does.”

Starlee Rinehart kept only one light on in the little house she'd rented at the edge of town. Doing so kept her electric bill at a manageable level, and in her opinion, it made her less noticeable to the angry citizens of Masonville. These days, invisibility was a precious thing to her.

She tucked an auburn strand of hair behind her ear as she focused on her computer screen with only a small part of her consciousness anchored in the real world. The rest played deep inside her mind, and her fingers quickly typed what she imagined.

*Gnarled trees twisted and tangled above her, blocking what moonshine the thick clouds allowed. The sound of gravel crunched behind her, and she knew the man was there.*

Her fingers raced across the keyboard as she tried to capture the thoughts spilling from her mind. She'd finished working on the technical paper she'd been hired to create. Now, she had the blessed luxury of playing with the suspense story she'd always wanted to write.

*The woman ran down the dirt road, but the closest house was a mile away. Her lungs would never hold out for that long. She glanced over her shoulder, spying another moving amongst the tree trunks and—*

The sound of shattering glass brought Starlee straight out of her chair. With her heart thundering inside her, she whipped around, searching for the source of her fear. When she spotted nothing, she picked up the baseball bat she kept in the corner of her small bedroom and crept out into the hall, terrorized once again.

In the front room of the house, a cool breeze rippled her curtains. A

breeze that shouldn't be coming through a closed window. A breeze that delivered a familiar, sickening blow.

She peeked out the curtains, but the assailant had gone. There wasn't a car driving on her quiet street. Which meant it had to be kids. *Again*. They were probably hiding in the bare fields across the street, watching and laughing at her.

*Would it ever end?*

She'd become a target over a year ago after the horrible accident on a rainy night in her small town. The police had said it hadn't been her fault, but deep down, she couldn't forgive herself. In her mind, she'd taken one of their beloved hometown sons. It didn't matter that the man was also her husband, and she'd suffered a considerable loss as well. More than any of them had.

None in his family had talked to her since Bradley's funeral, and they were still determined to hold it against her.

Starlee turned on a lamp and found the large rock that had made the hole in her front window. Someone had scribbled *murderer* across it with a red marker. Just like the last four times.

She wouldn't bother calling the police. Nothing ever came of it except more reports and more looks from officers that held either pity or blame, neither of which she wanted.

Her knees threatened to buckle, so she sat on the couch as tears of grief overwhelmed her. Thirteen months had passed, but it seemed her adopted little town would never learn the meaning of forgiveness.

She'd ignored reality for far too long. But the fact was, if she stayed in Masonville, she'd never move beyond the tragedy that had stolen not only her husband, but her safety and soon her sanity.

She needed to find somewhere new, somewhere safe, preferably in a small town where no one cared much about what went on in the outside world. As hard as it would be to move, the time had come for her to reclaim her life. She wanted safety. Ached for friends and to feel like she belonged. Love was a different matter, but she'd decided she could give up dreams of finding someone who truly cared, as long as she had peace and security in her life.

Layers of guilt and regret peeled away from Starlee the closer she got to her new home. She'd been driving most of the day, cutting across Wyoming, through late-April winds. As she did, she relived how she'd come to have a rental trailer hitched to the back of her black Jeep Cherokee with all her worldly possessions inside.

It had been pure luck, a one in a million chance, that she'd stumbled across the government auction website while doing research for a freelance article she'd been writing. Fate had tempted her, and she'd paused in her work duties, taking time to click a few links that took her to homes up for auction.

The quaint, white-washed home was in the middle of nowhere, in a small town called Aspen, Utah. From the online photos and description, it was surrounded by nonjudgmental fields that would never care about her history. It boasted two bedrooms and one bath, and the listing honestly included that the little spread would require some work.

That didn't bother her in the least. She was pretty handy with a screwdriver and a wrench, and as it was, she'd been taking care of herself just fine during the past year. A clogged toilet didn't scare her. A window broken by hateful people did.

Purchasing sight-unseen might have been a crazy thing to do. She didn't care. Desperation made people do insane things. She just needed somewhere safe to *be*. Despite what the house looked like, at least she wouldn't be living in the midst of a group of people who hated her.

The down payment on the home had used up the rest of her late

husband's meager life insurance policy, but it had given her a new start, and for that, she was grateful. Bradley would have been, too. He would have been angry about how his little town ended up treating her. If he was still alive, he would have told them all in no uncertain terms to shove it up their asses, including his family.

In her own way, she'd done the same. She'd left them to wallow in their misery, taking with her precious memories that they'd never be able to steal from her. She'd left his remains where she'd buried them and a piece of her heart with him.

The wind had stopped by the time Starlee reached the city limit sign, and clouds floated in fluffy white patches across the brilliant, clear sky. She lowered her window and inhaled a breath of the sweet air. If her printed directions were correct, she was almost there.

Without warning, excitement burst inside her. She couldn't remember the last time she'd looked forward to something. Couldn't remember the last time her future held anything other than regrets and fears.

She slowed as she reached the town, trying to absorb each aspect of the little place she'd call home. It had a grocery store, along with another store that looked like it sold a combination of hardware, animal feed, and clothing. It even had an adorable little coffee shop where maybe she could write sometimes if the walls of her house closed in. The bar at the end of town would be a great place to look for guys wanting to make a couple of extra bucks to help her unload her furniture.

Aspen had everything she could possibly need.

She might even make new friends. She couldn't describe how much the thought of that appealed to her. She'd always been an introvert, but she'd never known true loneliness until the past year.

As she drew closer to where she should start watching for Willow Lane on the sparse road signs, she came upon cows dotting the green pastures. There wasn't another car in sight, and it felt as though she'd been set free after serving a year-long prison term. Nobody here would judge her. No one would talk behind her back. To them, she had no history, and she intended to leave her past in the past.

A few minutes later, she identified the road that would lead to her house. With excitement pulsing in her veins, she squinted through the sunshine glaring off the windshield, trying to get a better look at her new home.

What she saw was perfect. It looked exactly like the online photos, a

charming home surrounded by aspens. The clusters of the white-barked trees grew everywhere, all showing off their new tender green leaves.

She pulled up the gravel drive and stopped in front of the house. Charming red tulips bloomed near the porch and contrasted nicely with the white house and its black roof. A large lilac bush bloomed on the corner, and Starlee couldn't wait to unpack a vase so she could bring the fragrant blooms inside.

Behind her home loomed a huge brown barn. It was so close to the house that the two buildings looked like a packaged deal, but the barn hadn't been included in her listing. What would she do if it actually did belong to her, but the listing had failed to mention it? Maybe she'd buy herself a cow and learn how to milk it and make her own butter and cheese.

She chuckled at the absurd idea that surely would end in disaster. It was a nice thought, though.

Starlee exited her car, pulling the house keys out of her jacket pocket. She let herself through the little gate attached to the picket fence surrounding the house and scanned everything around her. At one point, someone had painted the wooden slats white, but now most of that paint had peeled off, revealing the bare, gray layer of wood beneath.

No problem. She liked to paint, and as soon as the weather reporter guaranteed her several sunny days in a row, she'd fix it.

Robins chirped in the trees as she unlocked the house and stepped inside. The blinds had been drawn, giving it a closed-up feeling, as though the place had been sitting and waiting for its new owner.

The house was as small as had been advertised. One bedroom was slightly bigger than the other, and she'd put her bed in there. The smaller room would be her office. The kitchen was adorable, with white cupboards and a new granite countertop. It looked as though someone had been upgrading the house when, apparently, life had intervened.

She stood for a moment, taking it all in. *Wow.* This was now hers. Her heart filled with gratitude for the fates leading her to it. She was certain she could be happy here.

The doorbell rang, startling her, and she had to remind herself she was no longer in Masonville. She made her way to the front of the house, wondering who it might be. Maybe someone who'd heard she was moving in? Small towns could be like that. But since she'd bought the place from an outside broker, it surprised her that the locals would have known about her purchase

so soon.

There was no peek hole like she'd had at her previous house, and all she could see was a dark blue pickup truck parked in the driveway. For a moment, she was afraid to answer the door, being a single girl and all. But this was a small town and people tended to be more neighborly. She grabbed the pepper spray from her purse and took a chance by opening the door.

Outside, she found a lone guy standing on her porch dressed in a long-sleeved gray t-shirt and faded jeans. A ball cap partially shaded his eyes, making her yearn for a closer look. She had to admit, her impression of the first Aspen resident she'd met was a good one. "Can I help you?"

His deep voice matched the look in his eyes. Cool, dark and sexy. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

She furrowed her brows. "Uh, I don't think so. Unless you're offering to help move furniture."

He stared down at her, the stubble on his unshaven jaw suddenly giving him a menacing appearance. "What I'm asking is why are you in this house? It should be vacant."

She stiffened. "I purchased it."

"From who?"

"It was on a government auction site. I have all the signed papers." She could provide them, if necessary, but this guy didn't seem like anyone official. Probably just someone keeping an eye on the place.

"I see. I wasn't aware they'd sold the house."

He studied her for a long moment before he turned on his heel and strode back to his truck. The engine started with a roar, and he left with a trail of gravel and dust flying behind him.

She stood on the porch for a moment, not quite sure what had just transpired. Whatever it was, it had left uncertainty churning deep inside her.

She closed the door, praying the residents of Aspen wouldn't be a repeat of who she'd left in Masonville.



TYLER COULDN'T HAVE CARED LESS about the speed limit as he drove into town, his foot heavy on the accelerator. He slammed on the brakes, skidding to a stop, and parked illegally in front of the courthouse. He ripped his keys

out of the ignition and raced up the steps, almost knocking down old Mrs. Harris in the process.

“So sorry, ma’am,” he said as he skirted around her.

He was certain she’d said something about respect, but he didn’t have time to stop and listen.

The sounds of his boots thudding across the polished wooden floor echoed as he hurried down the hall and burst into Ted Bower’s office. The reception desk was empty as usual, and he bypassed it, walking straight into the back area. Luckily, his attorney was in that day.

Ted glanced up, startled, holding a phone to his ear. “Let me get back to you on that, Tom. Give me an hour.”

He placed the handset on the base. “What’s wrong, Tyler? Is your family okay?”

Fury unfurled inside him. “*They sold my damned house.* You said no one would be interested, but there’s some woman, and heaven knows who else, moving into my goddamn house.”

Ted stood, holding up a hand. “Whoa, hang on, Tyler. Take a breath and tell me what you know.”

He did his best to inhale a steadying breath, but his heart rate was so out of control, he thought he might keel over. “I was headed for the barn when I notice a little moving trailer parked outside my house. A woman answered the door and told me she bought the place.”

Tyler fell into the closest chair, his mind reeling. “Someone bought my house,” he whispered as despair settled over him. Thoughts of how he’d ever get it back were suffocating.

A deflated look dimmed the expression on Ted’s face, which didn’t make Tyler feel any better. “Well, shit. I can’t believe it. Who the hell would want that old house, anyway?”

Tyler sent him a look full of warning.

The man coughed. “Except you, of course. But you have a lot of other reasons to want it, too.”

He shook his head. “What the hell am I going to do now?”

“Make her an offer.”

He snorted. “If I had the money, I’d have bought it already, and you know it.”

“Then wait until you get the money and then make an offer.”

Tyler closed his eyes on a groan. “I never should have listened to you in



the first place. This whole thing is screwed.”

Ted cleared his throat. “You didn’t have a choice, son. When the government wants their money, they’ll get it, one way or the other.”

**T** Tyler walked into Sparrow's Bar and Grill with a chip on his shoulder as large as a pile of cow shit and just as stinky. He was pissed. That house should have been his. His grandpa had promised it to him since he could remember.

Now it was gone.

He sank into a chair next to one of the small deserted tables at the back of the bar. The server arrived almost immediately, her usual cowboy hat in place, and her pink lips turned up in a smile. "What can I get for you, Ty?"

"Hey Becky." He should probably ask her how she was doing, but he couldn't get beyond his own pain right now. "Bring me a shot of Jack Daniels. And a beer, too," he said as she walked away.

"Damn it," he whispered as he dropped his head into his hands. Now what the hell was he supposed to do? He'd had his life planned out, but everything had changed.

He'd been content to let his grandpa call the shots while he'd been alive. But Tyler had made so many plans for the little farm, like purchasing some surrounding land, hoping to make the operation into something much bigger. His grandpa had left him the business portion of his assets, but Tyler had always viewed the little house as the crown jewel.

He'd pictured him there with his future wife and children, growing happy as they grew older. He'd wanted to build a large family room and another bedroom onto the backside. He'd even recruited his contractor-buddy Seth to help with the addition.

Now, he'd have to build a new dream. Which didn't hold the same

appeal. *Or* he'd have to figure out a way to get his house back.

The server brought his drinks, and he slammed back the shot of whiskey before she finished putting the bottle of beer in front of him. He slapped a twenty on her tray. "Thanks, Becky. I appreciate it."

It wasn't like he needed to save every cent he had any longer. It would be months before he'd gain any profit from his crops, and who would want to sell a house that soon after they'd moved in?

A moment later, the feel of a firm hand on his shoulder brought his gaze upward. Luke Winchester stood over him, a solemn look on his face. He and Luke had been buddies for nearly all their lives, except for a few years when Tyler's sister had come between them.

"Lily and I saw you walk in," Luke said. "I wanted to come over and let you know I'd heard the news, man. I'm sorry. That's just bad luck all around."

Tyler stared at him, astonished. Small towns were notorious for news spreading like wildfire, but this had to be a record. "Who told you?"

"Ted's wife texted Lily's boss, Betty, who knows we're friends, so she called Lily."

He glanced toward the front of the bar and spotted Luke's wife sitting with two of their friends, Milo and Anna. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed them when he'd walked in.

Tyler nodded to the adjacent chair, indicating Luke should sit down. "Yeah. It's... Yeah." He didn't know what else to say.

"Maybe they'd be willing to sell it back to you."

"Fat chance." Tyler shook his head, the whiskey not doing much to dissolve the sick lump of disappointment in the bottom of his stomach.

Luke blew out a breath, giving him a commiserating look. "Wish I could help."

Tyler raised his beer to his lips. "Yeah," he said before taking a drink.

Just as he lowered his bottle, he glimpsed Noelle coming in through the front doors. She stopped, her long blond hair swinging as she looked around. Then she spied him in the back and started heading his way. "Shit," he said under his breath.

Luke turned. "Noelle's here. Maybe she'll help."

Or make things worse. "I'm not in the mood to deal with her right now."

Luke raised his brows in a surprised arch. "Trouble in paradise?"

"Something like that."

“Hey,” Noelle said with a smile on her face as she greeted him, but Tyler could see the irritation flashing in her eyes. “I thought you were going to call me.”

Luke stood. “I need to get back to Lily. Good to see you, Noelle.” With that, his best friend deserted him.

Noelle took his spot, the smile disappearing from her lips. She looked at him expectantly, without saying another word.

He gave an inward sigh. “I’m sorry. It’s been a rough day.”

“So, you’re just going to ignore me? Why don’t you let me help?”

“It’s not about you. I just need a little time to get my head on straight.”

She shifted in her chair, her gaze softening. “I heard the news. What will you do now?”

He eyed her with an intense look. “I’m not really sure.”

It seemed everything was out of alignment. He’d lost his house, and when he looked at Noelle, he could no longer imagine spending the rest of his life with her.

“Yo,” Calvin, the bar owner, called into the tavern, pulling Tyler from his misery. “Anyone need a couple of extra bucks? I have a lady here who needs some strong men to help her unload furniture.”

Calvin’s words were like a bowie knife right between his shoulder blades. Tyler slowly turned in his chair, recognizing the pretty woman he’d met only hours earlier. She stood near the bar, an anxious, almost fearful look in her eyes as she scanned Sparrow’s occupants. He was too far back in the dim light for her to see him, but it didn’t matter.

“Is that her?” Noelle whispered.

Tyler responded with a slight nod.

“She’s pretty. Do you think she moved here alone? I mean, why would she be asking for men to help if she’s married?”

“Hell if I know,” he said, knowing he was indulging in a pity party, but not able to help himself. The gentleman in him urged him to step up and volunteer. After all, his momma had raised him right, and he’d likely be running into the new owner since her house was smack dab in the middle of his farm.

But he couldn’t do it.

For a few seconds, no one else responded, either. Then Milo stood along with Luke and approached the woman, with Lily and Anna following behind. A small part of him was grateful his friends would do what he couldn’t.

The woman gave them a careful smile as she nodded to each of them, and then the entire group walked out the door.

Tyler signaled to Becky, letting her know he needed another shot of whisky.



STARLEE'S NERVES twisted into a strangling bundle as she drove back to her house. When she'd decided to pack it all up and move away, she'd pictured living in a quiet place with new people who wouldn't have a reason to dislike her. But it had been so long since she'd interacted with others without recriminations that the thought intimidated her.

But here she was with four new potential friends, and she hadn't even been in town a full day. They were people who were kind enough to help move a stranger's furniture. She'd promised to pay them, but they'd refused to take anything.

She turned onto her lane, glimpsed her new house in the fading light, and a sudden, unexpected warmth flooded her. She reminded herself that things would be okay now.

She pulled in front of her house and stopped, a large black truck and another white one pulling in behind her.

Once they were out of their vehicles, she offered them another smile. "It's so nice of you to help me tonight. I seriously could have waited until tomorrow."

"No problem," said the darker-haired guy with engaging green eyes. "We'd already finished dinner and were headed out, anyway. My name's Luke, by the way. This is my wife, Lily."

The pretty blonde standing next to him stepped forward and extended her hand. "It's so nice to meet you..."

"Starlee Rinehart." She shook Lily's hand, followed by everyone else's.

The man with short blond hair introduced himself and his wife. "Milo and Anna Sykes."

Warmth radiated from Anna's gaze as a slight breeze teased her long, dark locks. "Lily and I both know what it's like to be new to Aspen. Just know, the people here are amazing."

"That's right," Lily added. "If you need anything, just ask."

Luke glanced toward the setting sun. "Let's not waste daylight. Show us what you need to have moved, and we'll get it done."

Starlee unlocked the back of the little moving van that she'd struggled to unhitch earlier in the day. "There's really not much, but it's too big for one person to move alone."

"Step back, ma'am, and we'll take care of it for you." Milo grabbed hold of one end of her kitchen table and slid it out of the truck, leaving Luke to take the other.

Starlee hurried toward the front door to unlock it. "Put it in the kitchen, please."

She stepped back as the two big men carefully navigated through the doorway, while Lily and Anna waited at the bottom of the porch.

"Really," Starlee said as she joined them. "I can't thank you enough. Are you sure I can't pay you?"

"Are you kidding?" Lily laughed. "If you ask those guys again, you'll insult them."

A pang of jealousy nipped at Starlee. "You're both really lucky to have such great guys."

"Oh, we know." Anna winked. "Most of the time we love them to death, but sometimes they can be a real pain in the ass."

Lily agreed, and then her expression turned serious. "I know it's none of my business, but I'm guessing you're not married."

Starlee hesitated a moment before spilling any personal information. These women would have no reason to hold her husband's death against her, but it was safer not to say anything. Yep. Single lady."

Lily nodded. "Are you living here alone, then?"

Starlee worked to keep her buried emotions where they belonged. "Yeah. My previous relationship...had its issues, and I needed to get away. So, this is a new start for me."

Anna smiled. "We sure hope you come to love Aspen like we do."

"Coming through," Luke said as he led the way down the stairs, with Milo following him.

The ladies watched as they hefted a mattress and carried it into the house.

"Are you looking for work, too?" Lily asked her when the coast was clear.

"Actually, I'm a freelance writer and editor for technical manuals, articles, and things like that. I can work from anywhere as long as I have a

computer and internet access.”

Anna lifted her brows. “Sounds fun, but, fair warning, the internet can be a little sketchy from time-to-time. Whenever I have issues, I head to Rumors Coffee Shop. They have great access, even though I think we all have the same provider.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” Lily stepped up onto the porch. “Hey, is it alright if we take a peek inside your house? I’ve driven by many times, but I’ve never been inside.”

“It’s pretty small,” Starlee said, stepping aside to let the men pass once again before she led the way inside.

Anna stopped in the living room and looked around. “So is mine. But it’s the potential that counts, and yours has a lot. I love the woodwork. Whoever lived here before must have been extremely talented.”

“Henry Tullis used to own the place,” Lily said to Anna.

Anna stared at her friend for a moment with a puzzled look, and then widened her eyes. “Oh... I didn’t realize this was where he lived.”

Starlee glanced between both women, feeling like she’d missed something. “Did you know the previous owner well?”

Lily nodded. “He was the grandfather of one of our friends.”

“I see.” It was weird, but she didn’t want to think about who used to own her house. It was hers now.

“Let’s check out the rest of this place,” Anna said, heading toward the next room.

Another thirty minutes passed as the women chatted about residents of Aspen who Starlee needed to meet. Then they switched to decorating ideas for her house, while the guys continued to move furniture. Finally, the men found them unpacking some of the kitchen dishes from boxes Starlee had brought in earlier.

“That’s all the big stuff,” Luke said, removing his ball cap to wipe off the fine sheen of sweat on his forehead. “If you’d like, we can come back tomorrow and carry in the rest of the boxes.”

Milo wrapped an arm around Anna’s waist, tugging her close. “Yeah, sorry to bail on you before we’re finished, but I have the early shift tomorrow morning. We could come back around five, though.”

Starlee held up both hands. “No. You’ve all done so much already. I can handle the little boxes myself.”

Milo tilted his head toward the trailer. “There’s still a lot of stuff in the

back of that. How about if you give your number to Anna, and she can check on you tomorrow afternoon? If you still need help, we'll come over."

Starlee couldn't stop the smile that claimed her lips. "That sounds great." She wouldn't let them, of course. They'd already been more than helpful, but it was so nice that they'd offered.

She exchanged cell numbers with Lily and Anna, and then they all said their goodbyes. Starlee watched them drive away, with new seeds of happiness growing in her heart.

She closed the front door, letting quiet settle upon her little house. The place was a mess. It probably would be for days until she could get everything unpacked. Then she'd need to decide how she liked her meager furniture arranged and her items stored.

For now, she was exhausted, mentally, emotionally, and physically. It had been a crazy day that had depleted her.

But she was *safe*.

The thought undid her like nothing else, and tears sprang to her eyes as she pulled bedding from a box she'd carried in from her Cherokee. She spread a sheet across her bed, rapidly blinking back moisture.

For the first time in a year, there would be no one tossing rocks through her windows, no one flattening her tires. The incidents had never been life-threatening, which was probably why she'd stayed so long. But the fear had been a constant source of stress, compounded by the fact she was trying to grieve her husband.

That was all behind her now. She could crawl into bed and actually rest without listening to all the night's noises, wondering if someone was prowling around.

It wasn't until that moment that she realized how precious peace of mind could be.



**B**right morning sun barely peeked over the mountains when Tyler pulled down the long drive and parked in front of his barn. He shut off the engine, his gaze traveling over the architecture of his grandparents' house. Built back in the early 1920s, it had a sweet little wraparound porch backed by sturdy bricks that his grandpa helped lay, one by one.

Somewhere inside was the woman who'd colored his soul with a deep shade of envy. She owned what mattered most to him. He hated that. Hated it worse that he couldn't let go. It was just a house, for hell's sake.

He needed to talk to her. Wanted to beg her to sell, but wouldn't. Instead, he'd give her the lay of the land, let her know they were neighbors, and that would give him the opportunity to learn a little more information about her.

When he'd stopped at Sparrow's that morning for coffee with the guys, trying to kill some time, he'd learned she was living in the house all alone. That knowledge sparked his interest more than he would have guessed. He found it hard to believe that she was single, as pretty as she was. But his interest in her marital status had more to do with knowing he had better odds if he had only one person to convince to sell.

