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ROXANNE SNOPEK



A SWEET MONTANA

Christmas

THIS OLD HOUSE - BOOK 2

A Sweet Montana Christmas

A This Old House Christmas Novella

Roxanne Snopek



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A Sweet Montana Christmas

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Montana Born Christmas Series

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Chapter One



T*HWACK!*

Splinters of bark and wood exploded onto the snow as the last log split apart at his feet.

Austin Sweet yanked the axe head out of the stump, straightened up and stretched his back. A cord and a half of dry lodgepole pine, split and stacked neatly next to the honey shed. Would it be enough to heat the 150-year old pile of ugly he now called home, through to spring?

He took off his work glove and wiped the sweat off his face, surprised again by the beard. He hadn't intended to grow it exactly, but a month without shaving will do that.

The temperature dropped dramatically in December after dark and suddenly he felt it. Time to go in. He looked across the yard at the house, the sagging wrap-around porch, the weathered shingles, the shutters falling drunkenly away from the windows, like his grandfather's eyes after the stroke that finally killed him.

Maybe, thought Austin, if he closed off the parts of the house he wasn't using, the firewood would last long enough. "Come on, Speedy Gonzales, let's go scrounge up some food."

The ancient Malamute or husky or wolf or whatever he was began the process of getting to his feet. His actual name was Jackson. According to the neighbor who'd handed him the keys, the dog came with the farm. From the way he moved, you'd think he'd been there from the beginning.

"I feel like you look, buddy."

Jackson's tail swayed politely, too busy putting one foot in front of the other for any more enthusiasm. Could also be he was deaf.

Austin shrugged his jacket back on and hiked up his jeans, reminding himself to punch another hole in his belt. And to go to town for some groceries.

Bring home the bacon, son. That's what a man does. A husband provides.

He shook his head, trying to erase the thoughts but they were on replay. The best he could hope for was a shuffle.

He hated going to town. Shopping meant people. And people always had questions.

Are you reopening Sweet Montana Farms?

How are you handling the adjustment from Chicago?

Aren't you lonely, out there all by yourself?

And the worse one of all.

So what brought you to little old Marietta, Montana?

The answers were yes, badly, yes and don't ask.

Austin helped the dog up the rickety steps to the porch and through the front door.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, at a particularly loud creak. He told himself yet again that he'd fix it. The whole thing. Tomorrow.

Or, he'd let it fall off and put a milk crate under the front door. Who cared? What did it matter?

Inside the kitchen, he opened a can of dog food for Jackson and a can of human food for himself. The dog ate from his dish on the floor. Austin stood at the sink and didn't bother with a plate. They finished at the same time.

"So," he said to the dog. "That's dinner. Now what?"

With no cable or Wi-Fi, no city or nightlife, what did a single guy do?

He looked down at the wedding band still on his finger. Was he single? He wasn't divorced. They weren't even formally separated yet. But if a man moves to the forest, and his wife isn't there to share his spaghetti-os, are they still married?

Austin yanked the door of the wood stove open and shoved in some more firewood.

The same slug hit his chest the way it always did when he thought about her.

The fire was mostly dead, the edges of the wood inside black and ashy, the only sign of life a faint red glow underneath. The fresh log lay on top, smothering the dying embers, the cold fuel impenetrable and useless in the fragile heat.

Was she happy now, without him? Had she found someone new? Had there already been someone in the wings, just waiting for the right moment to swoop in?

He deserved it, if there was. She deserved to be happy.

He reached in and took out the log, then replaced it with the smaller sticks and kindling that could bring the fire back to life. His wrist brushed against the edge of the stove and he jumped. He kept forgetting how long that heavy cast iron held heat.

Melinda hadn't betrayed him; he knew better than that. He hadn't betrayed her either but he'd still given her more than enough reason to leave him.

A husband provides.

It ran faster now, like a ticker-tape at the bottom of a CNN telecast, reporting up-to-the-minute news on the latest disaster.

A husband provides for his wife. And beneath that:

Sweet and Morgan Financial Services' Doors Closing.
Investors Furious.

Deposed Financial Wizard's Wife Stands By Him. But For How Long?

Sweet Golden Son Tarnished By Failure in Business and Marriage. As predicted.

The red mark on his wrist was already forming a bubble. Like a scientist observing an experiment, Austin noted that it hurt. He should probably put something on it.

But that was Mel's purview, one of the perks of being married to a nurse. He didn't have so much as a band-aid.

Jackson, stretched out on a blanket in front of the stove, gave a long, low groan.

Austin thought, why not?

He shucked off his T-shirt and jeans and pulled on his Montana State sweatpants, the ones Mel kept trying to throw away. He wrapped himself in a blanket, lay down on the couch and went to sleep.



THE EIGHT-YEAR-OLD HONDA Civic bounced over the cracked and ridged asphalt with enough bone-rattling enthusiasm that, had there been room, the packing boxes behind her would have gone flying.

Melinda Sweet hit clutch and brake, fish-tailed briefly, then pulled over to the side of the road where she killed the engine and sat, hugging her belly, willing her pulse to return to normal, aware of the perspiration running like ice between her shoulder blades.

She squeezed her eyes tightly, then opened them. It felt like peeling the shrink-wrap off a jello mold at a church social.

"Pull it together, Mel," she muttered.

She forced herself to look at the scenery outside her window. The brilliance of the snow pierced her retinas like an ice pick. No wonder she'd let her eyelids droop. All this jagged, unrelenting white, with the mountains looming in the

background like a hawk, lazily biding its time while the rabbits played below.

I'll sleep when I get there, she'd assured her mother.

She'd left her mom's home in Billings before dawn, after pacing the floor for most of the night. She couldn't sleep in the king-sized guest bed, but she drifted off while driving stick?

Her circadian rhythm was still monumentally messed up. As long as you stayed doing night shifts, you were okay. It was the days off in between, the attempt at normalcy that caused the problems.

She shifted in her seat, tugging the track suit jacket tighter around herself. She felt like the broken Christmas ornament she'd kept for so long, a gift from her grandmother, brittle, sharp, wrapped in cotton wool and taken out year after year only to be set aside, useless.

She rubbed her eyes, wondering if it was possible to rip your corneas off, then restarted the car.

Within a few minutes, she saw it: *Sweet Montana Farms, 4 mi.*

The faded wooden sign listed sideways and had what looked to be a bullet hole through one corner. Nice. Might as well say Sweet Montana Farms. Help Us, We're Dying.

She turned down the side road and thump-thumped over a little bridge beneath which a trickle of water flowed over multiple layers of ice.

Another turn, another frozen field. A bunch of goats popped their heads up as she passed by.

There it was: *Welcome to Sweet Montana Farms*. This sign made the one at the road look good.

Instead of turning in, she drove past, getting a sense of their new home.

Austin's new home, she corrected.

Her welcome wasn't guaranteed. He didn't even know she was coming.

She made an awkward turn at the end of the road, to take a second pass from the other side, preparing herself.

The house was straight off one of those calendar shots of picturesque, falling-down farms. Lovely to look at but to live in?

No.

The barns or sheds looked like barns and sheds. A three-line barbed-wire fence bisected the snow-covered field on one side. Dead weeds poked up through some of the snow clumps and random pieces of equipment acted like props for ice sculptures.

Melinda rubbed her neck. Her hands were freezing.

She guided the car over the rutted driveway. One good snowfall and the Civic would be shut in for the duration.

For a second, panic fluttered up like a hummingbird inside a garage window. Shut in for the winter in a place like *this*.

Her mom's words came back to her:

You can't give up now. You and Austin have what it takes.

Love can conquer anything, huh Mom? An unlikely motto for her to have, since the only clue to Delores's love life was a photograph of her with Melinda's father, before Melinda was born.

Mel hoped she was right.

She'd also told Mel that Austin deserved the truth and if he didn't hear it from his wife, he'd hear it from his mother-in-law.

Delores might be a romantic, but she was no pushover.

The car shuddered to a stop and silence fell. So much silence. She stepped out, feeling like the Tin Man in need of a

good oiling and let the door slam shut behind her, the noise a gunshot over the vast yard.

She tucked her bag tightly against herself and forced her feet toward the listing front porch. But before she got there, the door flew open and a figure stepped out, blinking and shading his eyes against the bright morning sun.

Melinda stopped, unable to feel her feet. The figure was Austin. Rationally, she understood that. But it wasn't the Austin she knew, gym-fit, clean-cut, Boss suits, sparkling smile.

This was Austin as she'd never seen him, stripped down, bathed in testosterone and unleashed to hunt bear.

"Ah-roooo," said the raggedy-looking creature beside him.

"Who's there?"

Even his voice was rougher. He lifted his arms to drag a T-shirt over his head. Muscles in his chest and torso flexed and rippled. Her eyes fell to narrow hips, to which those wretched sweats of his were barely clinging.

"Um," she said, hearing the quaver in her voice. "It's me."



AUSTIN FROZE.

Melinda?

He shoved his head through the neck of the shirt, hearing something rip. His mind was foggy with sleep. His eyes smarted, still adjusting to the vicious light, but they worked well enough to know that yes, that was his wife standing in his yard.

"Mel?" he said, anyway.

"It's really early," she said, glancing back at her car. "I can go and come back, if--"

"Mel." He stepped out into the light. "What are you doing here?"

Her hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail. The circles under her eyes were, if possible, darker than they'd been a month ago. She was wearing shapeless fleece track pants – what was it with women and track pants? – And a matching hoodie.

Yet she'd never, in all the years he'd known her, looked more beautiful.

Anger tightened his belly. She'd asked for the separation. To come out here and surprise him like this, to dangle herself, their marriage, their life together, in front of him without warning was nothing short of cruel.

“I'd have c-called,” she said, tightening her hoodie around her neck, “but your ph-phone wasn't working.”

It wasn't working because he'd turned it off and tossed it in a corner. He kept the plan alive because there was no land line to the house and who knows, maybe one day he'd need it for an emergency.

The cold finally bit through his thoughts. He was shivering but worse, he could hear Melinda's teeth chattering.

He leaped down the porch steps, heedless of his bare feet. He wanted to catch her up in his arms, to hold her, to bury his face in her neck, but he settled for hoisting her luggage from the back seat.

“You're freezing,” he said. “Come on in. I've got a fire.”

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Chapter Two



SEEING HER HUSBAND again had shaken Melinda far more than she expected and when she entered the old house, the sense of unreality got worse.

The smell of damp wood and smoke assaulted her and her stomach lurched. She pressed a knuckle hard under her nose and breathed through her mouth.

Better.

The entry and main room were spacious, with rough-hewn beams and a vaulted ceiling between which cobwebs hung like torn bridal veils.

On the wall between the main room and the kitchen stood a big, black, pot-bellied stove from whence came the smokey smell. On the flat top were four round holes, like the burners on an electric stove. Each hole was covered with a notched disc flush with the surface. She could see a handprint in the dust where someone had lifted one of them.

It was an impressive beast. The gas cooktop in their old house had been retro-styled, but this was the real thing, cast iron and meant to last.

A large moss-colored couch sat in front of it. From the balled-up quilt and pillow, it appeared that Austin had been sleeping here when she arrived. The intimacy of being so near where he'd been sleeping felt familiar and foreign at the same time.

She thought of their butter-colored Italian leather couch and love seat, now yard sale prizes in the home of strangers. Beautiful. Stylish. Expensive.

But never intimate.

Austin grabbed the jeans lying over the back of the couch and before she knew it, he'd stripped off his sweat pants, revealing that a) his lower body had been chiseled just as lean as his upper body, b) he wasn't wearing underwear and c) he didn't care that she was watching.

She whirled around, feeling her face heat up.

"Relax," he said. "Nothing new here."

Wrong.

She attempted a carefree laugh. Failed.

"Okay if I look around?" she said.

He chuckled low in his throat. "You want me to slow down? Put on some music?"

Her mouth went dry, her head empty. She was acutely aware of the zipping and slipping sounds as he did or did not finish dressing.

Bathed in testosterone wasn't even close to describing this new Austin. He was *simmering* in it, dripping with it, sizzling and juicy, calling to her like a perfect steak to a starving woman.

"I meant," she said, hoping she didn't sound as carnivorous as she felt, "at the house."

"Whatever," he said.

She moved away to check out the rest of the room, forcing herself away from her husband as he tucked and buttoned. But the hunger didn't turn off immediately.

"Didn't know that bare wall was so interesting."

His amusement had an edge to it. He wasn't interested in making this easy for her.

She struggled to focus, to recover her equilibrium. He was hurt, she reminded herself.

"What's that?"

In the center of the room a group of items, furniture probably, sat clustered together and draped with sheets. Austin's parents had said the place would be "partially furnished;" he hadn't asked for specifics and she, not thinking it mattered, hadn't pushed him.

"Furniture. Junk, mostly."

Her fingers itched to pull off those tarps. She'd always been drawn to old things, places with history, things with stories behind them, and memories. But these weren't her memories and it wasn't her place to pry.