Her unforgettable eyes, the color of new alfalfa leaves, and her thick auburn hair that a man could dig his hands into were a moot point for him. He couldn't be attracted to someone who held his home hostage.

With determination and a focused mind, he walked the distance between his barn and his grandpa's house. He knocked on the door and waited.

A full minute passed before the locks turned. He supposed it was normal for a woman living alone to keep her doors locked, but his grandparents

never had. *Their* door had always been open to friends and strangers alike.

She opened the door a crack, surprise registering in her beautiful eyes. He wanted to say something rude about never expecting to find himself on this side of her door again, either. But that was the hand life had dealt him.

“Hello?” she said, opening the door a little farther, her expression somewhat wary as she stared at him.

The words on his tongue tangled and stalled, giving him time to take in the dark lashes showcasing her eyes and her mass of sexy hair looking rumpled from sleep. He cleared his throat. “My name’s Tyler Morgan.”

She held out her hand to shake. “Starlee Rinehart.”

He took her delicate fingers in his hand and shook. He couldn’t resist tracing his thumb across the back of her hand before letting her go. Smooth silk met his roughened fingers, and his gaze flew to hers. She widened her eyes, and he released her with a cough to cover his awkwardness.

“How can I help you, Mr. Morgan?”

Despite his efforts, his gaze slipped lower to the thin tank that clung to her curves. She wore a robe, but it wasn’t closed in front, and he zeroed in on her breasts that puckered in the cool morning air.

She busted him and closed her thin robe tighter around her, a soft flush coloring her cheeks.

Everything male inside him approved. “My dad is Mr. Morgan. You can call me Tyler.”

“How can I help you, *Tyler*?” she repeated, and he found he liked his name on her lips.

He dipped his head. “I stopped by to let you know that if you see my truck around, you shouldn’t worry. We share a drive, and the barn back there belongs to me. It’s part of the property, not the house.”

Her brows dipped as though his news surprised her. “The property?”

“Everything you see around you belongs to me.” *Everything*, he wanted to emphasize and make her feel like the outsider she was. But he couldn’t.

He’d find another way to get her to sell besides bullying her.

She glanced at the farmland behind him as though taking it all in before she turned her cautious gaze back to him. “Yes, that’s what the purchase agreement stated. I only bought the house and the small amount of property it sits on. I don’t have the time or the interest to purchase a working farm. I just wanted the house.”

And she had it, and he didn’t. The thought burrowed deeper into him,

eating away at his soul. He wanted to hate her for it, but couldn't. None of this was her fault.

"Sounds like we're clear, then. I'll be on my way." He turned without saying another word and headed toward the barn.

*Jackass.* He might as well have the word tattooed on his forehead because he was pretty sure that's what she was thinking right now. What kind of asshole knocks on someone's door and more or less intimidates her while trying to make it seem like a friendly neighborhood welcome?

If he'd have been her, he would have slammed the door in his face.



STARLEE CLOSED her door and rested her back against it, an image of the man who'd just left her porch etched on her retinas. Today, he wore a thick blue hoodie and ripped jeans, with muddy cowboy boots poking from beneath his pants. His short, dark hair had looked freshly washed, but the shadow of stubble scattered across his jaw gave him a sexy, yet unapproachable look.

Everything about the man baffled her. His friends had vouched for him, so he must be a decent guy. If she'd read instead of heard the words that he'd spoken to her just moments ago, they'd seem totally innocent. But the way he'd said them had been almost defensive, like he needed to make sure there were clear lines drawn in the sand.

And yet...

She put a hand to her throat, drew her fingers down between her breasts before letting her hand drop. She'd never experienced that kind of physical reaction from a man who'd only looked at her.

Whatever it was Tyler Morgan had, he certainly *had* it. So, it was a good thing that his manner was cool and aloof, both of which would keep her heart safe.

It took Starlee the whole morning to clean her new house. It wasn't super dirty, but it was obvious the previous owner hadn't scrubbed it before placing it on the market. She figured she might as well dust and vacuum before she filled it with her things.

When her home was sparkling and smelled fresh, she headed out to the rental trailer once again to bring in more stuff. Movement caught her attention as she stepped off the porch, and she spied Tyler looking in her

direction. He turned before she could wave and headed into the barn without glancing her way again.

She stared after him, stung by his reaction. No doubt he intrigued her, but it was obvious she didn't have the same effect on him.

Then again, maybe it wasn't her at all, and she shouldn't take it personally. Maybe he was going through some rough times like she'd been through, or maybe he didn't realize how he came across to others.

That explanation eased her thoughts, and she'd go with that for now.

She opened the back of her Cherokee with a push of a button and grabbed a small box before walking toward the house. She set the box labeled "kitchen" on her table and headed out for more.

She'd made more than a handful of trips when she stepped outside to find Tyler stacking several boxes in his arms. His muscles bulged from the weight of them, and something warm and feminine inside her sighed with appreciation.

She held open the door as he approached and managed the steps without looking. "Thank you. That's very kind of you."

His unreadable gaze met hers. "Where do you want them?"

"Uh..." She glanced at the writing on the boxes. "In my bedroom."

He headed down the hall like he knew exactly where he was going. After he placed them on the bed, he turned and nearly ran into her.

"Sorry," she said, feeling more than a little clumsy. He must not have realized that she'd followed him. "I'll just..."

She turned and headed out of the bedroom, down the hall, and back outside.

He was right behind her when she stopped at the back of her SUV. For doing such a friendly deed, he was giving off some frosty waves, leaving her feeling awkward. "I appreciate your help, but really, I can get the rest myself."

"Sorry, but a gentleman does not stand by and allow a lady to carry heavy boxes by herself."

Was that why he was helping her? Out of some chivalrous obligation?

She could appreciate that. Nothing like a true gentleman. But if he was going to hold it against her, she didn't need his help. "It's not a problem. I put them in there myself, and I can get them out all the same. But I appreciate your offer."

He stood, staring down at her, his dark gaze serious and almost menacing.

“I’ll help you.”

Her pulse spiked. “I said I could do it.”

He arched a challenging brow. “I said I would help.”

She was tempted to argue with him, but it seemed pointless to refuse his help when she really needed it. Not to mention, she sensed he was the stubborn type, so she stepped aside. “Fine. Thank you.”

He grabbed two large boxes, hefting them into his arms. “Stack another one on top.”

Feeling a little annoyed by his demands, she picked the largest box and put it on top. His muscles once again bulged, and she had to resist the urge to trace the attractive curves with her gaze.

“Where do these go?”

“Kitchen,” she said, adopting his all-business attitude. Instead of following him this time like a little lost kitten, she grabbed two boxes of her own. No, they weren’t large boxes. And yes, it would have taken her three trips compared to his one to have hauled the same amount of stuff inside, but she could handle her own belongings.

That was one thing she had become very good at. Dealing with whatever came up in life. It’s what helped her survive her parents’ contempt and lack of care, and it’s what kept her moving forward after her husband’s death, despite her lack of support.

Just as she stepped inside the house, she met Tyler, and he relieved her of her boxes without asking. She frowned. “I’m more than capable of carrying them, you know.” Everything about him that attracted her irritated her at the same time.

“It’s not about capability,” he said as he continued on toward the kitchen.

She hadn’t even told him where those particular boxes belonged. Although, she supposed she had marked them like the rest.

She stood in the front room, waiting for him to return. When he did a moment later, she put her hands on her hips, blocking the doorway. He walked forward until he stood inches from her, like an insurmountable mountain of testosterone that she needed to conquer.

“I need you to explain something to me,” she said as an intense awareness of him built inside her. She caught a whiff of the earthy scent, a mixture of sweet hay and spice, and she almost sighed out loud. “You’ve come to my door twice now, and both times you’ve...”

She paused. “Shall we say, you’ve been a little cool toward me. Although

I don't know what it is, it's obvious there's an issue between us. So why are you helping me?"

He studied her for a moment, their gazes clashing. She could tell he was battling conflicting emotions, but she had no idea why. "I'm trying to be a good neighbor," he finally said. "Luke said he thought you were alone, and despite what you obviously think of me, I believe in helping those who need help."

"Is that what you see when you look at me? A helpless woman?" She was far from that.

He gave her a slow perusal that left her more overheated than cleaning her house had. "Not exactly." With that, he pushed past her, leaving her to consider his words.

It wasn't what he'd said, but the way he'd said it, that made her think twice about broaching the subject again.

The warm afternoon sun had heated the air despite the earliness of the season. As he retrieved more boxes, she paused long enough to open a window, letting in a slightly cool breeze tinged with the scent of lilacs.

She inhaled a deep breath, wondering what had gotten into her. Just because he was uncommonly hot didn't mean she had to react like a ridiculous school girl. She was a twenty-six-year-old widow, for hell's sake, and had no business looking at another man.

Not to mention, he was too surly for her. If she ever considered dating again, she wanted someone grounded, a source of strength internally, not just muscles. Someone who would be kind to her and not threaten her world.

Instead of trying to carry any more boxes, she focused on unpacking what he'd brought in. She didn't start a conversation as they both worked, and apparently, he was happy with that situation as well.

"Thank you," she said as he placed the last of the boxes on her kitchen table.

He lifted the bottom of his shirt as he leaned forward to wipe his brow, and she couldn't keep from staring at the six-pack of stomach muscles he'd uncovered. She swallowed, trying to moisten her throat as she visually followed the ripples of his tanned, tight abs. Then her gaze fell lower to the dark trail of hair leading into his pants.

She forced herself to turn away and reach for the refrigerator door. She hadn't had a chance to go to the store yet, so she didn't have much to offer. "I have some soda if you need a drink."

She pulled out two and turned around, holding one out to him. He accepted with a soft murmur of thanks, and the lid hissed as he twisted and removed it. He took a long drink, and she found herself mesmerized by the lithe, almost animal-like way he moved.

He watched her watch him as he drank, and then gave a sigh of appreciation when he finished. "Thanks."

"No, thank you." For the chance to appreciate his beautiful body and for the work. "This would have taken me three times as long without your help. Can I pay you for your services?"

He snorted, shook his head, and walked out her front door, closing it behind him.

She stood, bewildered. There was obviously something brewing between them, and not in a good way, which made no sense. He didn't know her well enough to dislike her. But it seemed like he did. And yet, he'd helped.

This was a small town. Maybe Lily or Anna could shed some light on Tyler Morgan's quirks. She'd have to ask the next time she saw them.

For now, Starlee blew out a frustrated breath as she opened the box of cookbooks she'd collected since she was sixteen and stacked them on the counter. Sometimes, there was no figuring out people. Maybe she reminded him of his old girlfriend. Maybe he disliked women.

Although he'd definitely checked her out more than once that afternoon.

She sighed. The one good thing about her newfound freedom was she didn't have to impress anyone or justify her actions. Forget about asking Lily or Anna. He didn't like her? Fine. No one said he had to, and quite frankly, she didn't really care. She'd spent too much time in her old town trying to make people like her, and look how that had turned out. Plus, she didn't really like him, either.

That thought simmered in her mind for all of five minutes before she felt guilty for thinking badly about a person who'd helped her. Maybe she should bake something for him as a show of gratitude instead. Then they could call it even. That way, she wouldn't feel indebted to him for his help. Maybe they could give each other a friendly wave now and then when they ran across each other's path, which was bound to happen in a town as small as theirs.

Their interactions didn't need to be more than that.

**S**tarlee stepped into Aspen's grocery store, surprised at how tiny it was. She'd always considered Masonville to be a small town, but Aspen definitely had it beat.

Two women stood talking just inside the front door, and they paused long enough to give her a solid perusal. Their looks weren't unfriendly, but her self-defense mechanisms jumped into place, and she had to remind herself that she was somewhere new now. Trying to bury her uneasiness, she pasted on a smile and pulled her grocery list from her purse. Someday, she hoped to know everyone in the little town and be a person who noticed when someone new arrived.

It could happen.

For now, she'd have to endure everyone's scrutiny and try to make new friends. She could have moved to a larger town where she would have gotten lost in the masses, but she wanted what she should have had in Masonville. To be part of a community of people who cared about each other.

She needed that in her life. She had no family other than her parents, who didn't keep in contact, and she ached to fill that void. Maybe it was her isolated childhood that made her crave the company of others. She wasn't sure. But she knew she didn't want to be alone any longer.

It didn't take long to shop for her necessities, and before she knew it, she was finished. As she headed to the front of the store to pay for her items, she found that the two women were still talking. She tried not to look at them as she placed her grocery items on the little conveyer belt.

"How are you today?" the clerk asked.



The older, shorter woman's nametag read Florence. She could remember that. Especially if she tucked the lady's curly gray hair and bright red lipstick that didn't match the rest of her country style into her memories.

Luckily, a friendly warmth emanated from the clerk, and she returned her smile. "I'm pretty good. How about you?"

"Very good, thank you." The clerk weighed her bag of apples and then typed in the price on her cash register.

Starlee widened her eyes. Talk about behind the times. She couldn't remember *ever* seeing a manual cash register.

"Did you find everything okay?" the woman asked.

Her anxiety inched higher. "I did, thanks."

Florence glanced at her again. "I don't think I've seen you in here before."

The part of her that had been beaten down in her former hometown begged the cashier to hurry so she could escape. But the rebellious side of her that had been dormant for so long dug in her heels. "No. I've just moved to the area."

"Really?" The other lady's interest spiked. "Which house?"

"It's a little white house on Willow Lane."

She rang up a block of cheese. "Oh, the old Tullis place. Henry was such a nice man. I'm really going to miss him."

Starlee nodded. "Did he pass away recently, then?" She hadn't known that about the previous owner. She kind of hoped he hadn't died in the house. That might be creepy.

"Not too long ago. The old man was out plowing his field and just keeled over dead."

Relief flowed through her. "That's awful."

"Not really, if you think about it. He died doing what he loved. I think we all hope we'll go the same way."

The woman had a point. "You're right. No time in a sickbed, just *poof*, and on to the next thing." If a person had lived a good life, that was about as perfect of an ending as it could get.

"I do feel bad for the family, though," the woman continued.

"Yes, it's always hard to lose someone you love." Firsthand experience had taught her that.

"Well, that, too. But I think the family wanted to keep the house and didn't have enough money to pay the back taxes."

And now she owned it. She hoped no one would hold that against her. “That is sad. I mean, good for me because it’s such an adorable little house, but sad that the family lost it.”

Florence finished ringing up all her items and took her credit card for payment, taking a moment to read the face of it. “That’s the way it goes around here, Starlee. With the poor economy, many people struggle to make ends meet. Sometimes, we have to make sacrifices. At least you didn’t oust anyone out of their house, right?” The clerk gave her a toothy smile, complete with lipstick on one of her front teeth.

“Right.” She forced herself to smile back. Still, she didn’t like the idea that her happiness came from someone else’s sadness. She gathered her bags. “Thanks, Florence. It was nice to meet you. I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.”

“You have a good day, Starlee. Enjoy that new house.” She waved goodbye as Starlee headed out of the store.



TYLER CLIMBED off the tractor after a long day of planting alfalfa. The sun was nearly down, but if he wanted to get an extra planting in this season, it had to be done now. He’d reconsidered his options and realized he couldn’t miss the opportunity, even though he’d already put in an eight-hour day with the drilling company. He might not have been able to buy the house before it was sold, but there was nothing keeping him from making an offer once he had the money in his pocket.

He had locked down for the night and was headed toward his truck when he saw Starlee. He looked away, trying to ignore her like he’d begun to do. Being near her caused too many conflicting emotions. He could admit there was something about her that made him want to get closer, but the sight of her also constantly reminded him of what he’d lost.

She called out his name, increasing the voltage running through his veins, making him grit his teeth in response. He stopped walking and turned toward her so she would know he’d heard her. He couldn’t be rude. None of this was her fault. But things were better if they stayed apart.

A slight breeze caused her hair to dance over her shoulders and across her breasts as she walked toward him, carrying something in her hands. As she neared, it looked to be something circular covered by a white cloth. He didn’t

walk forward to meet her. Instead, he let her come to him, enjoying the vision sashaying in front of him.

He might hate the fact that she'd gotten his house, but he could still appreciate the sight of a beautiful woman. And she was definitely that.

She nearly matched his six-foot stature, missing it only by four or five inches. She had a nice shape to her, full breasts and some softness to her hips, not one of those stick women that he wasn't interested in touching. She looked fit enough to keep up with him, but she wouldn't feel like he'd break her if he crushed her against him.

Not that he ever would.

"I have something for you," she said when she reached him. She ran her gaze down his form the way she always did when they met, looking at him as though she wanted to see more. A second later, a guilty look crossed her face, and she focused on his eyes. The whole eager, yet innocent response to him fed his ego like none other, and he wished he could tell her to stop.

"I wanted to say thank you for your help the other day."

The setting sun set fire to her hair, catching the strands of auburn, and bringing them to life. If only he could reach out and touch what must feel like fine silk. He held his tongue, not knowing how to respond to her without giving away his feelings.

Her gaze grew more apprehensive. "It's a pie." She shoved it toward him. "Apple."

He didn't want to take it from her, didn't want her gratitude. He'd helped her because he didn't like the thought of his grandpa watching him from heaven, disapproving of his actions. Even though his grandpa had left things in such a mess. Unfortunately, his stomach betrayed him with a growl.

"You're hungry," she said as she shoved the pie into his hands, forcing him to take it. "Haven't you eaten?"

"I'll grab something when I get home."

She frowned. "Are you sure?"

Her concern touched him, but also threatened to expose a tender part of him. "I'm sure," he said, sounding rougher than he'd meant. He gave her a curt nod and then turned and climbed into his truck, not sparing her another glance.

The only thing he knew was he needed to get the hell out of there before he started liking her. He wanted that house, and when he had enough money, he would do what it took to make her sell. Thoughts of where she'd go and

who would help her after she left were none of his concern, and the less friendly they were, the easier the whole thing would be.



OVER TWO WEEKS had passed before cabin fever set in. Starlee had unpacked, made the beautiful trek through a nearby canyon to Pinecone to return her rental trailer, and had worked in her new little office. That had kept her plenty busy, busy enough to appreciate the silence, but not dread it.

But the new day brought a different feeling.

She'd reached her maximum isolation quota and needed to get out of the house. Even if she didn't talk to anyone, she yearned to be around people. She packed up her laptop and headed out the door, stopping on the porch when she realized it was raining.

A reminder of the night she'd lost her husband replayed in her mind, and she shoved it away. She'd worked hard to separate a rainstorm from that horrible incident, and she wasn't willing to backslide now.

She dashed across the wet grass to her Cherokee and climbed inside, her heart racing a faster. This was good. Getting up and getting out was exactly what she needed.

It took her only a few minutes to reach the town center, and she parked in front of Rumors, grabbing her bag as she exited her car. Even though only a few people went about their business on a rainy Saturday morning, Aspen had an entirely different vibe than Masonville.

Of course, she couldn't tell that much about a place until she had actually lived there and interacted with the residents. But she would swear her old hometown had a dark cloud hanging over it, and it had nothing to do with the weather.

There was something vicious and petty about that place that seemed to have infected everyone. When people there saw weakness, it appeared they exploited it instead of lending a helping hand. Maybe that was just her perception, her experience, but it had been ugly.

A bell on the door chimed as she entered the shop, and a sunny atmosphere and the heavenly smell of baked goods and coffee immediately surrounded her. A current pop hit played in the background, and overall, it seemed like a welcoming place. No doubt, she'd come here often.

Two teenage girls sat at one of the small round tables in the corner, laughing as they shared confidences and a big gooey cinnamon roll. An older couple with graying hair at another table had coffee cups in front of them, both reading different sections of a newspaper.

“Good morning,” said a blond-haired woman from behind the counter. “Can I get you something?”

Starlee studied the menu on the wall. “I’ll take a medium coffee and one of those delicious-looking cranberry scones.”

“Perfect.” The barista went to work putting together her items, glancing at her occasionally.

“This is weird,” the woman finally said. “But I feel like I’ve met you before.”

Starlee studied her and shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“I’m Noelle Parker. I went to Aspen High. Are you from Pinecone, perhaps?”

“No. I just moved here from Wyoming. Starlee Rinehart.”

Her face broke into a smile. “Now, I remember. You bought the Tullis house. I was at Sparrow’s the other night with Tyler when you came in and asked for help. I guess I saw you for such a brief time that it didn’t register with me this morning. How are you liking the place?”

Her neighbor had been at the bar that night? “It’s great. It’s such an adorable little house. I think I’ll really like it.”

She handed Starlee’s coffee to her. “You’re planning on staying, then?”

“Yeah,” she said with an enthusiastic nod. Why wouldn’t she? “I think I could really like it here.”

“Aspen is a great town. Mostly, the people are really nice.” Noelle paused, as though deciding whether to continue. “I guess it just seems weird that a single lady would move to a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere.”

She supposed it did. “I like small towns, and I prefer the quiet.”

Noelle bagged her scone and handed it to her with a smile. “Then you’ve come to the right place.”

Since Noelle wasn’t hesitant to question her, she decided turnaround was fair play. “It sounds like you know Tyler Morgan, then.”

She snorted. “I should. We’re dating.”

Envy gave her a vicious pinch. Of course, a good-looking guy like Tyler wouldn’t be single. “Oh, okay.” She acted like she was happy to picture the two of them together.

“He’s not giving you trouble, is he?”

Starlee shook her head, thinking that was an odd thing to ask. “No. Mostly, I rarely see him. When I do, it’s usually in the evenings, and he’s busy working.”

“That’s because he works all day for his buddy Luke out in the oil fields. Farming is his second job.”

Damn. She hadn’t realized it, but Tyler was a total badass. He had two tough, physically demanding jobs. No wonder he was built like he was. “Luke. I think I’ve met him and his wife, Lily. They helped me move furniture.”

“Yeah, they’re great people.”

“How long have you and Tyler been together?” She couldn’t resist asking.

Noelle rolled her eyes toward the ceiling as though calculating. “Just over five months, I guess. Feels like a lot longer than that.”

“He seems like a great guy.” Some of the time.

Noelle gave a non-committal shrug. “He is. I’m just not sure he’s the right one, you know?”

“I do. Sort of. I mean, I’m realizing life’s too short to stay where you’re not happy. You shouldn’t be with someone you don’t love.”

*Shit.* Had she really just said that?

Starlee waved her hands between them. “I’m not suggesting you should break up. It’s just that I believe two people should love and care about each other if they are going to spend their lives together. Maybe you need more time. Five months isn’t all that long.”

She should just shut up now, or she would have people in town disliking her.

Noelle nodded and thankfully wasn’t insulted by her unsolicited advice. “We’ve just been going through a rough patch. I suppose most couples do at some point.”

“I think so, too.” Who the hell was she to give love or life advice? She and Bradley certainly had had their difficult times. The latest one had cost him his life.

The bell on the front door chimed, and Starlee glanced up to see a guy wearing an orange construction vest walk in. Noelle gave him a quick wave.

Starlee lifted her cup an inch, intending to move and let the man order. “Thanks for this. It smells delicious.”

“It was nice to meet you, Starlee. I hope you’ll come back soon.”

“I’m sure I will.”

Starlee took her scone and coffee and found a seat near the front where she could work and watch people on the street and in the coffee shop. Though mostly, she found Noelle, with her long blond hair and infectious smile, kept stealing her attention. She was beautiful. No wonder Tyler was in love with her.

And really, what did she care? If life decided she needed another man, the fates would toss him her way. *When she was ready.*

The drizzle had long since stopped by the time Starlee arrived home, and she was surprised to see Tyler's truck parked out in the back. He didn't usually show each day until after four in the afternoon, and he always worked until dusk. She wasn't certain exactly what he did in the fields, but every time she'd been outside when he'd headed back to his truck, he seemed exhausted and dirty.

Those brief sightings described the extent of their relationship. She'd found her pie plate on her porch the day before with a quick note that said, *Thank you. It was delicious.* He could have thanked her personally. Instead, he'd set a boundary. They could be cordial with each other, but they would never be friends.

Her cowboy boots crunched on the gravel as she carried her laptop along with the two bags of groceries that she'd picked up on her way home. It wasn't until she'd made her way through the opening of her peeling, white picket fence that she spied Tyler and Milo kneeling near the front bushes of her house.

Milo smiled as he straightened and met her gaze. "Hey, Starlee. How's it going?"

She returned his gesture as she slowly approached them. Tyler had yet to acknowledge her presence, his ball cap shading his face from view. "I'm good. What are you guys doing?"

Tyler huffed. "Some of the irrigation controls are housed here, and for whatever reason, they're not working right." His last words came out with a grunt as he put all his weight behind the wrench in his hand and then cussed



as he sat back.

“Anything I can do to help?” she asked.

Tyler turned in her direction then, his gaze slowly making his way up her bare legs, leaving her feeling exposed. When his gaze finally connected with hers, attraction zapped her full force. His eyes seemed dangerous and hungry, as though if he devoured her, it might not fix his problem, but it would ease his frustration. He raised a suggestive brow. “Not unless you’re good with a wrench.”

“Uh, no,” she replied, taking a step backward.

Milo’s smile widened into an entertained grin. “Maybe you should offer to help her instead, Ty. The lady looks like she has her hands full.”

Embarrassment sizzled through her. “I’m okay. You’re both busy.” She took another step backward and almost tripped on the uneven grass. Mortification bit hard and she turned, refusing to look at them again as she climbed the couple of steps to her porch.

She juggled the bags as she turned the handle and pressed forward, expecting the door to open. But it refused, and she bounced off it instead. The shoulder strap on her laptop slipped forward, causing everything to shift out of balance, and forced her to drop one of her bags. “Shit,” she said under her breath. She hoped she hadn’t broken anything.

She wasn’t about to glance at Tyler and Milo, but she prayed they’d gone back to their work and hadn’t noticed her struggles. Just as she bent to pick up her bag, she heard footsteps behind her, and Tyler snatched the grocery sack for her. “Let me help.”

She reached for the bag. “I’ve got it.”

He stilled her grasp with his hand. “Let me help,” he repeated, a little more forcefully. He was so close with his big, broad chest right in front of her and his masculine scent assaulting her nostrils, making her weak.

If she argued with him any longer, it would only prolong their interaction. Better to let him help her and then be on his way. “Fine.”

He didn’t back away as she turned to the door, and her shoulder brushed against his chest, scrambling her thoughts even more. She tried the doorknob again, but it wouldn’t turn.

She struggled to balance the remaining grocery bag as she adjusted the laptop strap. Afterward, she wrangled her purse to a position where she could rifle through it for her keys. “I didn’t think I locked it when I left.” In fact, she knew she hadn’t because she’d wanted to prove to herself she could trust

that she was now safe.

Tyler relieved her of the rest of her possessions, his fingers running down her bare arm as he slid the laptop strap from her shoulder. “Give me these.”

With her nerves jittering, she located her keys and slipped the correct one into the lock. It still didn’t turn. She twisted the key and the doorknob a few more times before the whole knob suddenly came off in her hands.

She stared at it in disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” she hissed.

“Damn,” Tyler muttered. “Everything’s falling apart today.”

The irritation in his voice made her cringe, and she stuffed the knob in her purse. “It’s okay. I can fix it.”

“It’s not that. It’s just... Why would you want this old piece of shit house, anyway?”

His question surprised her, and she took a moment to answer. “I don’t know. It seemed like somewhere safe.”

“*Safe?* Aspen might be a safe place, but this house will drive you insane with all its issues.”

She shrugged, not wanting to get into a discussion. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I’ve bought it, so I guess I’ll deal with whatever comes up.” The thought of constant problems was worrisome with her being on her own, but the peace of mind that came from living away from Masonville was worth it.

He studied her for a long moment, and she couldn’t help but feel she’d said something wrong. “Let’s go in through the back door,” he finally said. “Randall’s has closed for the day, so you won’t be able to get a new doorknob until Monday.”



TYLER TRIED NOT to look at Starlee’s rear end as he followed her around the side of the house to the back door. But the jean shorts that she wore hugged her sweet curves so nicely and showcased those long gorgeous legs that would surely lead a man to heaven.

He’d forced himself to look away several times, but every sway of her hips drew his gaze right back to her. God, help him.

The back door was unlocked just like she’d thought the front door should have been, and he wondered what had prompted her to stop locking them.

She'd mentioned being safe. Maybe she'd realized what a great town Aspen really was, which didn't bode well for him and his plans.

The second she opened the door, she turned and held out her hands. "Thanks for helping me."

That she kept resisting his help made him even more determined. "I'll carry them to the counter if it's all the same to you." Now that he was near her, he didn't want to leave so soon. He didn't wait for her invitation, but pushed past her instead, inhaling as he did to catch another whiff of her sexy perfume.

He wasn't disappointed.

She shut the door, leaving them alone in her tiny kitchen. He didn't remember it being this small when his grandparents lived there, but whenever Starlee was near, she seemed to suck the air from his surroundings.

He set her bags on the table and turned, catching her as she studied him. Had she been checking out his ass as well?

"Thanks again," she said, blushing and taking a step back. There was nowhere for her to go, and she bumped into the counter behind her.

Her retreat fired up the hunter inside him, and he took a couple of steps forward just to see how she'd react. He was well within her personal space and knew he was putting himself in as much danger, but he couldn't stop.

She widened her eyes, watching him with a nervous interest that he enjoyed. Her breasts lifted as she inhaled, pressing against the soft white cotton of her tank top, and he remembered the morning she'd answered the door with no bra. He wished she wasn't wearing one now.

She might pretend to be cool and collected with him, but he could tell his nearness affected her, too. He leaned in closer, almost close enough he could kiss her. "You're welcome."

She blinked, bursting the intense bubble surrounding them.

He'd had his fun, but her expression and her scent were drawing him in, and it was time to go. "See you later."

With two strides, he was out the door, back into the fresh air that sadly wasn't chilled enough to cool the heat inside him.

"Damn," he whispered under his breath. He'd enjoyed their little unspoken exchange, but he needed to stay away from her. Far away. And he would have if Milo hadn't goaded him into helping her. The woman was a sorceress as far as he was concerned, and he could only hold his control for so long in her presence.

She had his house. He wasn't about to give her anything more.

He adjusted himself before he rejoined Milo, hoping his friend wouldn't notice the power Starlee had over him. Why couldn't some ugly old man have purchased his house? Then his proposal to buy would be nothing but a logical business proposition. Instead, he had to navigate the waters of a beautiful woman while keeping his head intact.

"You were in there long enough," Milo said with a grin when he kneeled down next to him.

"Yeah?" Tyler returned with a healthy dose of attitude. He didn't need any shit from his friend. "Long enough for what?"

"You tell me."

"Long enough for nothing." He met his gaze square on, trying to prove he wasn't the slightest bit interested in his sexy neighbor. "I helped her with her bags like you wanted me to. That's all."

Milo shook his head. "You disappoint me. If I was still single—"

"You're not." He picked up the wrench. "And technically, I'm not either."

His friend tipped his head in agreement. "How are things with you and Noelle? Luke mentioned seeing you at Sparrow's."

"They're shitty, okay?" He tightened the wrench on the damned bolt and put all his muscles and frustration behind it. It budged enough that he lost his balance and had to catch himself. Finally, he was getting somewhere.

Milo snorted. "Could it have something to do with that pretty little lady sitting inside?"

He gritted his teeth as he gave the bolt another turn. "Why would it?"

"I don't know. When things aren't good between a man and a woman, and then something more fetching shows up, it can cause friction."

Tyler lifted a mocking brow at his friend's choice of words. "Fetching? Really?"

"Especially if the new woman can't keep her eyes off you," Milo said, ignoring his taunt.

His words punched him in the gut. "What do you mean?"

"Starlee. It doesn't take a cop's intuition to see she's interested in you. The moment she showed up, she barely glanced at me. Yet, she couldn't take her eyes off you."

Tyler remained silent. He'd noticed it, too, but didn't want to acknowledge her reaction.

Milo gave him several seconds before he prodded. “So?”

“So, what? What she wants, what I want, doesn’t matter. Even if there was a spark, I wouldn’t act on it. Any kind of relationship between us would only complicate things.”

“Because you want the house.”

Tyler gave the wrench one last turn as water started seeping from beneath it. “Exactly.”

“But there *is* a spark.”

Sometimes, he really hated it when Milo used his interrogation techniques on him. He turned a hard look in his direction. “What do you want me to say? That every time I’m near her, I can’t look at anything else? That she messes with my head?”

“Holy shit,” Milo said with a laugh. “You’ve got it bad.”

“What the hell are you talking about? I didn’t say that was true. I was just giving you an example.” He stood, tired of their conversation. “The water is still coming through this main. Why don’t you make sure the valve is turned all the way off while I get the new part?”

He didn’t give Milo a chance to answer before he turned and headed to the barn, where he kept the irrigation parts. If his grandfather hadn’t jury-rigged the damn system, he wouldn’t be having to fix it now.

Add that to the list of messes his grandpa had left for him.

There weren't many cars in Sparrow's parking lot when Starlee pulled in and parked. She glanced around, wishing she knew what Anna drove, so she'd know if her friend had already arrived. She exited her car, and the growing darkness that had descended on the little town circled around her.

She'd been happily surprised when Anna had invited her to dinner, but walking into a new place alone had always intimidated her. Luckily, her friend was already inside and waiting for her at the bar when she walked in.

"Let's get a table," Anna said to Starlee as she waved goodbye to the female bartender. Her friend had pulled back her dark hair into a sleek ponytail, giving her a sophisticated appearance. That, along with the hint of a cultured accent, proved she hadn't always been a small-town girl.

"I'm glad you weren't busy tonight," Anna said. "Milo's working the late shift, and I couldn't stand the thought of staying home alone."

"I'm happy you called. I think I've had too many nights alone, too."

Anna gave her an empathetic smile, and Starlee blushed. "I didn't mean not having someone to share my bed. Just, well, I live alone."

Her friend grinned. "It's okay to be lonely. I went through a spell where I was *all* alone for long periods of time. It can be unnerving and make us do things we wouldn't normally do if we let our thoughts get the best of us."

Her nonjudgmental attitude put Starlee at ease, and she knew there was a reason she liked this woman. "All alone, meaning no one? That sounds awful. What happened?"

Before she could answer, a blond server appeared, complete with cowboy

boots, a short skirt, and pink lipstick.

Anna greeted the woman with a smile. “Becky, I’d like you to meet Starlee. She’s new in town. Starlee, this is Becky, another person I call my friend.”

Starlee shook the blonde’s hand as they exchanged greetings, and then she and Anna placed their orders.

“I have a convoluted history,” Anna said after Becky left. “But, in a nutshell, my father was a mobster, and he put out a hit on my life, trying to stop me from testifying against him.”

Her friend’s revelation shocked her. “Seriously?”

Anna nodded, not seeming too concerned about the whole thing now. “I spent some time in isolation, and trust me, there’s nothing lonelier than not having a friend in the world.”

She wished she didn’t understand Anna’s feelings. “Good thing you married a cop.”

Her friend laughed. “Actually, that’s how I met him, hiding out here in Aspen. But I’ll never forget those lonely times.”

“I can understand. Not that my father was a mobster. Honestly, I think most of the time, my parents tried to pretend I didn’t exist. They were too busy living their own lives. But after my husband...left, I lost all my friends, too.” Emotion rushed to the surface, and she quickly shut it down. “It was an awful time.”

Anna wrinkled her brows in sympathy. “Why did you lose your friends? That’s when they really should have been there for you.”

Starlee forced a smile. “I guess they weren’t really friends after all.”

“I’d say not.” Anna tilted her head in a friendly gesture. “I understand better than you know, though. My father actually killed my first boyfriend. His men kept me under constant surveillance, so anyone who befriended me was at risk, too.”

“I can’t imagine your pain.” It seemed the world was full of it.

Anna shrugged. “Life doesn’t let anyone get out unscathed. But things are better now. That’s in the past, and Aspen’s a good place to be. I promise. Most of the people here are good, and I found I didn’t want to live without them.”

That’s what she was counting on.

Becky brought their chicken salads and beers. The food looked delicious, and she was glad she’d taken Anna’s suggestion on what to order.

By the time they'd finished their salads and were halfway through their second beers, Starlee had relaxed enough to have a good time. It had been forever since she'd had a girlfriend to laugh with and confide in.

"Can I ask you a question?" she said to Anna, finally getting up the nerve to say what had been bugging her.

"Sure. Anything."

"There's this guy."

Anna laughed, cutting her off. "It's always a guy that troubles us, isn't it?"

She nodded. "I'm not interested in dating right now, but there's this weird chemistry between us that I'd like to understand."

She furrowed her brows. "What do you mean?"

"Honestly, I think he hates me. He avoids me like the plague. But whenever we're close to each other, serious sparks fly, and he looks at me like..."

"Like he wants you more than air?" Anna teased.

Starlee blew out a breath. Anna had nailed it, but she couldn't bring herself to admit it. "Something like that. I just don't know how to react. I'd like to be friends with him, but I'm so confused."

Anna leaned forward and rested her chin on her palm. "Do you like *him*?"

She hadn't allowed her thoughts to go there, so she paused and considered Anna's question for a long moment, but couldn't come up with a definitive answer. "I don't think I know him well enough to know if I like him, but there's definitely something there. Still, I don't think he likes me. He just...wants me. Does that make sense?"

"It makes perfect sense." Anna took a drink of her beer, eyeing Starlee over the rim as though she was in serious contemplation. "You want to know what I think? I think you should push things a bit. Flirt a little. See what happens. Either he'll take the bait, and you'll get to know each other better. Or not. At least you'll have an answer."

Starlee cringed at the thought. "But I don't want to date him."

Anna sent her a confused look. "Is he a good man? Is he cute?"

She took her time before she nodded. "Yeah."

"Then give him a chance. Maybe he likes you, but he's picking up on your unavailable vibes. Why not date him?"

Starlee lifted her shoulders. "I guess because life is easier if I don't go there."



Compassion filled her eyes. “Safer, right? I know the pain that comes from losing someone and the resulting fear that holds us back. But if you ever want to get past that, you need to open your heart again. Maybe just a little at a time and see what happens.”

She agreed with a nod, wondering if Anna was right. She wanted to take a chance, but she was afraid that she might lose everything in the process.

Friendship seemed like the better option, but even in that case, she probably did need to open her heart and trust a little.

That way, she could remain safe while not pushing people away.



TYLER LOOKED past the plates of spaghetti on his kitchen table to Noelle, who sat across from him. She didn't seem any happier than he was.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.” She stared at her plate before stopping to take a drink of wine.

“Something,” he said, twirling spaghetti on his fork before shoving the ball into his mouth. He wasn't much of a cook, but he could make a decent plate of pasta, so that couldn't be why she was upset.

Noelle released a deep breath before meeting his gaze head on. “You haven't been the same since Starlee bought your grandfather's house.”

“Why do you say that?” Not that she wasn't correct. He just wondered what she'd noticed since he'd tried to keep his frustration hidden. The fact was, it tormented him, but he'd figure things out his own way and in his own time.

She shrugged. “You're distant. Agitated.”

He twirled more spaghetti, but instead of eating it, he rested his fork on the plate. “It meant a lot to me, in case you didn't know.”

Noelle gave him a commiserating look, but there didn't seem to be much heart behind it. “I know it belonged to your grandparents, but you still have your grandpa's entire farm.”

Her careless dismissal bothered him. “I want the house, too.”

She released a heavy sigh as she stared at him. “We'll find something else. We could live here. It's not any smaller.”

“Size doesn't have anything to do with it.”

She snorted. “That's what all men say. Ask a woman, and you'll get a

different answer.”

He stared at her, hardly believing her words. Was it really all a joke to her?

She must have realized her mistake, because she quickly lost her smile and cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. I was just trying to lighten the mood.”

He lifted his wineglass and took a large swallow.

She dropped her shoulders. “I guess I don’t understand why it’s so important to you.”

Obviously. “That place holds a lot of fond memories for me. I spent most of my summers there helping my grandparents. I’ve put a lot of heart and soul into that place, and I was always told it was going to be mine.”

“And now it’s not.”

He pinned her with a steely gaze. “No.”

She lifted her chin. “I met her, you know. Starlee’s her name. I really like her.”

Their conversation wasn’t helping in the least. “I know her name. I work on her farm every day.”

“I thought it was your farm. Only the house belongs to her.”

He knew he was being difficult, but he couldn’t help it. “What difference does it make? The place was never meant to be divided.”

Noelle frowned. “Have you asked if she’d be willing to sell? She seems like she really likes it here. She might not want to.”

“No, I haven’t asked her. And I’d appreciate it if you don’t mention it to her. When the time comes, I’ll do the talking.”

She toyed with her spaghetti. “What if she says no?”

That should have been the first thing he’d asked Starlee. But every time he was around her, she had a tendency to muddle his thoughts and make him forget his purpose. Besides, she’d just moved in, and that was a huge job for a single lady. Plus, he didn’t have enough money to offer yet.

He stood, taking his mostly full plate to the sink since he’d lost his appetite. “If I can’t eventually get her to agree to sell it, then I’ll offer to let her buy the farm or sell it to someone else.”

Noelle stood and followed him. The hairs on his arms stiffened when she drew near. “That seems a little dramatic. I understand that you’re grieving the loss of your grandpa and the house, but don’t you think time will help?”

He turned to her with a dark gaze. “No.”

She shook her head in disappointment. “I’m not sure what’s wrong with

you, Tyler, but it seems like you're not handling this the best way."

He snorted. "Thanks for that. Next, you'll be calling me crazy like my sister."

She scoffed. "No. Hannah has a serious disease that she's dealing with. You..." She stopped as though she was searching for the right words. "You just seem obsessed with a place that's nothing more than a farmhouse."

He widened his eyes and compressed his lips, refusing to say more.

She lifted a hand and sighed. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to help you move past this, but me being here is only making things worse. I should go."

When he didn't stop her, she grabbed her jacket. "In fact, I think it wouldn't hurt us to take a little time apart. I've been thinking about it, and things between us just aren't what they should be."

He wasn't sure he wanted her to take things that far. "Noelle."

She held out a hand to stop him from touching her. "Really, Tyler. Even before your grandpa died, you have to admit things had chilled between us. It's not that we're not both good people. We are. But I'm not sure we're right for each other."

Things *hadn't* been great between them for a while, but he didn't want to admit it. Losing his house had only amplified their issues.

"I'm leaving," she said. "If I really start to miss you, I'll call. You do the same. Otherwise, maybe things are better off this way."

He stood still as a stone as he watched her walk out the door and stayed that way another few minutes after she'd gone. He waited for the heartache to hit him, and when it didn't, he let out a string of curses.

*Damn his life.* Damn his carefully planned out life that was now crumbling around his feet.

Starlee stared at the selection of doorknobs currently available at Randall's Western Outfitters. None of them looked exactly like the one she held in her hand. Would another kind fit, or did she need to find one exactly like she'd had?

She turned, prepared to go ask the store clerk, and found Tyler watching her with a dark gaze. Her heart kicked into overdrive. The man had some seriously attractive qualities.

He glanced at the doorknob in her hand. "I told you I'd help you fix it."

She hadn't seen him for three days, and life had been calmer. But also more boring. "I can replace it myself." Plus, it sucked not being able to use her front door, and she couldn't wait forever for him to come around.

He arched an eyebrow. "Is that the one you're picking?"

Damn it. His simple question made her doubt her judgment. How was she supposed to open her heart to someone like him? "I just had one question I wanted to ask someone from the store before I made my choice."

A tall bear of a man, with a nametag that said Bill, had chosen that moment to walk down the aisle and must have overheard her comment. "What can I help you with, ma'am?"

She tried to ignore Tyler as she focused on the equally intimidating store clerk. "Are any of these doorknobs suitable to replace this broken one, or do I need to look for something specific?"

The man lifted his brows like she'd surprised him with her question. Before he could answer, Tyler cut in. "It's okay, Bill. I can help her with this."

“Sure thing.” He focused on Starlee. “If you have any more questions, be sure to let me know.”

She wanted to ask if he knew how to get rid of the gorgeous, yet irritating, guy who constantly haunted her thoughts. Instead, she mumbled her thanks.

Tyler took her by the elbow and steered her back toward the knobs. “You can ask me for help, you know. I’m not a total jerk.”

She was tired of whatever game he was playing. “Really? Because every time I see you, you turn the other direction.”

He had the decency to look ashamed. “I don’t know where you get that idea.”

She gave him an exasperated sigh and looked at him as though he must be joking.

He ignored her gesture and pointed to a doorknob hanging in front of them. “Mostly, you only need to worry about the price. They have a brushed nickel one that looks nice for not a lot of money.”

She exhaled and tried to let go of the frustration he constantly resurrected. She jerked the doorknob from the display and looked closer at it. “It’s pretty.”

“It automatically unlocks when you twist the handle so you won’t accidentally lock yourself out.”

He blinked a couple of times as he spoke to her, and she found herself mesmerized by the length of his dark lashes. Tiny flecks of gold simmered in his dark eyes, and the familiar, intense sparks burned inside her from meeting his gaze. “That’s good, I suppose.”

He pulled another one off and handed it to her. “It might not be a bad idea to get two of them at the same time. That way, the keys for both doors will match. I could install them for you, if you like. I keep a set of tools in my truck.”

Was this another offer to help that he wouldn’t follow through? The man was an expert in keeping her off balance, and she’d grown tired of it. But instead of getting defensive, as usual, perhaps she should try a little harder to be kinder. “If I let you do that for me, then I’ll feel obligated to repay you.”

“It’s unnecessary.”

If she made dinner for him, it would give her the opportunity to figure out why he seemed determined to dislike her. “Except I insist. Will you let me cook for you? Maybe one night this week when you’re working late?”

He shook his head.

“Fine,” she said as she turned from him in frustration. “I won’t need your help with the doorknobs, either.”

She headed toward the cash registers, determined to put permanent distance between them once and for all. She was done with the back and forth, giving her attention and then ignoring her.

She paid and headed out to her car, trying to put her latest interaction with Tyler behind her, frustrated that she couldn’t figure him out. He was brusque with her when he was near, and yet she would expect someone who didn’t appear to like her to stay away.

*“Starlee.”*

The moment he called her name, she stopped walking and paused before swiveling around. She couldn’t imagine what he could want. “Yes?” She had a hard time keeping the sarcasm out of her voice.

He had a sexy, predatory gait as he approached her, and she did everything she could to squash the interest sparking to life inside her once again.

*“Tomorrow.”*

The sound of his deep voice speaking one authoritative word lit an unwanted spark. She met his dark gaze, and everything inside her fluttered. If he even flashed a hint of a smile, she’d be history. “Excuse me?”

*“I’ll come tomorrow around six to fix your doorknobs.”*

She couldn’t stop the smile that tickled the corners of her lips. “You’ll stay for dinner?”

He studied her with an intense expression, as though trying to decipher her, and then he nodded. With that, he turned and walked away, leaving her standing in the parking lot like a giddy schoolgirl.

She didn’t know why the thought of him coming to dinner made her so happy. It wasn’t like he was nice to her. But she liked the fact that she’d have another opportunity to bring him around like she hadn’t with her previous neighbors.