Austin was dressed so she allowed herself to look freely around the room.

"Like what I've done with the place?"

Austin stood by the fire, finger-combing his hair.

Every wall had spots where the plaster had been punched out or chewed out or been the victim of someone with a picture to hang and no stud finder.

The fly-spotted windows were covered with shabby floral curtains, several of which had slipped off their rods to puddle on the floor.

Now that had potential. Made of irregular planks, it was probably beautiful in its day but buckled and warped now, with some boards the perfect height to stub an unsuspecting toe and cause a stumble. She wondered if it could be restored.

"You mean it was worse?"

"Kidding." He went into what appeared to be the kitchen. "Want some, uh, tea? Or something?"

She followed him, feeling like she was walking through a dream. She felt a little wobbly; either the sleep deprivation was finally catching up to her or she needed to eat.

Or maybe this was the sort of situation not improved with full consciousness and her body was protecting her from the full impact of where she was. And why.

It wasn't an option for her, but the best way to tour this place was probably drunk. Or stoned.

Immediately the image flew in: sea-green tile, gleaming chrome, the rusty smell of blood, a screaming, wild-haired woman on stained white sheets, writhing out of the stirrups as her drug-addled newborn entered the world.

She shuddered. The deep purple bruises on her thigh had long ago faded to sickly yellow and disappeared but she rubbed the spot absently, from habit.

“Still sore?”

He frowned, the lines on his face disappearing beneath the thick stubble on his jaw.

“I'm fine.” She clasped her hands together and squeezed, until the memory receded. “So, this is the kitchen?”

It was hideous. A deep, rust-spotted sink stood beneath a wide window that overlooked the yard. Cupboards hung off the wall, probably built at the same time, and with the same skill, as the saggy porch.

Austin filled the kettle from the gooseneck faucet and set it on the electric stove.

“Fridge and stove work,” he said. “I'll fix the cupboards.”

“It's, um, rustic.”

“Really, Mel? You want to talk about the decor?” He blinked once, slowly, then crossed his arms, his expression unreadable. “Say what you're here to say.”

All words she'd planned so carefully during the long night and practiced on the drive, all the explanations and rationalizations and excuses and yes, apologies, fled from her mind.

She sucked in a deep breath and opened her mouth.

“Austin,” she said. “I was wrong. I think we should try again.”



“TRY AGAIN.” IT was like the words didn’t compute.

The kettle squealed, an auditory cattle prod. Austin jumped and grabbed the kettle, pulling it off the stove. Hot water bubbled from the spout and he leaped back, hoping to avoid another burn.

Success.

A scorched smell rose from the stove.

Melinda paled visibly and lowered herself into a chair.

“Sorry,” he said. He poured the water into a mug, then looked around him. Surely he had tea. Didn’t he?

“No problem,” said Melinda. She took the mug from him and wrapped her fingers around it, like she was more desperate for the prop than the beverage.

Actually, their problems were legion. And Austin had been sorry for months, felt it bleeding out of him every time he opened his mouth, and all he wanted was for Mel to blame him, yell at him, scream, anything. But she never did.

So they kept on having the same conversation.

Sorry. No problem.

Until they stopped talking altogether.

Try. Again.

She hadn’t come running to him in tears, holding out her arms. She hadn’t said she wanted to start over, she’d missed him desperately, he was the love of her life, she couldn’t live without him.

I think we should try again.

“You *think*,” he said. “You’re not sure.”

She winced.

“*Should*.” He stared hard at her. “*Try*. Gee, Mel, I’m tearing up here.”

He'd lost his business, he'd lost their house, his car, their furniture, the place at the lake. His dignity.

And what had she done? She'd ripped his heart out of his chest and tossed it aside, leaving him an empty shell, yet still aching so much from her absence that if she turned around right now, he'd throw himself at her feet, beg her to stay, tie her up to keep her from leaving.

He was powerless and it infuriated him.

Austin braced his arms on the sink, unable to look at her for fear he'd break down.

"My mom convinced me," she said in a small voice.

Better yet.

"You mean, she kicked you out."

The comment was beneath him. Delores would never, ever kick her out. She'd never interfere in something like this. She loved Melinda.

But it boosted him a bit that his mother-in-law had pushed Mel toward him. At least she believed in him.

"Austin." Melinda kept her eyes on her mug, watching the swirling steam as it danced into the air. "A month ago, I couldn't imagine any way we could possibly recover from everything we'd been through. We tried so hard, for so long."

Shame twisted inside him again, and he gripped the edge of the sink so hard he felt it bite into his skin. She'd worked herself to the bone, working nights, picking up extra shifts, delivering crack-babies and getting beaten up by their wiggled-out junkie mothers, all so that he could salvage what was left of his reputation.

Sweet and Morgan Financial had folded, but they'd avoided personal bankruptcy, because she'd supported them, night after night until she made a mistake and they sent her home.

Except there was no home so she'd gone to her mom's instead.

A husband provides.

"You shouldn't have come, Mel." The words came up from a deep, dark pit, where he could still hear echoes of the man who'd been worthy of her love. "You deserve more than... this."

"Austin."

He heard the chair legs scrape across the floor as she stood up.

He heard her take a hitching breath, like a sob and he turned around, just in time to catch her as her legs buckled and her eyes rolled back in her head.



MELINDA FELT AUSTIN'S strong arms beneath her. Her eyes felt like they were weighted down with rocks and when he set her on the couch in front of the fire, it was all she could do to open them.

He crouched on the floor beside her and smoothed a lock of hair out of her face.

"Hey, there," he said softly. "Welcome back."

Her throat tightened. This was the voice she remembered. Not his big public voice, the firm tones that cut through the chaos, all smiles and control. Not the tight, terse voice that was all he had left afterward, when he didn't have to pretend anymore because it was only her.

She reached up and pressed his hand, holding it to her face, feeling the tears well up inside and trying to push them back. There was the kind face, the gentle touch she'd missed so much.

"Weren't satisfied with the shock factor of just showing up, huh?" He smiled. "Had to up the ante by fainting, too?"

"Mmm," she said.

“Okay, I’m shocked. Satisfied? No need to fall off a roof or anything. Hear me?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

His familiar just-rolled-out-of-bed muskiness sent a wash of bittersweet comfort over her. They’d been on opposite schedules for so long, she’d forgotten how warm he was in the morning, his unique scent, how the rumble of his laugh went straight to her sternum.

“When’s the last time you ate, Mel?” He ran his finger down her jaw, touching her collarbones. “You’re too skinny.”