It was an impossible dream to make everyone in town like her, but Tyler, he mattered. He was her neighbor, and she’d see him often. And damn it, she wanted him to like her.

She watched his muscles work as he pulled himself into the cab of his truck, and the engine started with a roar. He drove past her, and she caught his gaze again, both of them staring as though trying to gauge each other.

When he was gone, she climbed into her car, excited about what the next day might bring. She had a so-called date with the big bad wolf, and he was not going to blow *her* house down.



STARLEE FORCED herself to work until three. She had a couple of jobs that were nearing deadline, and she absolutely had to accomplish something that day. But it was hard to work. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Tyler and his dark eyes that seemed to hold so many secrets. Maybe tonight she'd figure out why he couldn't stay away, and yet why he seemed resolved to not like her.

She showered and blew out her hair, taking time to curl the ends, giving her tresses a sexy, sassy sort of style. She was determined to be on top of her game. For her, not for him. And because, for whatever reason, this clash of wills intrigued her. With the way Tyler had treated her for the most part, she shouldn't give him the time of day, but she couldn't help herself. He was a puzzle, and she *would* figure him out.

An hour before he was supposed to arrive, she put the roast with her special cabernet sauce into the oven and started peeling potatoes. She finished her preparations just as a knock sounded on the back door. Her heart stopped and then restarted with a jolt.

She didn't know why she was so nervous. It wasn't as if she was trying to impress him. She only wanted to break down the wall between them.

Starlee took a deep, calming breath, rolling her shoulders until she relaxed. With a bland smile fixed in place, she walked past the table and opened the door. The sight of him stole her carefully planned expression, and it was all she could do to keep her mouth from falling open.

"Hey," he said, his deep voice giving her shivers as he held out two brown sacks to her. "I didn't know if you were a beer girl or a wine girl, so I brought both."

Gone was his ball cap, and it was obvious he'd showered right before he'd come to her house. He'd spiked his hair on top, and it still looked a little wet. A tight black t-shirt showcased his muscles, and his spicy scent begged her to move closer. She accepted his gifts and took a step back. "Come in."

He walked past her into the house, and she gripped the doorknob tightly,

as though it was a lifeline, and shut the door. She was in trouble. She seriously hadn't thought about how difficult it might be to sit in the same room as this gorgeous man and bury her interest at the same time.

The only thing that would save her was his indifferent attitude toward her. Except that one time when he'd cornered her in the kitchen.

*But* he had a girlfriend, and *that* would keep Starlee from acting on her attraction.



TYLER STIFLED the urge to reach out and twirl a strand of Starlee's silky hair between his fingers as he entered her home, just to see if it was as soft as it looked. Curls that hadn't been there before teased him, bouncing as she moved, asking for attention.

He turned just after passing her, needing another glimpse of what taunted him. The turquoise shirt she wore fit her perfectly, molding to her breasts and showing off her waist. The vee of her shirt gaped slightly, giving him a peek at the swell of her breasts. He yearned to touch her. Far more than he should.

In an effort to save himself, he blinked and refocused on her face.

"On second thought," he said, retrieving the sacks from her hands. "Why don't you let me put them in the fridge?" It would give him something to do instead of gawking at what he shouldn't want.

His hand brushed her arm as he took the sacks, and he swore she had the softest skin he'd ever touched. Unfortunately, he'd need more contact to make a solid confirmation.

Then he cursed under his breath to dispel those thoughts.

He wasn't sure what to make of his unwanted attraction to Starlee. Every time he saw her, he ached to be closer. When she was near, he ached to touch, and he couldn't seem to get her out of his head.

Yet, he *didn't* want to like her. She had *his house*, the one thing he most wanted in life.

Then his conscience, or whatever the hell it was, constantly urged him to help Starlee. He wanted to stay away, damn it. He was pissed and not over his hurt yet. When he settled into a more reasonable disposition and had the money he needed, he'd approach her about purchasing the house. But seeing her kept him constantly off balance.



Hell, a smart guy wouldn't offer to help with repairs. He'd let the new owner discover for herself what a pain in the ass this house was, and that would make her more likely to want to sell.

But as hard as he tried, he couldn't keep his distance. He was all kinds of hungry. For her. And for the mouthwatering smells he'd encountered upon entering the house that made his stomach rumble.

He opened the fridge and placed the six-pack of beer inside. When he turned, she was right behind him, watching him with an unreadable expression, her mesmerizing eyes doing funny things to his mind. He had to snap out of it. Regain his control. "Anything I can do to help with dinner?"

Appreciation flashed in her eyes. "I thought you were going to replace the doorknobs."

"I am. After we eat. If that's okay with you."

She regarded him with a gaze that made him want to push her up against a wall and kiss her until she burned with heat and fire.

"I suppose you can set the table. The plates are in the cupboard—"

He cut her off. "I know where they are. My grandma used to cook for me all the time." And he missed that about her. Missed their intelligent conversations and her quirky ways that made him laugh, too.

Starlee met his declaration with wide eyes. "I didn't know it was your grandparents who'd lived here."

Tyler's gut tightened when Starlee blinked at what he'd disclosed. "It was your grandpa who died in the field?"

He wasn't sure who'd told her about how his grandfather had died. But he was surprised they hadn't mentioned him and that he'd expected to inherit the house. "The one and only."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize." She glanced around the kitchen. "You must know this house inside and out."

Like the back of his hand. "I do, as a matter of fact. I know every square inch of the rundown place. It really needs a lot of work."

Her troubled expression that followed his comment was an emotional punch to his gut. God, he was an ass. He really hadn't meant to toss that out and worry her.

Her smile returned a few seconds later, but not as brightly as before. "So, you've said. I figured I'd take one thing at a time. I'm not totally helpless, you know."

Things were getting too personal for his comfort, so he headed to the fridge. "Did you decide on wine or beer?"

The sound of the oven closing caught his attention, and he turned as she set a delicious smelling roast on the stove. She removed her oven mitts and walked closer to him, close enough he could smell her perfume, and it called to him like a siren's song.

She put a hand on her hip as if that would help her decide. "I don't know what kind of mood I'm in. I'll let you pick."

He shrugged. "I'm not sure if beer goes with roast beef."

She arched her brow. "I'm not sure I care."

Her nonchalant, sexy attitude totally did it for him. Besides, he'd never been super comfortable with all the different varieties of wine, anyway, and tonight, he preferred to be in his comfort zone. "Beer it is."

"Beer it is," she repeated with a laugh.

"It's not a regular beer, if that makes a difference." He didn't want to seem too much like a redneck who couldn't impress a lady. "It's a golden ale I got from a local brewery in Pinecone. I'll take you there sometime. They have a restaurant, too, and you can try some other kinds if you like."

He kicked himself for practically asking her on a date.

She studied his eyes, and he wondered if he was as much on trial as she was. "I'm sure what you brought will be fine."

She turned from him, her curls swinging again, tossing another whiff of her dangerous perfume in his direction.

He silently blew out a breath as he pulled tall glasses from her cupboard and set them on the table while she carried the platter of roast beef.

"Do you know how to carve it?" she asked with a teasing tone, holding up a knife.

The way she spoke and her actions made him wonder if she was flirting with him. He had to admit it was preferable to being at odds with her. He knew he shouldn't engage, but he couldn't resist.

He walked toward her, electricity flying between them. "I'm sure I can manage." He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and slipped the knife from her hand.

"Good," she said, not taking her gaze off him. "You do that, and I'll get the rest of our food."

While he carved, she brought over a bowl of fluffy potatoes and another that held thin swords of asparagus. Silently, they both filled their plates, and then Tyler opened a beer, letting it hiss before he filled her glass.

Starlee lifted her glass and took a sip, and Tyler couldn't help but notice her shirt had slipped a little, allowing the vee to plunge deeper.

"The beer's nice," she said, and he forced his gaze to her eyes.

"It is." He cleared his throat, realizing he'd responded more to the look of her than the taste of the beer. "I'm glad you like it."

He stuffed a forkful of potatoes into his mouth, the blend of butter and a hint of garlic melting on his tongue. "These are great." Like amazingly so.

"Thank you."

He noticed she hadn't touched a bit of her food. "Aren't you going to eat?"

She nodded as though half-lost in her thoughts. "I was just thinking."

Uh-oh. When a woman said that, it was almost never a good thing. "About..." he prompted.

Her gaze turned worried. "Noelle. I met her the other day. She's really nice. She said you were dating, and I just realized if you were my boyfriend, I don't think I'd like you having dinner alone with another woman. I'm sorry if I've put you in a difficult position."

Relief burst out of him in a laugh. "Was this a date, and I didn't realize it?"

Her cheeks blossomed with color, and though it might make him a jerk, he enjoyed her reaction a little more than he should have.

"No. I just wanted to say thank you for your help. Plus, you always look so tired at the end of the day, like you could use a good meal." She took a breath. "And if we're going to be neighbors, we should be friendly, right?"

"Right." He cut off a piece of beef and stuffed it in his mouth, still enjoying the hell out of her company. "Besides, Noelle broke up with me."

He'd thought Starlee would be relieved to hear his news, to know she wasn't causing any problems between them, but her expression grew more worried. The delicate blush on her cheeks paled. "Oh, no. I'm afraid that's all my fault."

He eyed her with a disbelieving look. "I don't think so."

"No, listen. When I was at Rumors the other day, I asked about you, and Noelle told me you were dating."

Starlee had asked about him? He let that thought settle on him for a moment.

"She said things weren't the best between you, and I said people shouldn't stay together if they don't love each other. And now...oh, damn. I'm so sorry." She slid her chair back. "I should go talk to her."

He reached out and covered Starlee's hand, stilling her before she could stand. "It's not your fault. Things haven't been good between us for a while. I think we were both too stubborn to admit it."

Her throat worked over a swallow as she stared at him, and some of her color returned. After a few seconds, she scooted forward again and helped herself to a large swallow from her glass.

He wanted to chuckle at her obvious discomfort. "Are you okay?"

She blinked but wouldn't meet his gaze. "Just mortified beyond belief."  
"How about if we forget Noelle and enjoy dinner instead?"

She sighed, glanced at him, and then sighed again. "Can I say something else?"

Another warning flared in his head, and he wanted to say no. "Uh...sure."

She tilted her head, her auburn hair sliding to the side. "I don't understand you at all."

He swallowed his food and took a drink. "What do you mean?"

She stared at him for a long moment, making him uncomfortable. "Is there something here between us?"

He nearly choked. "What do you mean?" he repeated, feeling like an idiot with a limited vocabulary.

"I just...you're so cold toward me sometimes, and then..."

He jumped on that. "Then what?"

She shook her head and smiled. "Never mind."

He shouldn't care what she thought of him, but he did. "I don't mean to be cold. That's not really like me."

Starlee blinked. "I can sense that. It's almost like you have two personalities."

Her comment reminded him of his sister, causing his stomach to tighten. He took a drink of beer before staring hard into her eyes. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"No," she said, and he could tell she'd grown uncomfortable, too. "It's like that song that says you're hot and then cold."

He snatched at her words like a lifeline. "You think I'm hot?"

She choked. "That's not what I said."

He regretted the tiniest bit that he'd dragged her down that path and reminded himself to go easier on the lady. "Then you don't think I'm hot?"

For the second time that night, he found her flustered state charming. She started to speak and then stopped. "You're twisting my words."

He shrugged, pretending innocence. "I'm just curious about your thoughts."

She paused, as eyes flashed with a brilliance that flushed excitement through him, and her gaze could have pinned him to the wall. "I think you're a friendly, flirty person at heart, but when you show that side to me, your demeanor chills."

Several moments of silence spread out between them.

“Am I right?” she asked, finally breaking the tension.

He’d done his best to hide his thoughts about her, but she’d seen right through him. “I wouldn’t say that.”

A knowing smile spread across her lips, and if he’d thought she’d been beautiful before, she was stunning now. He couldn’t stop himself from mimicking her gesture.

Her expression quieted a bit. “You have a really nice smile. Do you know that?”

A peaceful warmth spread through him. He hadn’t felt this relaxed in forever. “I could say the same about you.”

She nodded and took a sip of her beer. “I like us better this way.”

He raised his brows. “Us?”

“Yes. I like it better when we’re friendly with each other.”

*Friendly?*

She obviously hadn’t figured out the beast inside him who wanted things from her. Her house. Damn, even her body. But that heat only ran surface deep.

In truth, he was a cold, desperate man who’d lost too much. A man who’d offer nothing but money for what he wanted.

When she realized that, he wasn’t sure “friendly” would be a term she’d use.

**A**fter dinner, Tyler helped Starlee clear the table. She washed the dishes while he left to grab his toolbox. When he returned through the kitchen door, she fought the urge to release a sigh of appreciation. The sight of him lugging his heavy toolbox was her dessert, even if she was only window shopping.

Her husband Bradley had been an excellent accountant, but he'd been useless with his hands. He hadn't known the difference between a regular and a Phillips screwdriver until she'd told him.

Still, as good looking as Tyler was, something inside her warned her to be careful. He *did* have two sides to him, and she hadn't a clue what brought about his change in behavior.

Plus, there was no girlfriend standing between them now, and her excitement over that left her vulnerable. If Tyler found out how attracted she was to him? She swallowed, not willing to finish that thought.

After drying her hands on a dishtowel, she'd planned to steer clear of him while he worked. But she found herself wandering closer to the back door. "You seem like you've changed a lot of doorknobs in your life."

He snorted and lifted a sexy brow, causing her insides to tighten. "It's not rocket science, sweetheart."

He focused again on his work, and a second later, both sides of the doorknob disconnected from each other. He set the old pieces aside and then ripped into the new package, pulling out two knobs and some screws. "Here, hold these."

She held out her hand, and he dropped several screws into her palm. He

slid one knob through the hole in her door and then matched it with the other through the opposite side.

“Give me a screw,” he mumbled without looking at her.

Starlee held open her palm and let him choose whichever he wanted. His fingertips grazed the inside of her hand, feeling rough and sexy, and she suddenly wished he was touching her for another reason.

After he took what he needed, she quickly closed her fist, needing to quell those thoughts immediately.

He met her gaze with a dark, unreadable one of his own, and she wondered if he was thinking the same thing. Each time he touched her to retrieve a screw, she experienced the same attraction and met his seductive gaze. By the time he finished, she was far beyond overheated.

When he headed toward the front door, she resisted following, and let him work on his own.

Whatever animosity they’d had between them seemed to have disappeared as she walked outside with him after he’d finished. “Aren’t you working in the fields this evening?”

He climbed into the bed of his truck to store his toolbox and then jumped down onto the grass near her. “Nah. Works done for today.”

The man was certainly agile. And well-built. She allowed herself a quick moment to admire his well-honed body. Her ex-husband had been a runner and was always in good shape. But he’d looked nothing like Tyler with his big, sexy muscles that easily could lift a bale of hay or toss a woman onto his bed.

She forced herself to look across the quiet valley as the disappearing sun scattered shadows across the land. “What exactly do you do with alfalfa?”

He leaned back against the side of his truck, watching her with a heavy-lidded gaze that sent her heart racing. “Sell it for fodder locally and to surrounding states.”

“Oh,” she whispered.

He reached out and fingered a curl, and she lost her capacity to breathe. “Does that interest you?”

Her brain tried to push through the seductive haze he’d created when he’d touched her hair. “Yes. Maybe.”

He smiled, stealing more of her heart. “Which is it?”

“What?” she asked more breathlessly than she cared to admit. His touch had stolen her thoughts as she puzzled over what to make of it. Neighbors



didn't touch hair. Potential lovers did.

"I asked if that interested you."

"Yeah, a little. I'm surrounded by it."

His smile grew wider, and it felt like sunshine breaking through the storm clouds. He leaned away from the truck. "I should go. Thanks for dinner. It's the best damn meal I've had in a long time."

Her heart begged her to keep him around longer. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

Tyler dipped his head. "I'm sure you will. I still need to irrigate."

"Right," she said, realizing how thirsty she sounded. "I'll see you later, then."

He didn't leave like she expected him to, and she found she couldn't move, either. The attraction running between them warned he might kiss her, and she was shocked to find she wanted him to.

Instead, he broke their connection when he took a step away from her. "Goodnight, then."

She swallowed and forced herself to speak. "Goodnight."

Starlee didn't wait for him to climb inside his truck before she strode toward the house, not wanting to appear like a love-starved fool. It killed her, but she didn't look back, as she climbed the steps to her porch and walked inside her house using her brand-new doorknob.

Once inside, she stood in the darkened living room far enough from the window that he couldn't see her. She watched the shadows surrounding his truck for several minutes, wondering why he hadn't left.

But then he started his engine and pulled away.

She wondered if he'd hoped she'd return outside. Or perhaps he'd been checking his phone. She had no idea.

All she knew was that she couldn't wait to see him again, and yet dreaded the very same thing.



BRIGHT SUN GLARED from the afternoon sky as the sound of a vehicle pulling into the yard stole Tyler's attention away from his truck's engine. He turned to see Milo's police unit pull past Starlee's house and park in front of the barn.

Disappointment set in. He'd hoped to catch Starlee today, but she hadn't been home when he'd knocked on her door. For the past few days, he'd told himself he'd talk to her the first chance he got. But things kept popping up until finally he admitted he was using anything and everything as an excuse to avoid her.

It wasn't that he didn't like Starlee. Just the opposite, in fact, and it scared the hell out of him. She was supposed to be a random woman who he'd eventually convince to sell her house.

But in the short time that he'd known Starlee, he'd discovered something entirely different. There was no getting her out of his head, and now he found himself in a desperate situation, needing to hear her voice once more and smell that sweet perfume.

"Hey, buddy, what's up?" Tyler said as his friend exited his vehicle.

Milo shut the door and sauntered over to Tyler. For whatever reason, the ladies loved Milo with his blond hair and blue eyes. The uniform probably didn't hurt, either.

"I had a call out this way, so I thought I'd stop and say hi. Maybe check on your new neighbor and see how she's doing."

Tyler leaned his head back under the hood. "She's doing just fine."

His friend rested his arm on the truck. "You keeping an eye on her? Being a friendly neighbor and all that?"

He snorted. "What do you think?"

Milo cleared his throat. "Seeing as how you and Noelle broke up, and Starlee's so pretty, and she's living in your house, I'd bet you're keeping an *awfully* close eye on her."

The wrench came loose from the nut, causing his knuckles to slam into the engine. He jerked his hand out just in time to see bright red blood oozing from the gash. "*Son of a bitch.*"

Milo chuckled. "Gotta watch those tools. They'll bite you every time."

He wiped the blood on the bottom of his shirt and went back to work. "Shut up, man."

His friend tilted his head to catch his attention. "Are you going to answer me?"

Tyler grunted. "Yeah, I'm keeping an eye on her."

From the corner of his eye, he caught Milo nodding in approval. "You're not harassing her, are you?"

He shifted his gaze toward his friend. "No, but *you're* harassing me."

Milo laughed. “Good. That’s what buddies are for. And if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll go check on her myself. Anna made me promise I’d stop by.”

Tyler let Milo walk the distance to her porch and ring the doorbell. Seconds ticked by, and he chuckled under his breath. Two minutes later, Milo was back by his side. “She’s not answering.”

He grinned. “That’s because she’s not home.”

Milo slugged him in the arm. “You ass. You could’ve said something.”

He straightened, meeting his friend’s gaze with a mischievous smile. “You asked for it, showing up here, demanding to know if I’m treating her right.”

Milo shook his head in mock disappointment. “What’s Starlee like? She seemed nice enough the night I met her. Anna went to dinner with her, and apparently, she has her eye on somebody in town. Could that be you?”

He had no clue, but the thought of her looking at someone else left him edgy. Still, he kept his face expressionless, knowing Milo was gauging every word. “She is nice. I’ve helped her with a couple of things, and she made me a hell of a dinner in return.”

The cop arched his brow. “But she has your house.”

He nodded, growing uncomfortable with that reminder. He preferred to keep his attraction to Starlee separate from the fact that she owned his house because that only complicated things.

Milo shifted, facing him more fully. “You know, there could be a real simple solution to this whole problem.”

He already knew what Milo had in mind. He’d already thought the same thing himself repeatedly. But now, with Milo mentioning it, his logical side kicked in, reminding him it didn’t seem ethical. “Don’t say it.”

“Date the girl.”

Tyler groaned, but Milo continued. “She’s single. What if you end up liking each other? You could get married. Problem solved.”

“Except it isn’t right.” And he never should have considered it.

“Why not?”

He released a deep exhale, full of frustration. “Because I want the house. What if I think I’m in love and realize ten years down the road that I only married her for it? What if she finds out that’s why I’m dating her?”

Milo shrugged. “Don’t tell her.”

Tyler looked at him as if he was speaking to an idiot. “Really? That’s

your best advice?”

Milo shrugged. “All I’m saying is you already know you want the house. So what if it’s all-inclusive and comes with a wife? That’s why you wanted it in the first place, isn’t it? To raise your family here?”

He gave him a determined shake of his head. “Forget it. It would never work. Besides, I’m not ready to make a commitment to anyone.”

He wasn’t, and he wouldn’t use her feelings for him, if she had any, against her. “I’ll keep saving my money, and when I have enough, I’ll propose to buy it from her. Maybe there’s another little house in town she’d be happy in. Then it’s a win for everyone.”

“Okay,” he said, sounding like Tyler was a fool for not listening to him. “But don’t blame me when everything goes south, and you find yourself the one looking for a new house. She’s a pretty, single lady who already owns a home. It won’t be long before someone snatches her up. And she may already have her eye on someone else.”

Tyler did his best to not flip the bird at his friend as Milo climbed back into his Tahoe and drove away. Then he scrubbed his chin, trying to work out his frustration.

He couldn’t. No, he wouldn’t let the fear of losing his house drive him to do something he might regret.

A small thrill zipped through Starlee as she pulled into her drive and realized not only was Tyler's truck there, he was as well. Despite the chemistry that had blossomed between them when she'd cooked him dinner, he'd gone back to avoiding her, showing her his cold side again. During the week, she'd only caught glimpses of him as he came and left, but he hadn't come up to the house.

Perhaps he and Noelle had gotten back together. If so, that would be for the best.

She climbed out of her car, and the thought left her chilly despite the warm afternoon sun hitting her bare shoulders. She waved hello because it would be more awkward to ignore him. When all he did was wave back, she pushed aside the disappointed lump that had dropped into her stomach. She headed for the back of her Cherokee and removed several bags of groceries.

"Need some help?" he called out as she rounded the side of her car.

She forced a smile in his direction, remembering she'd said she wanted to be friendly neighbors. Apparently, she'd gotten her wish. "I've got 'em."

Without waiting for further communication that she knew wouldn't come, she went inside and dropped the sacks on the counter. Afterward, she headed to the bedroom at the side of the house, where she poked a careful finger between the blinds and gazed out.

When she realized he was still staring in her direction, she startled and let the slats close. She put a hand over her racing heart. What if he'd *seen* her? She needed to get a grip and stop her desperate behavior.

It killed her to leave the room, but she forced herself to return to the

kitchen and put away the groceries, growling as she did. Why couldn't she just go outside and talk to the man? It was better than stalking him through her blinds. There was nothing wrong with saying hello.

Because she wanted to do more than say hello, she finally admitted. And why shouldn't she? He was a good-looking guy, and she didn't want to be alone forever. What if Anna had been right when she'd urged her to open her heart?

She put a block of mozzarella cheese and a package of Italian sausage in the fridge as she argued with herself.

Plus, wasn't she the one who'd told herself if she was meant to fall in love again, then the fates would put a guy in front of her? Though she'd imagined that would be a year or more down the road.

She snorted. Tyler Morgan was definitely in front of her. He couldn't be more in front of her unless he was actually *right* in front of her, and then she'd have a hard time not wanting to kiss him.

And there was nothing wrong with that. Nothing. The only thing that would hold her back would be fear, and she'd lived too much of her life in that space.

She inhaled a fortifying breath and decided. Without giving herself time to reconsider, she walked out the front door and headed in his direction.

He glanced up as she neared. His gaze seduced her whether he meant to, releasing a thousand tiny excited bubbles inside her. She tried to walk as casually as possible, but he could probably see right through her.

"Hey," she said as she reached him.

He gave her a once-over that heated her blood. "Hey. How are things going?"

"Good." *Ask the man already.* "I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner. I mean, I'd planned on making lasagna tonight, and there's always way too much for just me, even if I have leftovers. If you don't already have plans, that is."

She sounded like a desperate fool, but it was too late to worry about that now.

"I'd love to," he responded without hesitating.

His reply stumped her. She didn't know if she'd expected him to say no or if she'd need to cajole him like last time, but his quick answer caught her off guard. "Great. Umm...it will take me about an hour and a half to get everything ready."

He glanced down at his clothes. “Would you mind if I borrowed your shower? I won’t have enough time to run back home by the time I finish here, and I hate to come to dinner dirty.”

Dirty? She swallowed, thinking of him naked in her shower. “Of course not. You’ve probably showered there more than I have.”

A quick grin tilted his lips, and she was sure she’d led him down the same path her thoughts had taken. “Maybe so.”

She eased out a breath. “I’ll go get started, and you can come in whenever you’re ready.”

He dipped his head. “If your lasagna is half as good as your roast, I’m looking forward to it.”

Warmth flooded her cheeks, and she smiled before turning and nearly running into the house. What the hell had she done?

Starlee had just put her creation into the oven when the sound of the front door closing startled her. She glanced up as Tyler poked his head into the kitchen, looking sexier than sin, holding an extra t-shirt in his hand. She wasn’t about to ask if he always carried around a spare shirt.

He gestured with his head toward the door. “A storm’s moving in.”

“Really?” She glanced out the kitchen window to see dark clouds hovering on the horizon. She hadn’t watched the news for several days, but she supposed it wouldn’t matter. “That’ll be good for the tomatoes and peppers I planted.”

He agreed with a nod. “I’ll just be in the shower, then.”

“Okay,” she responded, sounding breathless. One look from that man was all it took.

The bathroom door closed, followed closely by the sound of running water. She hurried to her bedroom, trying not to think about what lay on the other side of the closed door as she passed.

All her makeup was inside the bathroom, so she couldn’t touch up, but she sprayed on some of her favorite perfume and fixed her hair a bit.

She didn’t know what she was so freaked out over. It was just dinner. With a neighbor. With a really, really hot neighbor.

Back in the kitchen, she cut up a salad and got out the bottle of wine Tyler had brought the last time he’d been there, needing something to help her relax. She poured a glass, and all but downed it in five swallows.

By the time he returned from his shower, a pleasant buzz coursed through her veins. She’d refilled her glass, trying to make it look like she hadn’t used

alcohol as a crutch.

“It’ll be done in about ten minutes,” she said, hoping the distraction of food would keep the awkward tension at bay.

He walked forward with a smile, and she tried not to melt. He picked up the bottle of wine and glanced at her. “Sounds good. Is it alright if I help myself?”

“Of course. You brought it, after all.” Her voice came out breathless, increasing her anxiety.

“Is it any good?”

Starlee glanced at her glass and realized it was half-empty already. She set it on the counter, knowing she needed to slow down. *Way down.* “It’s great. I’m glad you’re sharing it with me.”

His eyes flashed with humor before he filled his glass. He took a sip and nodded in approval. “Anything I can do to help?”

She shook her head. The table was set, and the salad was ready to go. She’d taken care of everything while he’d showered and her nerves had simmered. “Why don’t we sit down?” Before she fell down.

He followed her to the table, but instead of sitting across from her, he settled in the chair next to her. He pivoted in his seat, his knee bumping into hers. “Do anything fun today?” he asked.

She was grateful for the distraction. “I was in town for a while. Spent some time at Rumors writing and then hit the grocery store. How about you?”

“I changed the oil in my truck and on one of my tractors. I could do yours, too, when you need it.”

Now that they’d gotten to know each other better, she was grateful he wasn’t as ornery as he’d been when she’d first met him. “Thanks. That’s really nice.”

He took a sip and then met her gaze, his dark eyes pulling her in like a whirlpool. “You’re a writer, huh? I kind of wondered how you paid your bills. What do you write?”

The spot where his knee touched hers was on fire. “I mostly edit technical manuals. Sometimes I write articles for magazines as extra income.”

He lifted an interested brow. “What were you working on today?”

She inwardly cringed. She’d only told one person of her dreams to write fiction, and Bradley had laughed at her. Well, maybe not laughed, but he’d given her a long spiel about how hard it was to be published. “It’s a novel.”

He nodded encouragingly. “What kind of novel?”



“A mystery.” The timer dinged, and she jumped up. “I’d better get that out.”

She hurried over to the oven and slipped mitts on her hands before pulling the casserole dish out of the oven.

“Smells good,” he said, and she startled, not realizing he’d followed her over. “Should we fill our plates here?”

“Sure.” The pasta dish should probably cool for a few minutes, but he appeared to be in a hurry, and she could use the distraction.

She grabbed the serving spatula out of the drawer as he collected their plates. Her heart rate refused to calm as she cut the lasagna into squares and then served a piece onto his plate. A string of cheese remained hanging from the spatula as she pulled it away.

He tugged on the cheese until it broke and stuffed it into his mouth. “Mmm...”

She watched, fascinated, as he licked a bit of sauce from his forefinger. She forced her gaze away and served her own piece as he held her plate, too. Luckily, this time, it was a clean cut.

He carried their plates to the table, and she realized how nice it was to be around a man again. How fun it was to appreciate his wide shoulders and trim waist. She had a sudden urge to wrap her arms around him from behind and hug him.

Instead, she sat next to him, his knee once again bumping hers.

He lifted his fork. “Thanks for inviting me. This looks great. Sometimes my mamma cooks for me, but other than that, I usually end up with something microwaved.”

She drew her brows. “Haven’t you ever learned how to cook?”

He shrugged. “I can cook, but not as good as you. But by the time I get home, I’m too tired to care what I eat.”

As hard as he worked, he needed to eat well. “I’ve noticed you work a lot of hours.”

He gave her a look that said he didn’t love it. “Yeah. I work for Luke in the oil fields during the day, and then hit the farm in the evening.”

She poured the balsamic vinaigrette on her salad. “Working two jobs is tough. Will you eventually be able to quit one of them?”

Tyler shook his head. “I’m not quitting the farm. That’s my passion.”

“It’s hard to resist passion.” She swallowed hard, realizing what she’d said. “I mean, everyone should have something they love to do, don’t you

think? Even if it's a hobby."

His beautiful eyes glinted with amusement. "Definitely."

She needed to keep the conversation moving forward before it stalled on passion. "What about the other one? The oil fields?"

"That's the one that pays well. And I need it right now." He put another bite of lasagna in his mouth. "Damn, this is good."

His compliment started a smile deep inside her, and she tried not to let it show too much. "Are you trying to pay off bills or something?"

He paused mid-chew and looked at her before swallowing. "Yeah...uh, just trying to get a little cash in the bank. There's something I want to buy."

"Something fun? Like a motorcycle or a snowmobile?" She wouldn't mind getting on the back of a bike with him and riding away.

He nodded as a faraway rumble of thunder sounded. "Hey, I was supposed to let you know Milo stopped by today to check on you. I guess Anna sent him."

She worked to keep her emotions from surfacing. Her friends were night and day from Masonville. "Really? The people here are so nice. The last place I lived in, not so much."

He stopped eating and looked at her. "That's too bad. You mentioned not feeling safe before. Did you live in a dangerous area?"

She clamped her lips closed, realizing the conversation had steered in a direction she didn't want it to go. She could thank the wine for that. "Nothing, really. Just not very nice people."

He watched her for an uncomfortable moment. "Come on. You can tell me."

She took a sip of wine and stared at him, trying to decide if she should trust him or not. "Let's just say the town was more my husband's than mine."

"You were married? I didn't know that." He nodded as though processing the information. "After you broke up, did they take his side?"

Familiar sadness crowded in around her. Tyler didn't have it exactly right, and she couldn't find it in her to correct him. "Yeah. Something like that."

He reached out and covered her hand. "Then it's a good thing you're here."

"It is," she said, a smile erupting out of that dark place inside her. "Things are much better here."

"Good." He lifted his glass. "Here's to new neighbors. Friendly

neighbors.”

She grinned. Thank God she was finally living somewhere safe. She clinked her glass against his before taking a large swallow.

Just as she lowered her glass, the light over the table surged and went out. Plunging them into darkness.

**S**tarlee sat at her kitchen table with Tyler, but with the lights out, she could only see his darkened silhouette next to her. “Did the power go out? The storm doesn’t seem like it’s that close yet.”

Tyler stood, and she did as well. He flipped the light switch a couple of times. “I don’t think so. The clock on the stove is still on.”

She walked into the front room and turned on a lamp. “It’s working in here, too.”

“The light in your kitchen might have died,” he said when she walked back into the room.

She’d never heard of such a thing. “Can they do that?”

“Sure. Your fixture is pretty old. I’ll look at it tomorrow in the daylight.”

For the time being, she figured she could get a candle so they could finish their dinner without eating in the darkness. She turned at the same time he took a step forward and crashed into him. He caught her around the waist, but didn’t immediately release her. All she could think about was how good it felt to be close to him. “Sorry. I was going to get a candle.”

“Good idea.” He let her go then, but instead of sitting, he followed her to the counter, turning on his phone’s light. “Here, this might help.”

He stayed next to her as she dug in a drawer and pulled out a long lighter. Thankfully, she remembered where she’d put it when she’d unpacked. She grabbed the scented candle near the window and headed back to the table.

“Nothing wrong with a candlelit dinner,” he said, his voice sexy and smooth.

She lit the candle and held her tongue, knowing if she spoke, she’d say

something about it being sweet and romantic.

As they finished their meal, she managed to play it cool, despite the shadows dancing over his features, making him look devastatingly attractive. She also consumed another glass of wine, leaving her feeling sexy and witty and wondering exactly how attracted Tyler was to her.

“Would you mind helping me carry the dishes to the sink?” she asked when they’d finished.

He chuckled. “Hell, I’ll even help you do them. It’s the least I can do now that you’ve fed me twice.”

Her insides warmed. “It’s no big deal. I was cooking anyway.” She set her plate in the sink, popped in the stopper, and turned on the water.

He sidled up next to her, his arm brushing hers as he placed his dishes in the sink and the candle next to them. “It’s a big deal to me.”

He reached across her, grabbed the dish soap, and squirted some in. Bubbles frothed on the water’s surface.

She reached her hands into the soapy water at the same time he did, causing her to laugh. “I’ll wash. You rinse.”

He bumped and innocently caressed her hand each time they swapped dishes. By the time they finished, she was a sizzling mass of need. She’d never known doing dishes could be so sexy.

After she handed the last plate to him, she grabbed a dish towel to dry her hands. Before she could finish, he snatched the towel from her.

“Hey,” she said playfully, trying to grab it back from him.

He met her gaze, tilting his head to the side as he wrapped the towel around her hand and finished drying her fingers. The action was so sensual she couldn’t speak. When her hands were dry, he tossed it to the side and pulled her into his arms.

His sudden move sent panic racing through her, stealing her courage. Her head reminded her she hadn’t kissed anyone since her husband, leaving her with doubt. Still, as she stared into the dark depths of Tyler’s eyes, she knew she wouldn’t resist him. She wanted this as much as he did.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he whispered in the darkness.

That was the last thing she’d expected him to say. “Why not?”

He brushed his lips against hers in a soft kiss that stole her rationality. “Because we’re neighbors.”

His words didn’t make sense. “So?” she asked, but she didn’t wait for a response before she drew him into a deeper kiss.

He responded by backing her until she was against the fridge. Her heart thundered as he pressed his body against hers, his tongue tangling with hers in a sweet dance. He moved to her neck, sending delicious shivers through her. "What if things go bad?" he murmured.

"Bad?" she whispered as a tiny shard of fear crept in, killing her desire. She put a hand between them, pushing him away. "What do you mean bad?"

He stepped back, a frown settling between his brows as he licked her kiss from his bottom lip. "If, you know, things don't work. We'll still have to see each other."

She'd been caught up imagining what it would be like to taste him, that she hadn't considered that possibility. "You're right. That wouldn't be good."

It killed her to step away from him, but she did. She walked toward the table to put more distance between them just as a flash of lightning lit the room. She'd convinced herself trying a new relationship could be part of her healing, but what if things *did* go bad? Was she prepared for another round of townspeople choosing sides? The people she'd met so far had all been Tyler's friends. What if they turned on her?

He followed, pulling her back into his arms. "Hey. I didn't mean to scare you off."

She forced a laugh and searched for the fun, sexy mood they'd shared earlier. Why did everything have to be so confusing where he was concerned? "I'm sorry."

He tilted her chin and forced her to look at him. "I was more or less kidding. It's an old saying that you shouldn't date your co-workers or neighbors."

Tyler might have been teasing, but he'd spoken the truth. "I know, but if things go south, I could lose all my new friends."

He sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to remind you of your haunted past. But whenever anyone starts a new relationship, it's a leap of faith, isn't it?"

Her breath caught in her throat. "Is that what we're doing, then? Starting a relationship?"

"Maybe." He searched her eyes, his full of questions, just like she was sure hers were. "I like you. I think you like me, too."

She couldn't deny it.

He dropped his gaze to her lips, and his mouth followed as he kissed her long and slow. Afterward, he licked his bottom lip again as if he couldn't get

enough of her. “I think we should give it a shot...if you’re okay with that?”

Her thoughts warred between caution and want, and ultimately her needs won. “Maybe we could take things slow? A couple of dates?”

Tyler quirked his mouth into a sexy smile. “I guess that’s better than saying you want to be just friends.”

She smiled and stared deeper into his eyes, wondering if it was possible to find love a second time. It seemed she was willing to find out. She traced his bottom lip with her finger and kissed him again.

Desire whipped through her, and after several moments, he was the one to back away. “Damn, Starlee. If you want to take it slow, you can’t kiss me like that.”

The knowledge that she could set him on fire, too, was a potent aphrodisiac. She ran a hand over his curved biceps, enjoying the feel of him beneath her fingertips. “Okay,” she whispered and met his gaze. “I’ll be careful.”

He took her face between his palms, his lips soft on hers as though he was memorizing each nuance. “I should go now. Before I lose the will to be a gentleman. I’ll stop by tomorrow to look at your light.”

Starlee stood where she was, her heart thundering in her chest, until long after she’d heard his truck pull away into the rainy night.

She finally fell onto one of the kitchen chairs, the lit candle flickering from her movement. *Wow.* She’d wanted a change in her life. She just wasn’t sure she was prepared for this much of a change all at once.

Maybe she needed to be careful about what she wished for. She’d wanted a new home, new friends who cared for her, and secretly, she’d wished she could fall in love again. Suddenly, she was on the brink, with no way to tell if she’d be happier than she’d ever been, or if she was setting herself up for another wave of misery.



BY THE TIME the next morning arrived, Starlee had talked herself out of anything to do with Tyler. She’d just gotten her life back, and it was a good life. A happy, safe life.

She and Tyler hadn’t taken things too far. Plus, he’d been the one who’d brought up that neighbors shouldn’t date. Obviously, he had some concerns

himself and wouldn't take it personally if she backed off. There was no reason they couldn't still be friends. Better to stop things now while they *were* friends, right? He might not like it, but he wouldn't hate her.

And she could fix her light herself. She'd found a website that had helped her troubleshoot it, and she was certain he'd been right that the light was no longer viable. Then she found a video that walked her through all the steps on how to change a light fixture, and it sounded reasonably easy.

Not that she didn't appreciate his help. He was a good man. But if she was going to be a homeowner, she needed to handle what she could without asking for help every time something went wrong. Living life that way would leave her weak and vulnerable.

A light rain drizzled on her during her trip to the hardware store and back. But she found a reasonably priced light she liked and everything she needed for installation.

Once she was back inside her house, she turned off the power to the fixture and climbed up on her table, feeling slightly unsteady, but trying to keep her confidence. It couldn't be that hard.

She removed the light bulb and screws just like the online video had shown. No problem. Her brand-new A/C tester made sure she wouldn't shock herself to death when she touched the wires. Next, the orange wire nuts came off easily, and within a few minutes, she'd taken down the old fixture.

When she unboxed the new one, she took a moment to admire the modern design of it as she climbed back onto the table. Excitement and self-confidence filled her. *She was doing it. All by herself.*

She smiled and lifted the fixture to the ceiling. Then frowned. Her new light came with a metal bar thingy that the video hadn't mentioned. She could see there was one already installed, so she wasn't sure if she needed to change it out or not. After holding the new one next to it, she decided they were close enough to the same size, and slipped the new one into her pocket.

Following instructions, she attached the white wire to the white wire hanging from the ceiling hole, and then tried to attach the black ones together. But the black one coming from the ceiling was kind of short, and she couldn't hold up the fixture close enough to get them together and attach the wire nuts.

Not only that, but the new fixture had a copper wire that the old one hadn't. Where the hell was she supposed to attach that?

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment before her



frustration level completely topped out.

Then her doorbell rang, and she swore. She knew without a doubt it was Tyler.

The question was, did she fight to prove to herself she could handle things, or let him come to her rescue, all while leaving herself vulnerable to his charms?

Starlee stood, holding the light fixture in the air, with Tyler at her door. Unfortunately, she could use his help, but she wasn't sure she wanted it. Besides, she didn't dare let go of the half-attached light in case doing so would damage the wires.

The bell rang again, and this time Tyler called out her name.

"Shit," she whispered. He could see her car in front of her house. He knew she was home, and he wasn't likely to go away, so she might as well accept his help. "Come in," she hollered, her arms aching from continually holding them up.

The door rattled as he knocked again, obviously not hearing her.

"Starlee," he yelled.

She tested the weight of the light and was afraid it wouldn't hold. She'd have to undo what she'd done and take the whole thing down with her. "*Hang on.*"

Just as she twisted off the orange wire nut, the door opened, and she knew Tyler had entered her home. "Starlee?"

"In the kitchen," she called, dreading what he'd say.

He stopped short in the doorway, his brows raised high on his forehead. "What the hell are you doing?"

His question added to her already irritated attitude. "I'm changing my light. What the hell does it look like?"

Her retort brought a smile to his face. "It looks like you're changing your light. Can I help?"

She wanted to take her frustration with the damned light out on him, but

she couldn't. Not with the way he was looking at her. She blew out a heavy breath. "I can't get the stupid black wire attached. It's too short."

He pulled a chair close to where she stood and climbed up next to her, smelling like a mixture of fresh air and something sexy and spicy. A few droplets of water clung to his ball cap and jacket. "You're going to break your neck."

Starlee huffed. "No, I'm not."

He nudged her with his elbow. "Here, let me take it."

She let go of the fixture and stretched her aching neck and arms.

He eyed her with a sideways look before surveying her work. "How long have you been up here?"

As if she'd admit the embarrassing truth. "Not long."

"Okay, hold the light again right where I have it."

Her hand brushed his as she reached around him and grabbed the fixture. With her holding the weight of it, he easily twisted the wire nut into place on the black wires. "Got a screwdriver?"

She reached into her back pocket and pulled it out. He undid a green screw a few turns, wrapped the copper wire around it, and tightened it again.

He took the fixture from her and held it in place, turning more screws. "There."

He stepped off the chair and held out his arms for her. She awkwardly placed her arms around his neck and let him swing her down from the table. The feel of his powerful muscles holding her weight made her tighten with attraction.

"Why didn't you wait for me?" he asked when she was firmly on the ground.

She stepped from his embrace, not at all sure how to give him her news. She knew she would seem wishy-washy, flirting with him last night, only to push him away today. "I've been thinking about what you said."

His smile faded slightly. "What did I say?"

She guessed he'd caught on to the fact he wouldn't like her next words. "About neighbors not getting involved."

"Starlee." He reached out and took her hand, making it hard to ignore the connection between them. "I didn't mean for you to take it so seriously."

"I know. But I've thought about it, and I think you're right. I don't want to lose the friends I've made here."

He studied her for a moment, as though he was trying to gauge how

serious she was. “You’re not going to lose them.”

She bit her bottom lip, struggling to hide the emotions he’d laid bare. She didn’t want to show him her vulnerability, her shame.

“Ah, girl.” He pulled her to him, crushing her against his solid chest. “The people here aren’t like that.”

Starlee pushed back and met his gaze. “But they’re your friends.”

He admonished her with a shake of his head. “They’re your friends now, too. I’m not going to turn them against you.”

She inhaled a hopeful breath and held his gaze.

Truth glimmered in his dark eyes. “I promise. Don’t say no, Starlee. Please. I’ve had my reservations, too, but now that I’ve held you and kissed you... This feels too good to walk away from.”

She didn’t know what to say. With him standing right in front of her, it was so hard to say no.

He ran a rough thumb across her bottom lip. “I’ve been thinking about you all day, and it’ll kill me if I can’t kiss you again.”

Her heart trembled as she stared at him. He leaned in, and she didn’t move. She supposed that was her way of saying yes.

Sweet pleasure washed through her as his lips captured hers. He owned her mouth, his soft kisses burning through her. He placed a warm hand at the vee of her shirt and drifted up the column of her neck, her shivers multiplying with each inch he claimed. He stopped at the base of her skull and buried his fingers deep within her hair and tugged.

She gasped as he moved his lips to her throat, everything in her growing soft and achy with need.

When he pulled away, she struggled to fill her lungs. She’d never experienced such a sensual kiss. Maybe it was because she and Bradley had been so young when they’d married, neither of them skilled in lovemaking. Or maybe it was because it had been so long since a man had held her. Either way, Tyler knew how to kiss a woman.

He laughed, but sounded breathless, too. “See what I mean? Chemistry like ours doesn’t happen every day.”

She placed a hand on his chest, his heart thundering beneath her fingertips. “No?”

“No.” A self-assured grin curved his lips. “At least not with me.”

“Me, either.” And that fact scared the hell out of her.

He stepped away from her, and she was sure if he hadn’t, they both would

have broken their commitment to take things slow. “What should we do today since you’ve already tackled the light without me?”

Her pulse slowed, and she could breathe again. “Don’t you have to work?”

“I’m off for a couple of days from my day job, and I can’t do anything in the fields. Not with the rain.” He paused, his gaze moving back and forth between each of her eyes. “Have you ever watched a storm come in over the hills?”

She gave him a doubtful look. “I’ve only been here a few weeks.”

“True. There’s a strong front coming in behind this weak one, sure to give us a good show. We shouldn’t miss the opportunity.” He glanced around the kitchen. “Do you have any snacks?”

“Popcorn?”

“Good. Bring it. We’ll need a blanket, too, in case it gets chilly while we wait. We can grab a couple of sodas or beers on the way out of town, too.”

She raised her brows. Before Bradley’s death, she’d loved a wild storm. Could she find her way back to that again, too? The idea intrigued and scared her. “I was planning on getting a little work done today.”

He tipped his head to the side, glancing at her from beneath his ball cap. “Seriously, girl. You need to learn to have fun. When was the last time you took a day off?”

She shrugged. “I usually work every day, even if it’s only a little.”

“Exactly. Come on. It’ll be fun. If you’re worried about the lightning, we’ll be safe inside my truck. I promise, it’s truly something to see.”