“Flatterer.”

“Seriously. I can make eggs and bacon and toast and, well, not tea as it turns out. There might be some orange juice.”

Her stomach clenched.

“Toast, maybe,” she said.

“Promise me you’re not going to die here if I leave you?”

He lifted an eyebrow at the less than ideal choice of words.

“I won’t die,” she said. “Can’t promise I’ll stay awake though.”

“Go ahead. If you sleep, I’ll eat the food and make more when you wake up.”

She heard the lulling domestic clatter of dishes and utensils, a refrigerator door opening and shutting, bacon sizzling in a hot pan.

She meant to tell him. That’s why she’d stood up. The words were on her lips. And for some reason, her body said no.

Melinda curled up tighter on the couch, tugging the Austin-scented quilt over top of her, and touched the small mound in her belly.

I’ll tell him when I wake up, she thought as she tumbled down, finally, into a real sleep.

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Chapter Three



MELINDA WAS SNORING gently by the time Austin had a plate ready for her, so he covered it with a towel and set it on old Bessie, the cast-iron wood stove. Bessie would keep it warm.

“Come on, boy,” he said to the dog as he pulled on his heavy winter jacket. Mel’s collapse had jolted him out of his self-pity. She was here now, he couldn’t worry about the details. He had work to do.

Jackson got to his feet, then turned around in a tight circle and lay down on a fresh spot in the blanket.

“You sure about that?” He pointed at Mel. “She’s your responsibility then, okay? She needs anything, you let me know.”

The dog’s tail flopped against the floor.

He went outside, careful to close the door softly. No wonder Mel was crashing now. Daylight was her trigger to sleep. She could be out for hours.

He tried not to think of what it meant, her sudden reappearance. He didn’t want to get his hopes up. If he’d learned anything in the past year or so, it’s that a woman’s heart was a place of mystery and even when you’re as close as two people can be, there are things going on in her that you’d never dream of.

Best not to speculate. She’d talk to him when she was ready.

He went first to the goat barn, to distribute their daily allowance of hay and pelleted food and fresh water. The little

beasts had stolen his heart way too easily, just as the next-door neighbor, Chad Anders, had warned him.

As the fill-in caretaker for Sweet Montana Farms, Chad had given Austin a crash course in both beekeeping and goat husbandry those first few weeks. He'd helped winterize the hives, pointed out which vegetable and flower gardens needed a last tilling before frost, mentioned bulbs and tubers and cold storage and compost piles and the merits of goat manure.

Goat manure as an asset. You had to laugh.

He quickly cleaned the pens, forking the soiled straw into a wheelbarrow, to be dumped on the steaming compost heap. By the time spring rolled around, Chad told him, all that straw and manure would be broken down into great fertilizer. The gardens would grow wildly, as would the fields of clover, blue thistle, milkweed and heather all of which were necessary for the end result: the famed Sweet honey.

Austin had to give his great-great-whatever-grandfather credit for putting the family name to work. He also gave thanks that he wasn't Austin Butcher. Or Austin Crematorium-Operator. Or Austin Crash-Test-Dummy.

Though the last one was fairly fitting, given the spectacular nature of Sweet and Morgan's demise.

Financial advisor to farmer. Why not?

The white Alpine doe nudged him in the leg. She looked like she'd be dropping her kid soon. It seemed to Austin that spring would be a kinder time for new babies to be born, but farmers had their reasons and he figured he'd learn. At any rate, the shed was solid and tight and with all the animals inside, it stayed plenty warm. Barring a blizzard, they'd be fine.

Another nudge, more forceful this time. Austin reached into his pocket for the alfalfa chunks they loved.

"Once," said Austin, handing them around. "I give you treats one day and now that's all you care about."

The Nubians, with their aquiline noses and pendulous ears, pushed their way in, eager for their share, as did the cashmeres, with their big woolly coats.

The cashmeres, he'd been told, were the earners. The fleecy undercoat, Chad explained, made beautiful, highly-prized yarn. Cashmere was a big hit at farmers' markets.

Austin would be happy if he could manage to sell the honey, let alone make goat-hair yarn.

He'd be happy if he could get them all through the winter, alive.

He glanced over at the house, wondering if Mel had woken up. Not likely, if she'd crashed the way he suspected she needed to.

By that last horrible week, both of them had been under so much stress, withdrawal had been a means of self-preservation. Mel was still black and blue from the assault and even quieter than usual. When his father had offered to let Austin take over the farm, he could hardly turn it down. Once spring came, they'd sell and Austin would get a percentage and he and Mel could take it and start their lives over again.

"Win-win, right my boy?" Bill had said in his too-loud voice.

Mel had been suspicious. If it sounds too good to be true...

"Hey neighbor!"

It was Chad, waving from his snowmobile. He hopped off, walked through the gate and closed it behind himself.

"I see you've got a guest," said Chad, striding up to him. They did the handshake-backslap thing that seemed to be the custom around here.

"My wife," said Austin, not feeling much like explaining himself.

"Your wife!" Chad's eyebrows went up. He nodded. "Kept that one tucked up your sleeve, didn't you? When will I meet

her?”

“She’s sleeping. Rough night. You’ll meet her eventually.”

Chad didn’t question further, but went to the honey shed, gesturing for Austin to follow.

“Meant to tell you,” he said. “There’s not enough honey jarred for the Christmas open house.”

“Open house?” Austin followed him into the honey shed. “What’s that?”

Chad stopped and faced him. “You don’t know about the open house? It’s a touristy thing. Your granddad loved doing them. Sleigh rides – I’ll help with that. A feed-the-goats pen for the kids and the display hive, so they can see the bees. Cider and treats in the house, where you’ll sell the honey. And that shed over there? It’s full of decorations and lights, ready to use. Of course, no one’s done it since he’s been gone.”

When Austin didn’t respond, he tipped his head and frowned. “You weren’t expecting this?”

Austin felt sick. “Communication’s not our strong point in our family.”

They began moving toward the honey hut.

“I’m getting that,” said Chad.

Granddad Sweet had leased forty acres to the neighbor, for his rescued mustangs. Chad helped with the honey production and generally looked after the old man. He knew the farm as well as his own and certainly made himself at home.

Maybe Chad hoped to buy it, come spring.

Or maybe the cowboy could stick to his side of the fence for two minutes and give Austin a chance to figure things out on his own.

“It’ll be a lot of work, given the state of things here. But you should go ahead with it, if at all possible. It’s your last earning opportunity before spring.”

Earning opportunity? Why was he learning all this from a stranger? Austin felt a flash of irritation that his dad hadn't mentioned any of this to him.

Of course he'd put on the open house. As strapped as he was, he couldn't turn down any chance to make some money. Of course he'd look after the bees and the goats and the surprise herd of wildebeests or whatever else Bill might have forgotten to tell him about.

Fix up the house a little, his dad said. Keep the bees alive. Tidy it up for spring, that nebulous, faraway spring, when they'd put a For Sale sign at the gate and ride off into the sunset.

Bill and Ducky hadn't even bothered to adjust their schedule, so they could meet him here. No, their annual winter trek to Arizona took priority.

Austin should have known there'd be more than "a little home renovation" involved. He hadn't signed up to be a farmer, but it wasn't the work itself that bothered him. It's that he'd been blindsided. Played.

Melinda had seen it coming; she'd suspected it was a classic Bill Sweet over-sell, under-deliver situation. Question was, now that she was proven right, would she stay and help him through it?

That's when he heard her scream.



MELINDA AWOKE REFRESHED and feeling better than she had in days. She found the plate of food sitting on an oven-warmed towel and picked at it, forcing herself to eat the scrambled eggs. She needed the protein. The toast felt good in her stomach and the honey she drizzled on top was delicious, better than any grocery store product.

She gave the bacon to the dog, who took it politely and then followed her every movement from then on.

She needed to get busy, do something, figure out what this place was about and how she might possibly fit in here. Either that or implode, which she was hoping to avoid.

Male voices rose and fell across the crisp winter air, and she looked out to see Austin with a neighbor, another big man with boots and a hat. Squaring off against each other? No. She heard her husband laugh, and it brought a smile to her lips. Unlike her, his need for social contact meant that he made friends easily and this neighbor appeared to be a useful friend to have. She didn't feel much like meeting a stranger, so she was glad to see them disappear into one of the barns.

Melinda began the task of unloading her car.

First thing, bedding. Napping on a couch, under a quilt was one thing. Sleeping there every night surrounded by furniture under sheets was edging into a crazy place where eventually you were on the six o'clock news, in a feature on hermit hoarders.

She carried the first box of linens to the porch, which creaked suspiciously under her weight, as it had done earlier, but held firm. She set it in front of the front door, to prop it open, then quickly made trip after trip, with box after box, until the car was empty and everything was piled in the main room.

Then she pulled the door closed. Despite the bright sunlight, the temperature was frigid. As long as she was moving, she didn't feel the cold, but now standing still, it was way too chilly inside.

Surely there was a furnace control somewhere. But for now, she hunkered down to the big black stove, from which the most delightful dry heat radiated. Should she feed it more wood?

Melinda tugged on the door. It opened with a screech and she could see the bright coals inside. With two fingers, she picked up a small log and tossed it inside. Sparks flew up and

ash drifted out onto her arms. She closed the door and hoped for the best.

In the back of the main room was a narrow staircase, which she expected led to a closed-in loft where she'd find bedrooms. She made her way up the steps to find she was right. Three rooms, all smaller than her mom's guest room.

But it appeared that each room contained a bed, disassembled and propped against a wall. She plunked the box of linens on the floor of the largest room and went to peek under the sheeting.

A new-looking boxspring and mattress and a metal bed frame. Austin hadn't even bothered to put it together.

She pulled off the covering, hoping she wasn't about to find a nest of mice, and was pleased to find the items still factory-sealed in plastic. No chew marks, no scat.

Quickly she assembled the metal bed frame and maneuvered the mattresses on top, then stood back to evaluate her work.

"Hope I've got some sheets that will fit," she muttered, wiping her brow.

This bed wasn't a king. It wasn't even a queen. What did that make it? Double? Standard? Too-Bad-For-You? The Little-People Bed?

She sat on the mattress and ran her hand over the quilted surface. Funny, people put such pretty designs on mattresses, yet who ever saw them? You brought your mattress home and then covered it with layers upon layers, sheets and pads and duvets and coverlets, spent a third of your life on it, but probably wouldn't recognize it in a line-up.

She bounced lightly. Firm. Good. Austin liked a firm mattress. His feet would hang over the end and they'd be elbowing each other all night, but at least it was firm.

It was ironic. She and Austin had been on opposite schedules for so long, barely seeing each other, let alone

sleeping together, that their king bed was always half-empty. Now that they'd be together all day and all night, they'd be crammed together in this little bed like sardines.

The spot on her thigh throbbed suddenly and she got to her feet to shake it out. She needed to make up at least one other bed too. She wasn't sure she was ready to sleep next to a man who was part stranger, yet part of her heart at the same time.

Fresh fatigue washed over her but she ignored it. No time to wallow, there were miles to go before she slept anywhere.

A quick survey of the kitchen revealed it was as bad as her first impression. Through the window over the sink she could see the two men, hands deep in pockets, shoulders hunched against the cold, kibitzing like old friends. If there'd been a sniffing and circling part, it was long over.

She bit her lip, a shard of worry shifting inside.

He was getting attached, already. She could tell.

Her hands were dry and dusty, so she turned the hot water faucet to wash them. An explosion of brown water spluttered and farted all over her hands. She leaped back in disgust, automatically keeping her hands over the sink, so as not to befoul the floor, while leaning as far back as possible.

The smell was hellacious, and she'd once been recruited to treat an ER full of German tourists with food poisoning.

All pipes flow to the sea? It seemed some of them detoured to Sweet Montana Farms, just to be ironic.

How long could she go without breathing? Would she be trapped in this position forever? Is this what hysteria felt like?

A laugh rose, and she turned her face toward her sleeve and let it out. She laughed until she had to squat down and cross her legs because, oh man, she had to pee and she hadn't yet discovered the bathroom and if the water was bad here, what would it be like in there and if it was worse than this, they'd have to bomb the place and sometimes, what else is there to do but laugh?

She laughed and laughed until finally, still hooting, she stretched her arms even more and opened the cold water too. This appeared to run clear and was, like the rest, freezing cold.

Probably a blessing, given the smell. Thank you, Lord, we've got no hot water!

If this was hysteria, she'd have to do it more often.

Eventually the episode of plumbing-diarrhea resolved itself and the water ran clear. She rinsed the inside of the sink, scooping the water in her hands, shuddering as she did so. That odor would be in her nose for days, in her hair, on her skin.

How naive she'd been, she realized. In a house this old, indoor plumbing of any kind could not be assumed. Nor electricity, though that seemed fine, so far. The avocado green electric oven and harvest gold refrigerator lurking in the corners of the room had already been proven functional according to Austin, though she'd reserve judgement on that until she'd used them herself.