It wasn’t the lightning that frightened her. More her memories. If she refused to go, he’d want to know why, and she wasn’t ready to tell him yet. It seemed her safest option was to test out her new wings and go with him instead.

He popped the popcorn while she grabbed a warm jacket and the fuzzy blanket she kept on the edge of the couch. When they had everything ready, he held her hand as they ran through the drizzling rain to his truck. His presence chased away her fears, replacing them with buzzing excitement.

“What if it doesn’t rain any more than it is right now?” she asked as he helped her into the truck and handed the covered bowl of popcorn to her.

“If it doesn’t, it doesn’t. We’ll still see some beautiful scenery.” He shut her door and hurried around to his side, climbing in the truck and starting it. “Are you afraid to spend an afternoon cooped up inside the cab of a truck

with me?”

She snorted. Maybe. “No.”

Actually, yes. That she might fall in love again seemed so real at the moment, and she wasn't sure what to do with those feelings.

He stopped at the gas station before leaving town and gave her the option of beer or soda. She picked beer in the hopes it would help her relax. Then they were on their way.

A few minutes out of town, she recognized the winding canyon he drove through. “This goes to Pinecone, right?”

“Yep, but we're not going that far. In fact...” He slowed and turned onto an unpaved road that headed through the trees. “We're going up this way.”

Pretty soon, the truck was bouncing as Tyler navigated over the rough terrain, avoiding rocks and deep ruts in the road.

She eyed the so-called road ahead of them. “Won't we get stuck?”

He grinned at her. “That's what four-wheel drive is for.”

Tyler knew more about the town than she did, so she'd trust him.

“Are you cold?” he asked, glancing at her.

She shook her head. If anything, she was quite cozy.

At the top of the hill, Tyler turned again, bringing them out of the trees. The road continued along the ridge, cutting across a meadow with plenty of spring grass growing. When they'd gone a little farther, he pulled off the road, angling the truck so they could see over the valley.

Dark, angry clouds were pushing out the light gray skies from earlier in the morning, leaving a vibrant energy dancing in the air. Below, smaller hills and valleys filled with green waited for the onslaught of rain that would bring more growth. “Wow...that's an amazing view.”

“Told you.” He shut off the truck and turned to her, a sexy look in his eye. “You should scoot over here and bring that blanket.”

Excitement raced through her as she undid her seatbelt and moved across the seat until she was next to him. “Is this what you say to all the girls you bring up here?”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer as she spread the quilt across their laps. “Maybe.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. He was a hopeless flirt. “Beer?”

“Sure.”

She pulled a bottle from the six-pack and twisted it open.

“Thank you.” He met her gaze, his full of invitation. “Nothing better than

a pretty woman bringing me a beer.”

She laughed as he took a drink. He was an expert at flirting, but she wasn't a complete novice. She took the bottle from him, put her lips where his had been, and kept her gaze on him as she drank.

He widened his eyes as if accepting her unspoken invitation, but said nothing.

The light rain stopped, but soon a wild, frenzied wind took its place, blowing with enough force to send twigs racing across the field in front of them.

“It'll be here soon,” Tyler said with promise in his voice, and Starlee braced herself for Mother Nature's show.

The tension inside the truck with Tyler rivaled the storm brewing outside, and a shiver raised bumps on Starlee's skin. She opened the bowl of popcorn and plopped a kernel in her mouth. Then, caving to her intuition and bravery, she held one out for him. His mouth grazed her fingers as he ate it, with his engaging eyes focused on hers.

He lifted his chin. "Give me another."

She grabbed a fluffy piece of popcorn, but put it in her mouth instead of his, giving him a sassy grin.

He smiled, obviously enjoying her teasing. "Hey."

She grinned as she took two more and stuffed them both in his mouth. His eyes brightened as he mumbled his appreciation.

Off in the distance, an electrical current zigzagged across the sky, and she thrust her finger toward the tear in the clouds. "Lightning. Over there."

His lips curved in a teasing gesture as he grabbed more popcorn. "Just wait."

She watched him as he watched the sky, glad that he'd talked her out of her fears. Besides the obvious physical attraction, there was something building between them. Something warm and comforting, and...fun. She loved the way she felt when they were together and in sync like this. Something about them seemed right.

He nudged her elbow, bringing her out of her introspection. "Did you see that one?"

She glanced at the horizon, surprised to find the entire sky now deeply bruised by dark clouds. A few strikes of lightning scratched across the



darkness, but the storm would need to step it up if it wanted to truly impress her.

Tyler grabbed a handful of popcorn from the bowl in her lap and held a kernel up to toss at her. "Open up."

She twisted in the seat and faced him. "Okay, but I get my shots, too."

His first one missed and landed in her cleavage. Before she could react, he snatched it, and she tried not to sigh at the feel of his fingers grazing her skin. Damn if she didn't crave the man's touch.

"Do overs," he said, putting that piece of popcorn in his mouth and grabbing another. His subtle act sent her thoughts racing.

She challenged his actions with a raised brow, but he said nothing.

Fine. Two could play that game. "I get my shot first."

He shook his head, but opened his mouth anyway. She tossed it at him, and it hit his bottom lip but fell to his lap. He went to reach for it, but she slid her hand in under his and grabbed it, her hand coming awfully close to his zipper.

She caught his gaze and slowly put the piece of popcorn in her mouth, knowing there would be a consequence for her actions. He widened his eyes in a sexy challenge, as if asking if she knew what she was doing.

She did. It terrified her, but she ached to know where it would lead. During the first few months after her husband's death, she'd struggled if a stranger paid her any attention, feeling guilty for even looking at other men. But she'd made a new start here in Aspen, and maybe it was time to completely let go of the past. She certainly wanted to.

He tried again, and this time, it landed in her mouth. "Score! I get a kiss for that." His gaze dared her to say no.

She chewed the popcorn and washed it down with a swallow of beer, keeping her gaze on him the entire time. It was one thing to allow him to kiss her in the safety of her house. But being out in the wild seemed more dangerous, and the idea of his lips on hers with nowhere to escape if things got too heated made it more so.

When she was done, she took a breath and leaned in so he could kiss her. He cupped her chin, placing a fat kiss smack on her lips, then smiled at her.

His kiss had barely lasted a second, and it left her wanting more. So much more. "Really? You only wanted a quick kiss. I would have expected you to take advantage of the situation." She hoped her teasing would lead to more.

He leaned his face closer, his wicked, dark eyes holding her hostage.

“You think you can do better?”

She didn't think. She knew it.

She caressed the curve of his lips with her gaze, then moved to the short, dark stubble covering his chin. Two months ago, she never would have believed she'd find herself in such a situation. But here she was.

The aching need inside made her brave, and she turned, getting to her knees on the seat, and took his face between her palms. When she placed her lips on his, desire exploded inside her. She kissed him like she meant it. And she didn't remove her lips from his until long after he'd opened for her and she'd slipped her tongue inside to find his.

“Damn, girl,” Tyler whispered against her mouth. He placed his hands on her sides and pulled her closer until she was almost on his lap. His reaction was exactly what she wanted, and she ended the kiss, knowing she'd tested his limits.

A blinding flash of light surprised her, and she jumped off him, landing squarely on her seat. “*Shit.*”

He laughed.

“Did you *see* that?” Adrenaline sent her heartbeat into overdrive as a percussion of thunder vibrated the air. “It was right on top of us.”

“I told you it gets pretty spectacular up here, though I think that kiss has it beat.”

She wanted to respond, but the weather outside stole her attention. The small droplets of water multiplied in size within seconds, and the sound of rain on the roof became deafening. She covered the popcorn bowl with the lid and sat it on the seat next to her before she scooted close to Tyler, pulling the blanket higher on their laps. “Are you sure it's safe to be up here?”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, tucking her into the warm safety of his embrace. “I haven't been hit yet.”

Just as he finished his sentence, a magical display of dancing lightning filled the sky. “Oh. My. God.” She widened her eyes as the hairs on her arms stood up while thunder crashed around them.

He smiled warmly, his expression tugging at her heart. “I thought you might like it.”

Like wasn't strong enough of a word. “I do.”

And for whatever reason, being out in the wilderness with Mother Nature providing the show made her want to embrace the essence of life. She turned and slipped her hand behind Tyler's neck, pulling his head closer to hers.

All thoughts of danger vanished when his lips touched hers. Having him next to her, kissing him, was so right. It seemed she'd been waiting for this moment in her life. This moment when everything clicked into place. She'd been through some unbearable, rocky times. Perhaps those days made this one all the sweeter.

She shifted, resting on one hip as she slid her hand across his abdomen, enjoying the work-hardened planes. Without thinking, she bunched his shirt, pulling it upward until her fingers met skin.

"Starlee," he warned against her lips, but she didn't stop her assault.

He groaned, his kiss becoming more demanding. He turned her and laid her flat on the seat in a smooth move, covering her with his hard body, evidence of his need pressing against her core. The solid weight of him felt good and left her aching for what would follow.

She trailed her fingers around his back, following the curves of his shoulder blades and spine. His body was rock hard, and she wanted him naked against her so she could explore every nuance.

They had too many clothes, and not enough space.

He trailed kisses down her throat as he pushed aside her jacket. "What happened to going slow?"

She met his gaze as heat licked at her. "It blew away with the storm," she whispered.

Tyler palmed her breast through the thin fabric of her fitted cotton shirt, and she sucked in a breath as his fingers found her buttons. Slowly, he moved lower and lower, popping each button, until her shirt gave way to his demands.

When he finished, he parted the edges with one hand, exposing her pink bra, exhaling as his greedy gaze devoured her. "Shit, Starlee. I feel like I shouldn't be doing this. I'll stop if you want me to."

"No," she whispered, desperate for him to keep touching her. "I want this, too."

He raised a brow as he pushed down the edge of her bra, his expression hot and possessive. He ran a finger over her mound before he sucked her into his carnal mouth.

She gasped as everything inside her clenched. It had been such a long time since a man held her. "Tyler," she whispered as she reveled in pleasure.

He sucked harder, ratcheting her need into a tight bud that blossomed in her core. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed this.

She threaded her fingers through his hair, holding him to her as he made love to her breasts.

“We need to go home,” he growled against her skin. “I need to have you beneath me, naked.”

She quivered inside. “I can’t wait that long. I want you now.”

“*Damn*,” he said on a groan. “I want you, too.”

He lifted off her. “We’ll make this work.”

She sat up, not willing to lose their delicious momentum. Within seconds, she’d kicked off her shoes and shimmied out of her pants as he worked on his boots. “Forget your boots,” she said, pushing his shoulders until he was straight in his seat.

He laughed. “God, you’re quick.”

“I can be. When I want something.” The long-buried, feisty spirit of her youth surfaced, leaving her suddenly excited for what the future might bring.

She shifted and turned, slipping one leg over him. He cupped her ass with his hands, his fingers gripping her cheeks as she settled onto him. The feel of him digging into her flesh amplified her desire. She pushed his jacket off his shoulders with impatient hands, needing to get a better grip on him.

The rasp of his whiskers kissed her fingers as she slid them along his jawline. “I just want more of you,” she said against his mouth before kissing him.

He pulled her tight against him, making sure she knew what he wanted, and she softly sank her teeth into his bottom lip and tugged in response. He growled, gripping her head, possessing her mouth like he couldn’t get enough.

She reached between them, and the second she touched the button on his jeans, he ended the kiss. A wicked grin split his lips as he sat back against the seat, letting her have her way. “I never expected this side of you. But I like it.”

His voice was low, heavy with seductive tones that raised shiver bumps on her skin. “I forgot she existed.” But the sexy side of her was back, and she was determined to not let her disappear again.

When his jeans were open to her, she slipped her hand beneath the elastic of his boxers. He stilled, his gaze wild on hers. Her lips were dry, and she moistened them as she encircled his rock-hard shaft with her hand. Power pulsed as she caressed him, feeling the ridges and the moisture budding from the tip.

He cursed, and she placed her mouth across his, wanting those lips on hers. “Do you have a condom?” she whispered.

“I damn well better.”

Another boom of thunder ripped through the air as she allowed him space enough to pull his wallet from his back pocket. Inside was a blessed foil packet that made them both grin. She took the package from his hands, tearing it open, and slipped the latex over the incredible piece of steel she’d soon claim. She shivered when she pictured taking him inside her.

“You gotta lose those panties, girl. I’ll fight my way around them if I have to. But I’d rather not.”

He had them halfway down her ass before she could climb off him.

She slid the barely there pink lace off her feet as Tyler watched her with midnight eyes that stole her breath.

As she climbed back on him, he slipped a hand between them, his fingers immediately cupping her. She gripped his shoulders as her jaw grew slack. The feel of him touching her most sensitive place was indescribable bliss, and she melted against him as he slid a finger inside.

“Jesus, Starlee.” His voice was as breathless as hers, his words a siren’s call. Nothing short of death could stop what they’d started.

She’d have this man. Inside her. *Now.*

Starlee reached between them, too, pushing his hand aside and putting the hard length of him in place. Then she sank down on him, taking him as far inside her as she could. She held on to his shoulders as her insides quivered around him, accommodating his size.

He cursed as he rolled his eyes upward, his face contorting in immense pleasure.

When she’d regained a shred of sanity, she lifted and then claimed him again. He leaned his head forward, sucking a nipple into his mouth, and he tugged as she took him and released him over and over. The sound of their bodies merging filled the cab of his truck, along with their heavy breathing.

She lost her rhythm as another huge thunder crashed overhead, and he gripped her ass, helping her get back on track.

“Damn, Starlee. You’re killing me.”

He tightened beneath her, and she could tell she’d pushed him close to the edge. But she wasn’t about to slow now. As the pounding rain accompanied her movements, she closed her eyes and focused on the intense friction that threatened to consume her. She was so close.

“Come for me, darling,” he whispered in a husky voice, and that was all it took.

She froze mid-stride, gripping his shoulders as she gasped in pleasure. A blinding release overwhelmed her, and time seemed to stand still.

He held her for a moment, enough that she could regain her bearings, before he started moving beneath her. She forced her thighs to work despite the feeling of complete satisfaction.

He growled, increasing their pace, and the urge for release immediately started building again.

Moments later, she inhaled as pleasure burst inside her, and she called his name. He grabbed her hips with a crushing grip as he stiffened beneath her. She held him tight to her breast until he relaxed.

Afterward, his breaths came hard, and he gave a winded laugh. “You’re a hell of a woman, Miss Starlee.”

She tried to catch her breath. “You’re a hell of a man. Have I told you that?”

He shook his head as she ran the tips of her fingers down the sides of his face before kissing him again.

He stared into her eyes, the heaving in his chest slowing. “I still want to take you home. Once was not enough.”

His sexy proposal made her insides clench again.

“I felt that.” He grinned. “Keep it up, and you’ll make me hard. And that’s going to make for a long ride home ‘cause the next time we make love, it won’t be hot and hurried inside a truck. You deserve better than that.”

His words were a sweet, piercing arrow to her heart. “You don’t like truck sex?” she teased.

“Oh, hell, yeah.” He grinned. “But I want more.”

She swallowed, trying to moisten her dry throat. “Then I guess you’d better take me home.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

When she tried to put her pants back on, he tugged them away from her. “You don’t need those. Not yet.”

She raised a brow as he threw the blanket over her lap.

“What?” he said with a grin. “I just told you. I’m not done with you yet.”

Dear God. She wasn’t sure she’d survive the ride home.

Tyler started his truck, and the engine roared to life as he gave it extra gas, the sound echoing the needy beast inside him. He cracked the windows to release some of the steam they'd made, and Starlee buttoned her shirt. He'd allowed her that much since they'd be driving on public roads, but now that she'd given him access to her sweet body, he wasn't wasting any time.

The ride back down the hillside was bumpy and slow, too slow for him, and his truck flipped mud from the soaked terrain. Rain continued to pour as his windshield wipers worked to keep his view clear.

The second they hit the paved road, and it was safe to steer with one hand, he slipped the other beneath the blanket, ready to play.

"Tyler," Starlee whispered as he tucked his fingers between her sweet thighs.

He flashed a flirting glance her way. "What? It's too late to tell me no."

"I know, but—"

She inhaled a sharp breath as he found her core and circled it.

He cursed beneath his breath. She was a firecracker, and apparently, he was a defenseless addict where she was concerned. "I just want to touch you."

Her mouth parted as she closed her eyes, and a whispered groan escaped her lips. She gripped his hand, but didn't pull him away.

He blinked and forced his gaze back to the road. If he didn't pay attention, he'd put them in a ditch.

When he curled a finger inside her, she gripped tighter and gasped. *Hell,*

*yeah*. His conscience warned him for the millionth time, but it was too late to stop now.

By the time they reached her house, they were both a hot mess. He slammed the ignition into park and immediately pulled her into his arms, kissing her mouth with an unrelenting demand. He was probably bruising her, but *God*, he needed more.

He'd never seen anything so sexy as her slipping into her jeans, not bothering to do them up, and then dashing across her lawn toward the house in bare feet. She glanced back at him with a smile as her auburn hair swirled in the wind and the rain fell down around them.

Hell. He knew right then and there he was a goner.

They made it to the porch, where they stopped for another heated kiss before opening the door.

Inside, they lost the rest of their clothing on the way to her bedroom. As they crossed the threshold into her room, he scooped her up and tossed her on the bed, following her down to the mattress.

"You're insatiable," she said with a laugh.

"Damn right." He spread her legs and settled between them. They'd had enough foreplay the entire way home, and if he didn't possess her soon, he'd damn near die.

Right before he entered her, the look on her face, one of utter happiness, caught him. This was more than just sex to her. He inhaled, taking in the ramifications of their actions. *God*, it was more than just sex to him, too.

He buried himself inside her before leaning forward and nuzzling her ear, the sweet scent of her surrounding him.

There was no doubt he was well and truly screwed.

At least it was in a good way.



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Tyler lay on Starlee's bed with her curled in front of him. It amazed him how well her sweet body fit perfectly against his. They'd made love all evening and throughout the night, and the indescribable feeling of being buried deep inside her was only moments in the past.

Clouds blocked most of the early morning light, but the alarm on his phone woke them fifteen minutes ago, alerting him it was time to start his



day. He should have been out of the house and on his way to work, but he hadn't been able to leave her without one more taste.

Nothing but loving her made sense. The thought that she might be the person he could truly love seemed so farfetched. Yet here they were. Being with her one time had erased all women from his past.

It was too soon to know if he loved her. Too soon to know if they'd be good together long term. But that's exactly what his gut told him.

"Is this crazy?" she whispered into the gray-shadowed room as rain pelted the side of the house.

It meant a lot to know she was experiencing similar feelings. "It's not crazy that we're together. But definitely unexpected."

When he'd first met her, he'd wanted to hate her, not love her. But, looking back, this was definitely the better option.

She stroked his forearm, that he'd wrapped across her stomach to possess as much of her as possible. "I didn't expect it, either. I'd wondered if I'd ever feel this way again."

The thought of anyone hurting her chilled him. "It sounds like your ex really did a number on you."

"Not really. I mean, we did argue. A lot, sometimes. But he never hurt me. Not physically."

Luckily, he'd never been unfortunate enough to find himself in a love-hate relationship like that. None of his romances had ever been that passionate, in a good or bad way, and he couldn't imagine being in that kind of difficult situation. "Is that why you left? The arguing?"

She blew out a breath and hesitated. "Yeah. That's...ultimately what ended us. It...uh...yeah."

He waited for her to finish her sentence. When she didn't, he hugged her. She'd tell him whatever it was she wanted to say when she was ready. No hurry. No pressure. Things were good with them the way they were, and he couldn't see any reason to change it.

"I'm sorry for your pain." He kissed her hair, the scent of her shampoo reminding him of her tresses swinging down around her face as she'd straddled him. "But I'm happy you're here."

"Me, too." She twisted in his arms until she faced him. "I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be."

He pushed her back onto the pillow and covered her again, loving the way she felt beneath him. "As much as I hate to say it, I've gotta go. I'm

already going to be late, and Luke's counting on me."

"But it's raining. You can't work in the rain." She ran a hand up his biceps, making him curse the morning.

"That might slow me on the farm, but not in the oil fields."

She smiled, looking beautiful with her messy hair and kiss-swollen lips. "Okay, then. I'll let you go."

God, he hated to leave her. "Can I see you later? I'd love to take you to dinner. We could drive into Pinecone, or eat at Sparrow's if you don't mind the noise."

She smiled. "Sparrow's. I don't want to be too far away from home, especially when it's rainy."

He snorted. A woman after his own heart. He placed a heated kiss on her lips as three dangerous words hovered on his tongue. "I'll see you later," he said instead.



STARLEE LANGUISHED IN BED, dozing off and on. The clouds kept her room dark, and she wanted to be where she'd made love with Tyler, where he'd slept the entire night next to her.

She was afraid if she got up, unwanted questions would surface about her recent choices, and she wanted to relish the feeling of being thoroughly loved.

But she had to finish the editing on a boring medical manual today. And if she didn't get started now, she might still be dealing with it when Tyler returned later in the day. And that just wouldn't work.

She groaned and rolled from the bed and padded across her room, enjoying the feel of the cool morning air brushing against her skin. She didn't normally walk around naked in her house even though she lived alone, but this morning it invigorated her. She found most of her clothes between the front door and the hallway, but she'd left her shoes and her panties in Tyler's truck.

The thought struck her as funny, and she laughed. She hoped no one saw them before he did. She dug her phone out of her purse and sent him a text, asking him to look for them, and then she hopped into the shower. She hated to wash the feel of him from her skin, but she was counting on a repeat of the

previous night as soon as she saw him again.

She'd dressed, had breakfast, and was just sitting down to work when her phone buzzed with a new message.

*They're mine now,* he replied.

She snorted. *Please.*

*Not a chance. Souvenir of the best night of my life.*

Her heart flipped at his words. She knew she was falling too fast. Caution warned her not to be one of those girls who mistook the excitement of lust for love, and it warned her to tread carefully until he proved himself. But she couldn't shake the shivers that claimed her.

*Best night of my life, too.* She pushed send before she could stop herself.

*Tonight, you're mine.*

*Yes.*

She tucked her phone in her purse and forced herself to walk away. She needed to work, and so did he. They'd have each other later.

Sparrow's was loud, crowded, and full of energy by the time Starlee and Tyler arrived. The rain and subsequent mud had slowed him down at work, making him late to pick her up, but she didn't care. Feeling his hand on the small of her back as they walked into the bar and grill together, fixed everything.

Several people she'd met in town smiled at them, and a few waved, making her feel more like a local than the new girl in Aspen.

"There's Milo and Anna," he said. "I asked them to save us a spot. I hope that's okay."

"Of course. I like them both."

Milo stood as they approached the table and shook Tyler's hand. "There you are. I was wondering if you'd found something better to do."

Starlee raised her brows, wondering if there was a sexual innuendo behind his comment.

"Don't listen to him," Anna said to Starlee, shaking her head. "He's such a guy."

A spark of mischief held in his eyes. "And you're glad I am, dear wife."

She laughed, obviously deeply in love with her husband. "Yes, I am. Now stop being a smart ass and let's order dinner. I'm starving."

"Me, too," Starlee said, taking a seat next to Anna.

Tyler helped to scoot in her chair before sitting next to her. "It's my fault. And this never-ending rain. We might need to build an ark."

"No shit. I think we've all had more than enough of this weather." Milo glanced across the table at Starlee, a friendly smile on his face. "How are

things going for you? Is Aspen feeling like home?"

She could see why Anna had fallen for him. His blond hair and nice build would attract plenty of women, but it was the playfulness in his blue eyes that set him apart from other good-looking guys. Still, she preferred a man with dark hair and dark eyes, who'd take a girl up in the hills to watch a thunderstorm. "Actually, it is. I really love it here."