She turned off the water, shook her icy hands dry and went to find the bathroom.

The bathroom, or water closet as it might have been called originally, was located under the staircase. The only one in the house, it was a quarter of the size of a typical modern bathroom and it had no window. She could barely see in.

She patted the wall, searching for the switch and as she reached in further, something cold and thin stroked her cheek, making a faint clicky noise before it slipped away.

She whirled, running from the room shrieking and slapping at her face, not stopping until she was standing outside on the porch, shuddering into the truly frigid early evening air.

Being a good sport was one thing. But this was awful, all of it.



AUSTIN TOOK OFF for the house, Chad hot on his heels.

Melinda was on the porch, laughing or crying, he couldn't tell.

"Mel, honey!" Austin grabbed her arms and peered into her face. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Chad hung back at the bottom of the steps, a real-life cowboy, not a poseur like himself.

"I'm fine," she gasped, between breaths. "Enjoying a little hysteria, that's all. It's quite therapeutic."

He could have shaken her, for giving him such a scare. But the wildness in her eyes suggested that the few hours she'd slept on the couch were too little for healing, but plenty enough for taking inventory.

"You don't say." He stroked a hand over her hair, as if she was a child. "Why don't you tell me what's going on, huh?"

She waited a long moment, then heaved an enormous sigh and sort of wilted against him.

"Ahem," said Chad, looking acutely uncomfortable. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Chad Anders," said Austin, "my wife, Melinda. Melinda, our neighbor Chad."

"Forgive me," said Mel, the crazy still right under the surface, "if I don't offer tea and crumpets. It's like a refrigerator in there, the plumbing has raging dysentery and there's a long-tailed creature living in the bathroom ceiling. Can you fix those things? Also, I have to pee and if you tell me to go to the outhouse, I'll, I'll..."

"Come on inside." Austin couldn't tell if she was shivering or shuddering but he knew it was too cold to be standing outside.

"May I?" Chad stepped past them. "I might know where your granddad hid the space heaters."

Of course he might.

"G-g-good," said Mel, her teeth chattering loudly.

He'd never seen her this emotionally fragile. Not that he wanted the separation to leave her resplendent with happiness, but he didn't wish this kind of misery on her.

He let her go to spare her this kind of misery.

"I think I found your long-tailed monster," called Chad. "The facilities are now safe for use."

"Wh-what was it?" said Mel, cautiously approaching the bathroom.

Chad fingered the chain-pull from the ceiling light in the tiny room. He tugged on it, turning the light on and off, then draped it over his face. "If you didn't know what it was, it could feel pretty freaky."

Melinda took another step forward, then touched the chain. It put her much closer to Chad than Austin would have liked. Also, he was a bit ripped off that he hadn't been the one to slay the dragon for the damsel. He could use a hero moment right about now.

"You're sure there's nothing living in there?" asked Mel, frowning at the toilet. "No alligator or snake or sewer rat?"

"Check it out." Chad lifted the lid and seat, then hit the flush handle on the toilet. "Could use a cleaning, and that, ahem, cracked seat could be unpleasant. But I can safely say it's uninhabited."

"In that case," she stared at them, "if you'll excuse me."

"Oh, right!"

Chad backed out of the room, crashing into the doorframe in his haste. He ran to the pot-bellied stove and stood in front as if preparing to interview it for a job.

"Thanks for your help," said Austin.

"Hey, it's nothing. You getting along with Bessie okay? I saw your cordwood outside. Nice job."

"I'm managing."

Austin waited.

“Okay.” Chad put up his hands. “Well, I’ll take off then. Let me know when you want to talk about the open house details. We need to get that going as soon as possible.”

“Sure,” said Austin. He opened the front door. “See you around.”

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Chapter Four



SHE WAS GOING to need more hand sanitizer, thought Mel as she watched the water swirl around the stained sink. It looked clear enough, but how could she trust it after what she'd seen in the kitchen?

She rubbed the back of her thigh where the crack in the toilet seat had pinched. Should she ask Austin to fix it? If the situations were reversed, she probably wouldn't appreciate him waltzing in and pointing out all the defects.

She exited the bathroom, self-conscious about her earlier meltdown. Especially in front of the neighbor. Last thing she needed was a reputation as Austin Sweet's crazy wife.

"Feeling better?" Austin came through the door with an armload of firewood. "Are you gladder now that your bladder's flatter?"

His tone was light but he busily avoided eye contact.

"Don't tell me you haven't been caught by the Crack of Doom," she countered.

"Guess I'm more of a hard-ass than you thought."

Nice.

"Any chance that could be fixed?"

"Depends." He dropped the logs into a battered aluminum washtub, turned and looked straight at her. "How long you planning to be here?"

Before she could respond, something darted out from the logs and scuttled under the stove.

“What was that?” she yelled. “Did you see it? It was huge! Get it, get it!”

Austin laughed. “And we have lift-off.”

She was taking giant, jumping steps, the way people always do when safety is up and away. There may have been hand flapping as well.

Mel hopped onto the moss-green couch. “Was that a mouse?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Don’t tell me that freaks you out. Surely Nurse Mel’s dealt with much scarier things than that little guy. Besides, he’s gone now.”

“He is not!” She grabbed a flashlight from a box and leaned down to shine it under the big stove. The flash from a teeny-tiny set of eyes stared back at her. “There it is! It’s a mouse!”

“Like I said.” Austin swept bits of bark and sawdust from the floor. “I probably brought it in with the wood.”

She gaped at him in amazement. “Is that supposed to make me feel better? Get it out of here!”

With a deep sigh, he poked the broom into the creature’s hiding place.

“There it is, there it is!” yelled Melinda as the mouse scrambled back into the wood-box.

Austin carried the box to the porch, where he carefully took out each log. Mel followed, peering over his shoulder as the box emptied.

“Hey there, little fella,” said Austin. A drab little thing with enormous grey ears sat huddled and twitching in the corner.

“Oh,” said Mel. “It’s so small.” And not threatening in the least.

“I’ll be right back,” said Austin. He walked the box over to the shed closest to the house and tipped it, letting the animal

go back to wherever it had come from.

He squatted there for a moment, as if making sure the mouse was all right.

“I’ll get some live traps tomorrow,” he said when he returned. “In case he’s a mob boss and I just triggered a turf war.”

“Thank you.”

Melinda pulled two chairs out from the furniture collection and sat them in front of the stove, watching her husband feed the fire.

“You know you’re probably bringing all sorts of vermin in with the wood.”

“Probably.”

“So, why use the stove then?”

He crouched down and pulled open the handle. “Furnace is crap. Bessie works just fine.”

“Bessie?” The cast-iron stove had a name?

He stirred the coals and added a larger log, sending a small shower of sparks popping inside the iron belly.

“She’s a good old gal.” He jammed another log inside. “She keeps me warm at night.”

Ah, thought Mel, hearing the subtle emphasis on *she*. The easy-going facade slips. Good. Not everyone would pick it up, but she heard the thread of anger.

It was about time he faced it.

They’d been struggling long before the final break but it’s not like she’d deliberately withdrawn from him and she certainly hadn’t been withholding sex as a punishment. She wasn’t that kind of person. And it wasn’t like Austin had made overtures; they’d barely seen each other, barely spoken at all those last few weeks. They didn’t sleep together because she worked nights.

And it just so happened that made it easier for her.

For so long, all she wanted was to yell, to cry, to shake him until he screamed at her and ranted and railed at the monumental dump the universe had taken on his head. Then she could scream with him and they could finally, finally get rid of the poison that was destroying them.

But he refused. Austin dealt with things properly. Reasonably. Rationally.

And if he couldn't be mad, well neither could she, because it wasn't *her* business that had gone belly-up. If she let out her anger, it would look like she blamed Austin. Which she didn't.

At the time, it seemed he barely noticed her distance. Now she realized it must have hurt.

“Wood stoves have risks, Oz,” said Melinda, unable to take the silence. “Carbon monoxide, sparks, smoke inhalation, it's not safe to have an active fire in the house.”

“I've been here a month. Hasn't killed me yet.”

Austin's optimistic glass-half-full resilience was what she loved, and hated, most about him. He was one of those guys people liked on sight, all friendly, hardworking sunshine and buttercups. Even when Sean Morgan confessed to the risky trade that brought down their company, Austin didn't throw blame. They were partners.

And Sean had lost as much as they had, more if you counted his fiancée.

Well. Melinda had balanced that out, hadn't she?

Austin took the other chair, set it across from hers and straddled it, resting his arms on the back. He looked at her, his expression blank, waiting, his blue eyes hooded and deep, as unreadable as those of a stranger.

Melinda's throat felt dry and she was aware of her increased heart rate.

His civilized good cheer, the quick smile and easy laugh that went along with their frenzied old life had been chiseled away, replaced with a kind of stillness, as if he'd become attuned to the slow quiet rhythms of this new life.

Not peaceful, exactly, but watchful. Patient.

Like a hunter.



AUSTIN RESTED HIS chin on his hands, just looking at her, grateful and terrified at the same time.

She was here. He tried not to think further than that.

Melinda chewed on a corner of her lip, unable to sit still.

He remembered that feeling. The stress, the pressure, always needing to run faster, faster, to do more, and still more.

For what? To earn still more money? So they could qualify for an even bigger mortgage? To buy another car? More furniture to sit in their beautiful home, unused because they were always out, running, doing, earning.

Always apart.

What's the deal, Mel? He wanted to shout. *Are you really back?*

Part of him wanted to throw down the words and demand an answer, find out the truth. It was simple. Yes. Or no.

They were married. He still loved her. Did she still love him?

A bigger part of him was afraid that she wasn't ready for a yes or no. She was dancing around something, preparing herself, evaluating him maybe, unable to commit fully again, but unwilling to give up completely too.

That was good. Wasn't it?

So much for not thinking about it.

Melinda got to her feet. “Not to be critical but what have you been doing for the past month?”

He tightened his lips over his teeth. Through the whole S&M debacle, as he now referred to it in his mind, she hadn’t criticized him, hadn’t complained. It seemed that phase was over.

In fact, he’d been working his ass off outside, but he’d let her have this one.

“Not a fan of my decorating style, I take it.”

“Not a fan of your third-world camping amenities.”

Good, he thought. Definitely an edge there.

“Okay if I explore the ‘junk’?”

“Your funeral.”

She took hold of the tarp and hauled it to the ground. A cloud of dust billowed up and she turned away, coughing, holding her gut and waving him away.

“Make yourself at home,” he said. “I’ve got work outside.”

He’d already checked the hives and fed the goats but he needed to plan for this open house he was throwing. In less than two weeks.

Jackson joined him this time at the door, jauntier than Austin had seen him yet.

“You like her, huh?” said Austin, once he was out of earshot of the house.

The dog wagged his tail.

“Yeah.” He looked back at the house. Knowing she was inside changed everything. “Me, too.”

He bent down, picked up a handful of snow and tossed it into the air, watching the icy particles catch the light, little diamonds floating to the soft earth.

“Ah-ROO,” said Jackson.



AS THE CHOKING cloud settled, Melinda made out a sight that kicked all other thoughts from her head.

Partially furnished?

For once, an understatement that ended in a good surprise. She took a step forward, drinking in the jumbled beauty before her.

Their house in Chicago had been furnished by the decorator they'd hired when they moved in. Minimalist, clean lines, stylish and practical. Perfect for entertaining, which given her schedule, they never did. Perfect for raising a family, ditto. Perfect for relaxing together with a cup of coffee on a Sunday morning or a glass of wine in the evening. Ditto, ditto and ditto.

Elegant, tasteful, expensive – and soulless.

All those sleepless hours she'd spent surrounded by a triumph of design and decorating, watching trash-to-treasure, do-it-yourself and home-and-garden shows on cable, and she'd never so much as set foot in an antique store.

But she knew enough to recognize the wealth before her.

She ran her hand along the deep, dark wood of an ancient dining room table, with elaborately tooled legs, built by an expert craftsman long gone from this world.

Behind the table was a matching buffet and hutch and a curio cabinet at the back that needed a glass pane replaced but was otherwise lovely. There were coffee tables and corner tables and a rugged, scarred butcher-block table that made her want to bake bread. With a worktable like that, she thought, maybe even that wretched kitchen could be redeemed.

Beneath the second sheet she found a huge deep armchair made for cuddling, and a rich purple floral... fainting couch?

She left the heavy items in place, of course, but pulled the other things out into the open, where she could look at them

more closely. By the time Austin came inside, she was actually bubbly with excitement.

“That’s a lot of junk,” said Austin, rubbing his hands together in front of Bessie. “I’ll ask Dad what he wants to do with it. Donate it to Goodwill, if anything’s still usable.”

“Oh no, Austin.” She ran her hand over the purple half-couch. “These are treasures. Some of these items might even be valuable.”

“What’s that, a chaise?” asked Austin. “It’s kind of ugly.”