Milo nodded in approval. "I'm glad my man Tyler finally had enough sense to ask you out. I was questioning his sanity."

"Like you were any kind of quick mover," Tyler countered.

"Isn't that the truth?" Anna added, and gave her lover a warm smile.

"I say we order dinner," Milo said, cutting off their teasing conversation.

Later, after they finished eating, Tyler groaned and patted his stomach. "That was good."

Starlee had to agree. Her steak and salad were excellent, and she was sure she'd eaten more than she should have.

Milo stood and held out a hand to Anna. "I need to dance with my lady before I fall into a food coma."

"You know I can't resist," she said with a grin, and the two of them headed off to join other couples on the dance floor, leaving her alone with Tyler.

He captured her with his sexy gaze. "How about *my* lady? Would she like to dance?"

*His lady?* Her heart expanded with happiness. "Okay, but I'm a novice, so don't expect great things."

He stood and held out his hand. "Don't worry. I've got you."

Before they could leave their table, another couple approached them. She knew people in Aspen were kinder than those in her previous hometown, but her initial guarded reaction was the same.

The tall guy with spiky blond hair said hello to Tyler, and accompanying him was a part-owner of the coffee shop. Her name was April, if Starlee remembered correctly.

Tyler clapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, Seth. April. How are you?"

"Good," Seth said as his gaze wandered to Starlee, and Tyler introduced her. By degrees, she forced herself to relax.

"Starlee and I have already met," April said with a smile. "She's starting to be a regular at the shop."

That April remembered her boosted the feeling of belonging to her

adopted town. "It's hard to beat your coffee."

"She bought the *Tullis place*," April said with emphasis.

Seth's gaze jumped to Tyler before he looked at Starlee again. "How is it living out in the fields?"

Their unspoken interaction left her with an odd feeling, but she couldn't say why. "It's nice. Quiet. I like it. Especially when the insects chirp at night."

Tyler squeezed her hand. "Seth's a good guy to know if you need any serious repairs. He's a hell of a contractor."

Seth snorted. "Yeah, butter me up, man. I've heard you're looking for an estimate on some...home repairs." His gaze wandered toward Starlee again, increasing her curiosity.

She glanced at Tyler, and he gave Seth a quick nod before turning to the dance floor. "Well, hey, we were about to go dance..."

"Oh, sure," Seth said with a smile.

"If you guys need a place to sit, you can pull some chairs up to our table," Tyler offered.

Seth lifted a hand. "Thanks, but no. We're meeting April's sister and her husband. They're in the back."

They said their goodbyes, and Starlee promised she'd visit the coffee shop again soon.

"Are you having problems with your house?" she asked as they reached the dance floor, and Tyler pulled her into his arms.

"Nah. Just some upgrades." He released a heavy sigh and stared into her eyes. "Do you ever think about making this something permanent?"

Her insides tightened in surprise. "Do you mean us?"

He nodded, his intense gaze boring into hers. "I know you haven't been divorced long, and maybe it's too soon to even ask you to think about it."

It was certainly much faster than she'd expected, sending emotions tumbling through her. Excitement. Anxiety. And wonder at his hurry. Not that she hadn't explored the same idea.

But there was also a need to be truthful with Tyler, and she hoped he wouldn't feel slighted since she hadn't told him the entire truth previously. "Tyler, I need to tell you I'm not divorced."

He gathered his brows as he leaned away from her to better look at her face. "You're still married?"

"No." She didn't know why, but this was harder than she'd expected. "I

didn't divorce my husband. He died. In a car crash."

A hint of doubt surfaced in his narrowed gaze.

"I'm sorry I let you think we divorced. It was easier than explaining." She shook her head and looked away, overcome by emotion.

He pulled her tight against him, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, breathing in the comfort and security he offered. "I'm sorry," he whispered against her hair.

"It's okay." She caught his gaze, wanting to reassure him. "It was hard, but I'm moving beyond my past. I've already told you we didn't have the greatest marriage to begin with, but I loved him, or at least I tried to."

"Is this your way of telling me I'm moving too fast?"

She searched his gaze as their bodies moved to the music. "I'm not sure. Though being with you feels right to me. I just needed you to know."

"It feels right to me, too." He leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her lips. "We should go home."

She smiled, loving the feel of solid ground beneath her feet. "We should."



TWO WEEK'S worth of mostly rainy days passed, and Starlee found herself caught up in a new routine. She worked through hazy days, followed by passionate nights spent in Tyler's arms. He'd slept at her house almost as many nights as he did his own.

She was certain he'd say yes if she asked him to move in, but there was a part of her that was still old-fashioned. If they officially were going to live together, she wanted a ring on her finger.

She'd met his family and loved them. More and more, she could see herself spending the rest of her life with Tyler. She'd heard the clichés before, but he truly was the perfect one for her.

Starlee peeked out the window, fluffy clouds breaking on the horizon, and finally letting the long absent sun stream through. "Hallelujah," she said into the empty house. The town desperately needed the warmth and heat to dry things out. Several people in town had experienced flooded basements. They'd even held sand-bagging parties to keep the usually mellow stream from flooding its banks.

With all that beautiful sunshine, it was too nice to spend the day stuck in

her office.

Thirty minutes later, Starlee entered Rumors with a smile on her face. She wasn't the only one. Chatting customers filled most tables, adding a cheerful ambiance to the air.

Everything about her life had completely turned around since she'd arrived in Aspen. She had Tyler. She'd picked up a couple of extra jobs doing freelance work, and her mystery was coming along nicely. In fact, she hoped to write her first big plot twist today.

She even wondered if Tyler might ask her to marry him one day soon. All in all, things were pretty damn good.

She said hello to the other occupants of the shop, calling most of them by name. They responded in kind, making her feel even more welcome. She'd ordered her coffee from April and had just settled in to write when Noelle approached her table.

"Hey Noelle," she said with a bright smile.

Noelle responded in kind, but her smile seemed more troubled. "Can I sit for a moment?"

"Of course. Is something wrong?"

She sat, bringing with her a heavy cloud that seemed out of place for the bright day. "I've been debating something for the past couple of weeks, and I've decided I can't live with myself if I don't say something."

She tried to read Noelle's expression, but couldn't. "What is it?"

"I know you and Tyler are dating."

Starlee hadn't mentioned it to her new friend because she liked the woman and didn't want to toss it in her face. "I hope we can still be friends."

"Of course. I don't begrudge Tyler his happiness. I hope to find mine sometime soon as well." She waved a hand between them as though clearing the air. "But me dating him is part of the reason I haven't said something already, because I worried that you'd think this was coming from jealousy. Otherwise, it would have been an easy decision."

Starlee had no idea where their conversation was headed, but she was pretty sure it wasn't going to be good news. She grasped the edge of the table and steeled herself. "So, tell me."



Noelle exhaled and frowned. “Does Tyler ever talk about your house?” Starlee shuffled through her memories for any specific conversation as she tried to keep her fears at bay. “Not really. I mean, I know it belonged to his grandparents. That’s why he owns all the surrounding property.”

She tucked a long strand of blond hair behind her ear. “But he doesn’t say anything about wanting to own it?”

Unease crept up her spine. “No. Florence, over at the market, told me someone in his family hadn’t wanted to sell the place, but that’s all I know.”

Noelle released a long sigh. “That would be Tyler. Starlee, he thinks your house rightfully belongs to him. His grandpa promised him that house, and he’s obsessed with it. Tyler had been told all his life that one day it would be his. He worked hard for it, too. And had no idea that his granddad owed all those taxes on it before he died. Tyler was saving up his money to purchase it back when you bought it instead.”

Her words hit her like a powerful tornado, causing swirling chaos in her mind and heart. She swallowed, trying to put all the pieces together. He *had* talked about saving money, but he’d avoided being specific. “So, you think what?”

A concerned look fell over her friend’s face. “I’m worried that he’s somehow using you or manipulating you so that he can gain ownership of his house again. He hasn’t offered to buy it?”

She shook her head as dark emotion gathered behind her eyes.

Noelle opened her hands between them. “Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe he

finally got over it. I know he likes you, so maybe he's decided it's okay for you to own it."

Her fears nudged her, reminding her of the promise she'd made to stay single to protect her bruised heart. "Why does he want the place so much? It's not like it's any great thing."

She shrugged. "I could never understand it. Something to do with his heritage and his roots. He'd planned his whole life to marry and settle down there. I guess old dreams die hard."

Starlee nodded.

"Anyway, I just wanted to warn you. It didn't seem right that everyone else knew about his obsession and not you. You seem like a nice person, and I wouldn't want anyone to take advantage of you."

Noelle bit her lip, looking torn. "Not that Tyler would. Deep down, I think he's a good guy. Maybe if you bring it up, he'll talk to you about it."

But why hadn't he already? Something in her gut told her things weren't what they appeared on the surface, and she needed the truth.

She forced herself to sit there long enough to finish her coffee so that Noelle wouldn't speculate further. But the second she was done, she gathered her laptop and headed out the door.



TYLER STEPPED into the office of the drilling company, getting ready to clock out for the day and head home to the woman who'd stolen his heart. Luke sat at his desk with his head bent over some papers. "Hey," Tyler said.

Luke looked up and then glanced at the clock. "I can't believe the day is already gone. This shit isn't adding up at all. I really need to talk to Wayne."

"Good luck with that." He knew from watching his grandpa run the farm that accounting could be a bitch. "I'd stick around, but I have places to be."

Luke chuckled. "I wondered when I'd see the day. Looks like it's arrived."

"What are you talking about?" He pretended ignorance, but he knew exactly what his friend meant.

"Starlee."

The sound of her name brought an unstoppable smile to his lips. "Yeah."

"Do you love her?"

He nodded. "It's crazy, but I can't stop thinking about her. I should hate her for taking my house, but I just want to, I don't know, smell her hair, you know? It's ridiculous, right?"

Luke snorted. "Lily turned me into a mush-headed idiot. But when it's right, it's right."

His gut told him Starlee was the one. "It feels pretty right."

"Does she feel the same?"

His heart tested its seams because he was so full of happiness. "I think she does."

His friend grinned. "Glad to hear it. Getting married was the best thing I ever did. If it were me, I would have been worried she'd think I was after her for the house. But it sounds like you've taken care of everything. I'm happy for you, man. It's good when things work out for the best."

He sighed. "Yeah, about that..."

Luke furrowed his brows. "Don't tell me you haven't told her about the house."

He'd been worried Starlee would think he had ulterior motives. So, when times were good, he didn't want to ruin the mood. And the rest of the time, he'd been more concerned about making her sad than talking about his grandfather's mistakes. "There hasn't been a good opportunity."

Luke gave him a low whistle. "You're playing with fire, dude. I've learned the hard way. It's best to speak up and tell the truth. It might sting, but it's better than a kick in the teeth."

He lifted a hand, wanting Luke to slow down. "I plan to tell her. In fact, I'm going to ask her to marry me, and once I have that ring on her finger, I'll tell her about the past. But if you think about it, it really doesn't matter now. We love each other, and that's taken care of all our other problems. It's the perfect solution for both of us."

She'd have someone to help her with the house, and they'd have the rest of their lives to love each other. "I can see now it was meant to be."

Luke looked doubtful. "My advice? Go tell her. Now. Before you propose. Every second you wait, the more pissed she's going to be. You should have told her right from the start."

Irritation reared inside him. "At the start, we weren't on friendly terms. Telling her would have made things worse. It wasn't like I was expecting to fall for her, you know?"

"Doesn't matter. What does matter is you not pissing her off enough to

leave you.”

The thought struck terror in his heart. She wouldn't. She might get mad, but they loved each other. He'd make sure she knew that more than anything else. “I'm outta here, man. Apparently, I've got some explaining to do.”

“Good luck,” Luke called as he headed out the door.

He wasn't worried. They loved each other. Nothing would tear them apart unless they let it... Unless she did.

*Damn.*

He hurried as fast as he could to his truck without looking like an idiot.



*WHY?*

Starlee sat on her front porch, watching more rain drip from the sky. The days were growing longer now, but it was hard to tell with the cloud cover.

She had on her favorite light blue dress and cowboy boots, her hair and makeup carefully applied. But her mind wasn't on how she looked. It was stuck on Tyler, and she wondered how things could go from so good to uncertain so fast. She'd been sure Tyler had loved her. But could she have been wrong? Could she be seeing what she wanted to see and not what was real?

She owed it to them both to ask him before assuming the worst, even though her gut told her to run.

He'd called earlier and asked if he could take her to a nice dinner at his favorite place in Pinecone. She'd accepted and dressed like she would have for any of their other dates, refusing to believe everything would fall apart between them. This would be a good opportunity to talk about a few things, to clear the air.

If he'd truly been that interested in owning her house, he would have said something much sooner. Noelle must have her facts wrong.

She heard his truck before she saw him, and she waited until he'd parked and approached the house. Looking at his handsome face and the way he smiled when he saw her, she had to believe everything would be okay.

“Hey,” he said as he approached.

She tried to give him a smile that hid her inner thoughts. “Hi.”

“There's nothing prettier than the sight of you sitting on the front porch

waiting for me. The only thing missing is a couple of kids. And a dog.”

“You think so, huh?” Her words held a carefree tone, but deep down, she wished she could read his mind so she’d know the true depths of his feelings. God, what if he thought he loved her, but his feelings really spawned from his obsession to own the house, just like Noelle had suggested?

“Are you ready to go?”

Hopefully, the next few hours would answer her questions. “I am.” She took his offered hand, and he led them to the truck with hurried steps so they wouldn’t be in the rain too long.

He helped her into the truck before climbing in. After starting the engine, he turned his truck around and headed out onto the road. “I can’t believe this rain. I don’t know if we’ve ever had this much water without a break.”

“Water’s good though, right? For your fields?”

He scoffed. “Some. But not this much. We need the sun to make things grow, too, and we haven’t had much this year. I hope to get an extra alfalfa cutting before the end of the season, but if the weather continues, that’s not going to happen.”

“And then you won’t get as much extra money as you’d hoped.” Money he might have earmarked to purchase her house.

He glanced at her, an uncertain look on his face. “Right.”

She studied him, hoping he’d use the opportunity to come clean. But he didn’t. It became difficult to meet his gaze, and she turned, facing forward, folding her arms in front of her.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded woodenly. “Uh-huh.”

He glanced at her again. “No, you’re not. I can see that as plain as the rain on my windshield. Tell me what’s wrong.”

She slowly released a tight breath. “I thought maybe we could talk at dinner.”

Anxious vibes from his direction bounced off her. “Or you could tell me now.”

She *would* remain calm. She’d learned an excruciating lesson with Bradley about not arguing while in a car, and she wasn’t about to put herself or anyone else in that situation again. “I want you to tell me about the house.”

He grew still, his gaze nailed to the road ahead of him. “I actually wanted to talk about that, too.”

“Really?” Was he saying that because she’d pressed the issue, or did he

mean it?

His throat worked over a swallow. "Someone has mentioned something."  
"Noelle."

He cursed under his breath. "I should have known."

"No," she countered, wanting to protect her friend, a friend that had only been looking out for her. "I don't think she was trying to hurt you. She seemed to think she was protecting me."

He narrowed his gaze. "From *me*."

Starlee forced a swallow down her tight throat. "She was concerned that you might be...using me to get the house. She said you're obsessed." Her voice trailed off, knowing that had been an awful thing to say to him.

He scrubbed his jaw, but couldn't hide the irritation on his face. "And you don't think her saying that hurts me? Just because my sister has mental health issues doesn't mean I do."

It was obvious he was struggling to keep his anger at bay, and she needed to help him. "I don't really care about Noelle. I care about us. I care about whether you've been honest with me."

Tyler met her gaze and held it. "I haven't lied to you, Starlee."

His words should have comforted her, but they didn't. "But you haven't told the whole truth, either, have you?"

He clenched his jaw and shook his head. "This isn't how it sounds."

"Was she right about you being obsessed with the house?" Her voice barely carried her words, but what he said next held unmistakable power.

He blinked and looked away from her. "There's a fine line between obsession and pursuing a dream, and I haven't crossed it."

A crack spread across her heart. "But you want the house."

"I'm not going to lie to you." He paused as though his next words were difficult to say. "Yes. I want the house."

She crossed her arms in front of her and held her stomach. "More than you want me?" she whispered.

He turned to her. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

The fracture in her heart grew wider. "The kind I need an answer to."

He swerved slightly, and she gripped the handle on the door as panic threatened to overtake her. "You should slow down."

He glanced at his speedometer and spoke in an irritated voice. "I'm barely over the speed limit."

Starlee shook her head repeatedly, working to keep herself in the present

instead of the horrific past. Her conversation wasn't as heated as her argument with Bradley had been, but it left her on edge. "Still, slow down. It's raining."

Tyler blew out a deep breath. "Starlee, you know I care about you."

"Don't say it." She couldn't take the whole *I care, but* speech. She'd obviously put much more into their relationship than he had, and now she'd pay the price.

"You're not even giving me a chance."

She couldn't take her gaze off the road long enough to look his way, but from the corner of her eye, she saw him glancing at her. "I don't need to hear anymore. Please, just take me home."

He inhaled a deep breath as though he intended to argue, but he surprised her instead. "Fine. I'll take you home, but we're not done discussing this."

He pressed hard on the brakes, and the tires lost traction on the pavement for a brief second, and skidded a little. When he'd slowed the truck enough, he cranked the wheel and turned around on the highway.

Nothing bad had happened, but suddenly, she couldn't breathe. The memories choked her. Blood gushing down Bradley's head. The deathly still way his body was slumped against the steering wheel when she'd finally regained consciousness. The realization that her life had utterly and completely changed in a fraction of a second and nothing, *nothing* could turn back time.

She needed to get out. She needed air. "You should stop."

He flicked a gaze at her. "Stop what? Stop wanting the house? Stop loving you?"

"*Stop the truck!*"

He widened his eyes, shocked, and pulled to the side of the road.

She fumbled for the door handle and pushed open the door, almost falling to the ground below. Cool air rushed into her compressed lungs as she gripped the side of the truck. Rain drizzled on her, a good reminder that she was still alive.

"Where are you going?" Tyler called after her.

She couldn't answer right now, and she shut the door on his question. She had to get her feet back under her and had to gain control over her emotions before she could deal with him.

The only thing she could manage was to walk toward home.

A truck door slammed behind her, and she began to run. She didn't want

him to see her like this. Like her entire world had fallen from beneath her again.

*“Starlee. Come back.”*

She kept moving forward, pretending she hadn't heard him.

Hurried footsteps came closer, and she picked up her pace, but she knew she wouldn't get away.

A second later, he grabbed her by the elbow, forcing her to stop. Her breaths came hard as rain ran down her cheeks. He took her chin, tipped her head toward him, and paled. “God. Starlee. Tell me what's wrong.”

She tugged on her arm, but he wouldn't release her. “Let me go.”

He tried to lead her toward his truck. “Come back. Let's get out of the rain and talk about this.”

Again, she tried to keep walking, but he didn't let go. “No.”

He glanced between her and the road ahead of her. “It's two miles to your house, and it's raining. Don't be unreasonable.”

Buried emotions clawed to the surface. Guilt and anguish at how her first marriage had ended ripped at her, and her voice rose several octaves. “I'm not unreasonable.”

“Then get in the truck. We'll go back home and talk about it.”

Her fear turned to anger. “I have no home. Just leave me alone.”

He gazed frantically between her eyes. “Get in the truck.”

“No.”

He caught her jaw again and faced her head on. “*Why the hell not?*”

Her remaining restraint crumpled, freeing the toxic, pent-up emotions that had built inside her. “*Because that's how he died. Can't you understand? I started an argument in his car. It was raining. It was...*” She trembled. “That's how I *killed* him.”

Her outburst had drained her energy, leaving her voice a whisper. “Let me go.”

Confusion burned in his eyes. “Are you talking about your husband?”

Her bottom lip quivered. “Please, just leave me alone. I don't want to talk anymore. I don't want to love you or anyone else anymore. I just want to be alone.”

“Starlee. Don't be like this.”

She stared at him, trying to tell him everything with her gaze that she hadn't been able to with her words. Rain water clung to his lashes as tears clung to hers. “I can't be with you.”



She should have remembered the promise she'd made right after Bradley had died, when she'd realized being alone was the only way to keep herself truly safe. If she allowed no one in, then no one could hurt her. If she didn't love, no one could leave her. That was the only way.

She'd been a fool to think otherwise, a fool who thought she could find love again, especially with a man who loved her more than anything. She'd played the game and lost.

After a moment, she jerked her arm to free herself, and this time, he let her go. Her boots slipped in the mud alongside the highway when she started running again. Away from the past. Toward safety.

His truck door slammed, but she refused to look back. It was the only way to save herself.

Tyler's heart fell from his chest as he watched the woman he loved struggle in the rain. Something deep and dark possessed her. Sure, some of it stemmed from the damn house. Who owned it and who wanted it.

But there was something more. She'd said she'd killed her husband, but he couldn't believe that.

Worse, he didn't know how to help her. The more he tried, the more upset she became. But he sure as hell wasn't going to let her walk home in the rain.

He dialed Anna's number and quickly explained the situation to her. "Can you come? She needs someone, and she won't let it be me."

After they ended the call, he stayed, following behind Starlee as she walked until Anna pulled up in her car. They talked for a moment, and then he sighed with relief when Starlee climbed into her vehicle.

He'd given his friend enough information hopefully to help her...and him.

If Starlee would allow it, they could fix whatever was wrong. One way or the other, he'd convince her of his love, and, if she cared for him, which he believed she did, he'd make things right.



STARLEE LET Anna drive her home, mostly because she couldn't stand the thought of Tyler trailing her for two miles. She needed space to think. Space to breathe. The interior of the car had been like a morgue, with Starlee

sniffing and Anna maintaining a respectful silence after she'd asked if Starlee wanted to talk.

Her new friend walked her to the porch and put a hand on her shoulder as she met her gaze. "I hate seeing you like this. Is there something I can help with?"

Rain dripped from her hair into her face. "I really appreciate that. Appreciate the ride, too. But I need some time to sort things out."

Her friend tucked a strand of long dark hair behind her ear. "About Tyler?"

She nodded, afraid if she spoke about him, she might start crying again.

Anna took her chilly hands. "I understand. I hope you don't mind me saying, though, whatever's cropped up between the two of you, he's a good man."

Starlee wanted so badly to believe that was true. "But he's lied to me from the start."

"Yeah," she agreed with a solemn look on her face. "He told me about the house, about not disclosing the past. I don't really know all the details of that, but I know this house means a lot to him. I have a feeling, though, that you mean more."

Her words were a lifeline that she didn't dare trust. "Why do you say that?"

"First, he's a smart guy. I don't see him putting an object before a person. Second, I've seen the way he looks at you. The man is in love."

Starlee gave her a tear-stained smile. "You're a good friend." To her and to Tyler.

Anna leaned forward and hugged her. "Ah, honey. This will work out. Just don't give up."

She released a shuddering breath, her fears playing torturous games with her mind. "Promise me that if things don't, you'll still be my friend."

Anna scoffed. "Of course. You shouldn't even ask that."

A measure of relief washed over her. "Thank you. I think I'll go in now and change out of these wet clothes. Maybe take a bath to warm up."

"Okay. Sure. But please call if you need to talk. I'm sure I can help."

Starlee nodded and waited for her friend to leave before she entered the quiet house and shut the door.

She made it into the living room and dropped onto the couch, wet clothes be damned. She'd hoped to come home with answers and proof of Tyler's

undying love. Instead, all she had was a shattered heart.

Hell, perhaps it had never truly healed.

In a minute, she'd get up and peel off her wet clothes. In a minute, she'd breathe deep enough to think about her future. In a minute or maybe an hour or a day, she'd decide if she cared enough to invest any more of herself in this house, or if it was time to try somewhere completely new.

Maybe she needed to move to a big city where she could lose herself amongst the crowds, and no one would notice or find her.



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Starlee realized the slow pitter patter of water seemed to come from inside the house instead of out. She was still on the couch, though she'd stripped down to her underwear and had snuggled beneath a blanket before falling asleep. She should have slept in her bed, but it reminded her too much of Tyler.

The sun made a rare appearance and filtered in through her front window, which was part of what made the sound of dripping water inside so noticeable.

She rolled to her feet, her body aching from the stress of yesterday and an uncomfortable night on the couch. With bleary eyes, she searched for the sound of the dripping. It took her a few moments to find the ten-inch circle of water on the floor next to the table.

Her stomach turned as she glanced upward. A small water stain colored her ceiling directly overhead, and before she could move, a drop hit her square in the face.

She shook her head as tears started anew, unable to take anything else at the moment. "No," she whispered. Not now.

But she didn't have a choice. This house and the leaky roof were hers to deal with. Alone.

She swiped the tears from beneath her eyes and grabbed paper towels to soak up the spill. Just as she turned to toss the wet towels into the trash, a drop of water hit her bare arm and ran down toward her wrist, smacking her with another dose of reality. If it was sunny outside and water still dripped, she must have a puddle in her attic.

*Shit.*

She pulled a big plastic bowl from her cupboard and placed it beneath the dripping water as numbness overtook her. She couldn't sit and cry over her troubles. That would get her nowhere. As much as she wished she could go crawl into bed and not deal with any of it, that wasn't an option she could afford. Instead, she'd do what she could and then go from there.

She found her phone still sitting in her purse. Ten missed calls from Tyler. She shook her head and cleared the main screen. Her leaking house was all she could handle right now.

She dialed the number of the only other person she could think of and tried to hold herself together. As she clung to her numbness, she explained things to Anna and asked for their construction friend's phone number.

Anna called Seth herself, and within the hour, there was a knock at the door. Starlee was sure she looked a mess, but there was nothing to help her red-rimmed and swollen eyes.

"Thanks for coming so fast," she said to the blond-haired man she'd met at Sparrow's. "I really appreciate it."

He gave her a compassionate smile. "Anything for a friend."

A friend. His words brought tears to her eyes, and she quickly blinked them away. "Thank you."

Seth nodded and headed into the kitchen. "Anna said the leak's in here, right?" He walked with his gaze upward until he reached the plastic bowl on the floor. "That doesn't look good."

Her heart sank. She couldn't afford major repairs.

He moved a chair until it was beneath the stain on the ceiling and climbed up. A frown grew on his face as he pressed a thumb against the sheetrock overhead. "Shit."

She couldn't handle the unknown any longer. "What?"

"This is pretty soft here, meaning water's been sitting on it for a while."

He moved the chair over a few feet and tried again. "And here. You know, if you look, you can see it's sagging."

Starlee swallowed, unable to respond.

Seth glanced at her. "The first thing we gotta do is get the water out of there and let it dry. Then time will tell if we can salvage it, or if it needs to be replaced. And we need to figure out where the water's coming in. I'll get up on the roof and see if you're missing shingles."

She clenched her hands, letting her nails dig into her palms, focusing on that pain instead of the emotion roiling inside her. "Whatever you need to

do.”

Seth punched a few holes in her ceiling with a nail, and more water dripped out. “This will let the water out so it’s not sitting. It’s better than having your ceiling cave in.”

He caught her gaze as he climbed down from the chair and frowned. “Hey, it’s going to be okay. It’s just a roof. We can fix it.”

She nodded. The roof could be fixed, but what about her heart? And how could she stay in a place that held someone else’s heart? This was Tyler’s home. He belonged here far more than she did.



SHE’D AVOIDED Tyler for two days except for the time he’d come to the door, and she’d asked him to give her some space. He’d complied, but she often found him staring at the house with a sad look on his face.

But she’d finally decided what she should do.

She was heartbroken, too, but this was the only way she knew to fix things.

On the third day, she drove to the courthouse and found her way to the office marked Ted Bowers, Attorney-at-Law.

Inside, there was no receptionist, so she continued to the back office, where she found an older gentleman with a long white mustache sitting behind the desk.

“Mr. Bowers?” she asked from the doorway.

He looked up, a smile appearing on his face. “Miss Rinehart, please come in.”

He stood to shake her hand, and afterward, she took the seat opposite him. “What can I help you with?”

“You’re Tyler Morgan’s attorney, correct?”

A frown creased his brow. “I am, but I must caution you that I can’t impart any further information about him.”

She waved a hand between them. “That’s okay. All I need you to do is listen, and then you can give him some information from me.”

The attorney nodded, an interested look on his face.

“I want to sell my house. To Tyler. It was his grandfather’s, and he should own it, not me. Here are the conditions. First, it needs some roofing

repairs. I'm not sure how extensive the damage is yet, but the roof leaked, and it will need to be fixed. Since I owned the home when it happened, I should pay to have it repaired."

She paused for a breath. "However, I paid ten thousand for a down payment, and I don't want to lose that. If it's agreeable with Tyler, he can keep that money to replace or repair the roof. We'll call it even. Then he can assume my loan for the rest of the house, provided the bank will allow it. If not, he can rent it from me, through you, until he can get his own loan, which will allow me to pay for an apartment in the meantime. My only other condition is that this transaction must take place through you."

Mr. Bowers studied her for a moment before he nodded. "Seems fair."

She released an anxiety-filled breath as peace settled over her. This was the right decision. "Good."

Mr. Bowers continued to watch her as though he expected her to say more. "Is that all?"

She nodded firmly, confident in her decision. "I believe so."

He arched his white brows. "May I ask where you plan to go?"

"I'd like to stay in Aspen." No more running for her. She'd found her place in the world, and with or without Tyler, she intended to make it her home. The people here did love her, and she loved them, too. "I thought I'd start looking for a place to rent, and then maybe I'll be lucky and find another house."

"You might start with Betty Johnson. Her real estate office is in the little strip mall next to the grocery store."

"Thank you." She stood and handed him a slip of paper with her name and phone number on it. "You can contact me here when the final arrangements have been made. How much do I owe you?"

His smile widened. "Nothing. This is a good thing you're doing, Miss Rinehart. That property means everything to Tyler."

Her tears came then. "I know."

She turned and practically ran from his office, not wanting to make a bigger fool of herself. The house meant everything to Tyler, and he meant the world to her. She wouldn't keep him from his dream.



STARLEE STARED at the computer screen in front of her, trying to put the finishing touches on a self-journey article she'd written about finding inner peace. Over the past few days, she'd started packing her house, knowing she didn't have too much longer before she'd move into the next phase of her life.

Tyler hadn't come around or called again since she'd visited Mr. Bowers.

That hurt. She couldn't deny it. But she couldn't regret her time with him and her time in this little house. It would have been easy to be angry. For the pain he'd caused her, for the hopes it had cost her.

But she'd lived the other side of that life back in Masonville and had experienced the damage it left in its wake. She didn't want that.

Her challenges had propelled her forward, and she knew now that everything would be okay, even if it took her some time to get past the crushing heartbreak.

But better to accept the wretched pain she had now than loads more later on when Tyler realized he only wanted the house and not her. She couldn't say that she'd ever let another man in her life, though. After Tyler, that door seemed to be firmly closed. Maybe after she'd taken a long time to heal. But those thoughts were years down the road.

The sounds of vehicles pulling into the yard dragged her from her work, and she peeked out past the lace curtains, the bright sun making her squint.

Luke's and Milo's trucks sat in the space between her house and Tyler's barn. Another truck bearing the Beckstead Construction Company logo pulled in behind them, with Seth behind the wheel.

She couldn't imagine what for.

Milo jumped from his truck, bringing Anna along with him. When they headed for her front porch, she startled and then smiled. In a rush, she saved her work and closed her laptop, standing just as the knock sounded.

She answered the door with happiness overflowing, pleased that they'd stopped in to say hello. "Hey, there. What are you guys doing out this way? Something wrong with Tyler's barn?"

"We've come to fix the roof," Milo said as Lily, Luke, and Seth joined him and Anna on the porch.

His statement took her by surprise. "Oh. I thought maybe Tyler would wait until all the papers had been signed before he fixed his roof."

Tyler pushed through the crowd of people until he stood directly in front of her. Her heart lurched, and she stomped down the urge to run into his



arms. “We haven’t come to fix *my* roof,” he said. “We’ve come to fix *yours*.”

She didn’t understand. “Hasn’t Mr. Bowers talked to you yet?”

He took a step forward, leaving their chests only inches apart. “Oh, he’s talked to me. But I don’t agree to the deal.”

She backed up, needing space, but it only ended up making room for him to step inside. The others followed behind him, carrying tools and supplies.

“Do it, man,” Luke said as he passed.

*Do it?* “What’s going on here?”

Tyler pinned her with an unreadable gaze. “I’ve come to propose an alternate deal.”

Her breath froze in her chest, and she tried to quell her skyrocketing expectations. “What would that be?” she whispered.

His features softened as he took her hand, love and tenderness rushing toward her in waves. “My proposal is that you marry me, and we live here together. This house and this farm were my world until you came along. But that was just a shell. Without you here to fill it, it means nothing anymore. I love you, Starlee. I want you with me always.”

Tears clouded her vision and clogged her throat.

He pulled a box from his pocket and bent down on his knee in front of her and all their friends. “Stay with me, Starlee. Be my wife, and let’s love each other like my grandparents did.”

Her insides shook with more happiness than she could contain. “Yes. Yes.” She ran into his arms as he stood, and she buried her face against his chest.

After he slipped the gorgeous ring on her finger, the surrounding crowd clapped. All her new friends stepped in to congratulate them. She blinked back tears as she hugged each of them and thanked her lucky stars that she hadn’t run when she’d wanted to.

When they finished, Tyler reclaimed her, and she met his gaze. “Are you sure about all this?”

He chuckled. “Do you want to know a secret?”

She narrowed her gaze and nodded.

“It’s really that I can’t live without your cooking.”

She punched him lightly on the arm, and he gave her a kiss worthy of whistles and a round of applause.

Milo stepped closer and spoke in a half-hearted whisper. “Could you save that for later? We have work to do.”

Starlee covered her laugh, as she and the others got busy building the life she'd share with the man she loved.

## EPILOGUE

**S**tarlee sat on the new swing on her front porch, watching the blazing sun dip lower on the horizon. Just as she predicted, Tyler pulled his tractor up next to the barn and climbed off.

Their new golden retriever puppy jumped from her lap and stumbled over himself to get to Tyler. He picked up the little guy and ruffled his ears before letting the puppy lick his face.

What a sight. She couldn't have imagined she'd ever be this happy.

She smiled as he sauntered toward her, looking all sexy and rumped and tired from a hard day's work. He'd finished the last cutting of the season, getting the extra one he'd hoped for despite all the rain they'd received that year. It was time to celebrate.

She stood as he reached the porch and put little Max at her feet. She wrapped her arms around his neck, ignoring the sweat and the grime. "Hi there."

He kissed her long and hard in return.

She ran a hand down his hard chest, enjoying the power that rested there. "I bet you're hungry."

"Starving."

She lifted a brow in invitation. "I made chicken and dumplings."

He grinned. "My favorite."

She leaned back and gave him a slow perusal. "How about some dessert after dinner?"

An interested smile tilted his lips as he opened the door for them. "Depends on what kind."

She winked, letting him know exactly what she meant. “My favorite.”

“Oh yeah. I’ll be all over that. Just let me shower first.”

He scooped her up and carried her into the house, but when he set her back on her feet, she didn’t let go. Instead, she sent him a cryptic smile. “Can we celebrate one more thing tonight?”

His eyes shone with the love that truly lit her world. “Anything.”

She took his hand and placed it on her belly.

He widened his eyes, searching hers. “Seriously? You’re pregnant?”

She nodded, and he broke into a wide grin. She slipped her arms around his neck and tugged him closer. “It’s what we both wanted.”

He picked her up and twirled her. “Best news ever. How about we start with dessert first?”

She laughed as he tugged her down the hall to the shower with him, their little pup barking at their heels.

Finally, she had the love and the family she’d longed for. She couldn’t tell what the future held for them, but at least they’d always have each other.



I HOPE you enjoyed Tyler and Starlee’s love story. Read on for an excerpt from *Reckless*, the next in the Aspen Series.

SIGN up for my newsletter to receive notifications of new releases, freebies, and special sales at [www.CindyStark.com](http://www.CindyStark.com). Also, if you have a moment, I’d appreciate a review!

*THANK YOU VERY MUCH, and happy reading!*

*Cindy*

# **PREVIEW: RECKLESS**

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Jenna Staker keyed in amounts from an invoice into her bookkeeping program, trying to ignore the restless energy building inside her. She wasn't sure if she could take another day sitting in the front area of the little trailer that had become her father's business office. Not when there was so much sunshine enveloping the outside world. She yearned to get out of her wood-paneled cage, out into the open air.

Instead, she stood and opened the window to let in the fresh late-spring air. April and May had both been unusually mild this year, and already she'd left her jeans behind in favor of cutoffs. A cool breeze wafted in, sweet with the earthy smells that always clung to the air in Aspen, Utah.

She sat and focused on her screen again as the sound of a vehicle pulling into the graveled parking area disturbed her quiet morning tranquility. When the door to the office opened, she glanced up, expecting to see her father step inside. Instead, a stranger walked in.

His black leather jacket hugged his muscled form, setting off his dark hair and brilliant blue eyes. The white button-down shirt and thin black tie made him look like he'd walked off the cover of GQ magazine. He smelled like heaven, too, his exotic, spicy scent luring her in, making her take a deeper breath.

"Good morning, darlin'," he said to her, his voice carrying a distinctive southern accent.

"Morning," Jenna managed to respond without stuttering.

He stood several feet from her desk, but his presence was enough to send her heart racing. "My name's Sebastian Black. I'd like to speak to Mr. Staker

if he's available."

She raised her brows, wondering exactly what kind of business he thought her father ran. Certainly not one where her dad sat in a back office all day waiting for visitors. He worked as hard as the other men he'd hired, putting in twelve or fourteen-hour days if the job required it. "He's out in the oil fields right now. Is there something I can help you with?"

Sebastian stepped closer, his gaze making her feel as though he was absorbing every detail about her. She had a definite sense that his mind had wandered away from his previous business thoughts and turned to something more personal. "As much as I'd like to say yes, I need to speak with Mr. Staker."

Jenna glanced at the clock. Her father normally made an appearance at the office around this time to refill his coffee mug. "If you'd like, I can call and see how long he'll be."

A smile full of charm curved his lips, and her protective wall slipped into place. "I would appreciate that Miss...?"

"Staker," she said with a smile, and enjoyed the look of recognition that crossed his face.

Sebastian arched his brow. "His daughter?"

"The one and only."

She stood and reached for the two-way radio that rested on the back cabinet. When she faced the man again, she found his gaze caressing her bare legs. It had been a long time since she'd had a man look at her so closely, and that he openly admired her left her a little off kilter.

She took a seat and slid her chair close to her desk to shield her from his view. With her eyes on him, she opened communication, asking her dad to respond. His voice came back with a crackle.

"Hey dad," she said. "There's someone here to see you. Sebastian Black."

"What does he want?" he grumbled, obviously not enthralled with the idea of someone interrupting his day.

She directed a questioning look at the eye candy standing on the other side of her desk, knowing full well he'd heard her dad's comment.

He met her gaze with a self-assured one of his own. "I'd like to talk to him about a business proposal."

She lifted her brows higher. A business proposal with her father? Seriously? "He said he'd—"

"I heard what he said. If he wants to wait, I'll be there in ten minutes."

Sebastian nodded.

She released the button, ending the conversation. “He’ll be here shortly.” Instead of getting up to return the radio to its base, she left it on the desk next to her.

“Yes, ma’am.” Sebastian shifted his stance and glanced around the room.

*Ma’am?* She’d never liked that endearment, but in his sexy voice, she might reconsider.

Not knowing what else to do, Jenna turned back to her computer and drew her long blond ponytail across her shoulder as she tried to focus.

Awkwardness claimed the seconds that passed, and she failed to concentrate on her work. Soon, she found her gaze drifting his way again.

Mr. Sebastian Black oozed confidence and power. She didn’t doubt his looks earned him plenty of attention from the ladies. But there was something beneath his polished demeanor, something in the way he moved that said there was more to him. He’d fit right in at a business meeting or downtown club, but she’d bet he could also hold his own in a pissing match with the roughest guys.

She bet he couldn’t ride, though. Most men she’d met who lived in the city couldn’t. He looked like he’d be more comfortable in a metal beast as opposed to sitting atop a magnificent horse.

He caught her gaze, and she smiled. “I’d offer you a seat, but we don’t have a reception area. Few outsiders come in here.” In fact, her office saw nothing but big, dirty local guys.

Interest flashed in his eyes. “An outsider? It shows, does it?”

She lowered her gaze to his nice boots and nodded. There was barely a hint of dust on them, and that was probably from crossing the gravel parking lot to her office. Not that the guys she worked with didn’t dress up occasionally, but it was a rarity. “No one will mistake you for an Aspen citizen.”

“Hmm...” He walked closer and perched on the edge of her desk. She caught another whiff of his cologne, and all her nerve endings singed with feminine appreciation. “If I wanted to look like an insider, what would you change about me?”

“I’d take off your jacket and shirt.” In her mind, she did exactly that, imagining she’d quite like what she saw. Unfortunately, she didn’t recognize her careless choice of words until a quick flash of blue fire sparked in his eyes.



He grinned. "Would you?"

His implied question sent heat rushing to her cheeks, and she cleared her throat. She worked around men all day, and she prayed she had it in her to keep this one from stealing her composure. "Those pants need to go, too. The boots might be okay, but they're too clean."

Jenna eyed him directly, daring him to spout another sexual innuendo. She'd found if she came right back at guys, they usually looked in another direction.

Her response erased his smile. "What's wrong with my jeans?"

"Too new. Too perfect. People around here are not so tightly laced." Let him figure that one out.

He seemed genuinely shocked. "You think I'm uptight?"

She shrugged. "I'm not one to judge. You asked me what I thought, so I told you."

He studied her for a moment, and then that smooth, alluring smile slipped back into place, knocking her off balance again. "So I did."

The sound of a truck pulling up caused them both to glance at the door. "Would that be your father?"

She dipped her head. "I expect it is."

He caught her gaze and held it for an unimaginably long moment. "It was very nice to meet you, Miss Staker. I look forward to the next time."

Before she could reply, he opened the door and stepped outside to greet her dad. Apparently, Sebastian was a man who went after what he wanted.

Through the open window, Jenna could hear the low rumble of men's voices. She strained to catch phrases, but couldn't tell what they discussed.

As quietly as possible, she left her chair and moved closer to the window. Bright morning sunshine rained over the two men as they stood across from each other. Sebastian didn't have the potbelly her father did, but he certainly matched him in height and presence. Her dad had his arms folded while Sebastian was more open, using his hands to present his case. They both had dark hair, except her father's held traces of gray in his beard and at his temples.

"It's a hell of an offer, Mr. Staker. I think you should consider it," Sebastian said, looking every bit as confident as when he'd walked into her office.

Her dad stared at him for a long, hard moment, stirring up that *oh, shit* feeling inside her. She'd seen that look on her father's face too many times,

and it was never a good thing.

“What did you say your name was again?” Her dad asked in his dangerously calm voice.

The poor guy still had a smile on his face. “Sebastian Black.”

Her dad glowered. “And you’re from...”

“Atlanta.”

“Well, Mister Black, I say you take your *offer* back to Atlanta and go screw yourself.”

Jenna cringed as obvious surprise stole Sebastian’s features, and it took him a moment to rectify his expression. “I think you should reconsider. With today’s economy—”

“What you’re offering is a joke.” Her father’s voice boomed, and she wondered what Sebastian could want to purchase from him.

Her dad took a menacing step forward, and she had to give Sebastian credit for not balking. He didn’t move. Not even an inch. “My sources tell me it’s a fair deal, better than the going rate.”

Anyone who could stand up to her dad had fortitude. Her father had gained a reputation in town for being a mean son-of-a-bitch when someone pissed him off, and few dared to cross him.

“Get the hell off my property.”

Self-preservation reared inside Jenna. This was the point in time when, as a troubled-teen, she would have made a run for it and not come home until he’d cooled down. Her father had never physically hurt her, and she greatly respected the man. But she didn’t like to be around him when he was pissed.

“I can give you some time—”

“I said, *leave*.”

Sebastian reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. “In case you change your mind.” When her father only glared in response, Sebastian flicked it and let it drop to the ground.

He turned and walked to the sleek, charcoal Corvette parked near her father’s beat-up work truck. He didn’t run. She’d give him points for that as well.

Her father stood his ground, arms folded, his face mottled with anger, until Sebastian backed up and headed for the main road. The moment his car was out of sight, her dad stepped on Sebastian’s business card, twisting his boot and grinding it into the ground.

When he turned toward the office, she quickly resumed her seat and tried

to pretend she hadn't heard most of the conversation.

He walked in and slammed the door. "Goddamn predators."

She widened her eyes. "What did he want?"

"He thinks he can show up here and offer me a pittance of what my business is worth."

Uncertainty crept over her. "Why would he bother? You're not selling."

The flush on her father's face faded as he stared at her. He couldn't have looked more like he'd been trapped.

She sucked in a shocked breath. "You're thinking of selling?"

He continued to stare, deepening her worries.

"Why? You never mentioned this." How could he not talk to her about something so important? "God, Dad. This is both of our livelihoods. If you sell, how will we live?"

He frowned. "I didn't say I was selling everything."

As if his comment made her feel any better. "Why would you sell any of it? We're just starting to make good money. Is it your back? What about Dave? I thought you'd given him that promotion so he could pick up more of the slack."

That had been six months ago and as far as she was aware, things had gotten better. Disappointment and hurt mingled inside her. "How could you not tell me?"

Annoyance flashed on his face. "I don't have to report every single thing I decide or do in life to you. You're my daughter, not my wife."

His words lit her anger. "Wow, Dad. Funny that you say that, but you expect to know what's going on in my life."

"That's because—"

She lifted an angry hand. "Don't say it. I've heard that lecture too many times. I'm not that girl anymore, and you know I haven't been for a long time."

Clarity gripped her with sharp claws, digging deep. She inhaled and pinned him with a look of disbelief. "Is that why you're always asking about my life? Not because you love me and you're interested, but because you think I'll screw up again?"

"You did it once..."

Her anger reached the boiling point, and she jerked her purse from the drawer before she stood.

He narrowed his gaze. "Where do you think you're going?"

“I’m getting the hell out of here. I don’t think I can tolerate you and your sanctimonious ways for another second today.”

She pushed past him and strode out the door, slamming it as hard as he had earlier. Right now, being out in the open air was the only thing that might save her.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Award-winning author Cindy Stark lives in a small town shadowed by the Rocky Mountains. She enjoys writing about forever love with hot men and strong women in her sexy contemporary romances, along with penning unexpected twists in her emotional romantic suspense stories, and creating magical mayhem in her paranormal cozy mysteries.

She'd like to think she's the boss of her three adorable and sassy cats, but deep down, she knows she's ruled by kitty overlords. Someday, she hopes to earn enough to open a cat sanctuary where she can save all the kitties and play all day with toe beans and murder mittens.

Connect with her online at  
[www.CindyStark.com](http://www.CindyStark.com)



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