“It’s not ugly!” Melinda sat down and spread her arms protectively over the small back. “It’s beautiful! My grandmother had a couch just like this.”

“The stuffing’s coming out.”

“I don’t care.” She examined the spot he indicated. Yeah, the fabric was torn and the upholstery was flat in places. “I might be able to fix it.”

He lifted his eyebrows, but said nothing.

“I could learn to sew.”

I’m not working, after all.

Loss struck, like a hawk diving out of the air to snatch away her peace of mind before it had fully emerged from its burrow, leaving her breathless with sorrow.

She loved nursing. She loved delivering babies. She was good at it, and even though it was back-breaking, and heart-breaking sometimes, she missed it. Her patients were some of the poorest of the poor, marginalized, underserved, forgotten, but on her floor, they and their babies got the best care possible.

“It’s not ours, Mel,” said Austin. “None of this is ours.”

“Nice of you to say *ours*.”

Austin’s face darkened. “It’s ours until you say otherwise.”

“Tell that to your dad.”

The farm and everything on it belonged to Bill Sweet. The deal was, come spring, when he sold the farm, Austin would get a percentage of the sale, as payment for the renovation work.

Except he had that tendency of bombastic people to gild the story as he wished it to be, rather than as it actually was. Melinda would bet her sweet patootie that her father-in-law didn't intend to sell.

In Bill and Ducky Sweet's opinion, the ten years she and Austin had spent in Chicago were nothing more than a glitch, a hiccup, a derailment that never would have happened if not for her dragging their son away from his home while she followed her dream job.

Forget that Austin himself wanted to go.

Forget that his cousin, Sean Morgan, was already there, ready and waiting to set up Sweet and Morgan Financial.

"Dad doesn't mean anything by that," said Austin. "It's just how he talks."

Yeah. As if she wasn't there at all.

However, beggars can't be choosers and regardless of their motives, it was kind of them to offer up the farm.

"Would your dad mind," she asked, "if I worked on it? If, like you said, it's junk or headed for Goodwill anyway?"

"Actually," said Austin, "we've got an event to plan for. An open house. Two weeks of inviting the public in to buy our honey and play with our goats and have hay rides. But mostly, buy honey."

Mel looked around her. "An open house? Here?"

"It's gonna be a lot of work but Chad says we could sell most of our inventory." He looked out the window. "We need the money, Mel."

Of course they did. But inviting people into this hovel?

He walked to the window and leaned against it, looking out. She could see tendons in his neck standing out like cords.

“So what do you think now, Mel? Still think we should ‘try again’?”



AUSTIN AWOKE ALONE and freezing in the little bed his wife had made up for him upstairs. Frankly, he'd been more comfortable on the couch. Sometime during the night, the room had gotten too warm and he'd unplugged the space heater.

Instead of plugging it back in and trying to go back to sleep, he pulled on his jeans and T-shirt, a fresh pair of thick socks and a sweat shirt. Not surprisingly, Melinda had stayed up, claiming that her earlier nap had ruined her bedtime.

He shouldn't be disappointed. She'd assured him she was staying, but an ocean of unsaid words still lay between them and he knew only one way to bridge the gap.

The smell of coffee drew him to the kitchen, where he found her standing in front of the sink, watching the mist starting to burn off in the morning sun. She was wearing a thick fleece sweat suit with the hood up.

He came up behind her, moved the hood aside and kissed her neck. She jumped, but didn't immediately draw away. That was something.

“Good morning,” he murmured, his lips lingering on her warm skin. “You smell good.”

“Hey, you scared me. Good morning. You're letting the cold air in. Coffee's ready. I'll get you a cup. I did some organizing last night so I'm the only one in the known universe who knows where things are now.”

She ducked out from beneath his arm but not before he saw the circles beneath her eyes. Last night he'd dragged the scarred butcher-block table from the main room into the kitchen for her, and now it was neatly stacked with their

dishes, silverware and the non-perishable food items he'd brought with him but hadn't bothered unpacking.

"I've made toast, too. And Chad was right about the honey. It's amazing."

One touch and he was desperate to hold her again. And she was as elusive as a wild bird.

"Did you get any sleep?"

"Oh, you know," she said airily, adding cream and sugar to his brew. The ancient refrigerator had a wide pull-up handle and a tiny icebox tucked inside, and from the look of it, she'd cleaned it.

She pushed the mug at him, then edged out of the room.

"So what's the deal with the hot water?" She pointed to the small bathroom under the stairs. "I'm dying for a shower but I'm not desperate enough for a cold one."

He was about ready for a cold one. He thought of her nipples, pink and peaked, and had to grit his teeth.

"See those pots of water sitting on top of Bessie? That's our hot water."

She glanced between the sink and the big black stove, as if by looking enough times, she could change the truth of the matter.

"People don't live like this, Oz." She spread her hands helplessly. "You have to get that fixed."

"Fine. I'm going to town today. I'll talk to someone about it."

"I'm going outside for a walk, now that the sun's up," she said. "There's milk in the fridge and the honey's on the counter. Holler good-bye before you leave for town, okay?"

But once he'd dressed and eaten, she was at the far end of the property, so all he could do was lift an arm. She didn't see him.

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Chapter Five



MELINDA PICKED HER way around the snow-covered garden, enjoying the occasional freeze-dried seed-head that popped through. Amazing how snow lightened and brightened everything, softening the edges, smoothing over rough spots.

She chunked over a ridge of frozen dirt, feeling the satisfying squashing sensation beneath the low block heel of her boot. They were her favorites, these boots. Comfortable, durable, with just a kick of sexy.

She hadn't worn them in ages.

Austin's lips on her neck had triggered a long-forgotten desire inside her. The closeness of being inside the same house, no rushing off to work, no TV or internet to distract them, it made it difficult to pretend she wasn't aware of him.

She squatted down to finger a stiff dried dahlia stalk. One of them, she could tell by the crunchy petals still clinging, was a lovely deep crimson. Her favorite color.

Used to be her favorite color, she amended.

That moment in the kitchen when she'd found herself actually responding to Austin's touch, she ached for their former closeness, but it also scared her. The honesty and intimacy of sex was beyond what she could handle right now. The great conundrum: sex makes men feel loved; communication makes women feel loved. Austin didn't know what she needed and as bad as she felt about it, she refused to go to bed with him until she could be fully honest.

The longer these situations went on, the worse they got. Small issues turned into bitter resentment and pain. She didn't

want that. But she wasn't ready, not yet.

"Hey neighbor," called a voice from the fence.

She'd been so lost in thought she hadn't heard his ATV.

She straightened, brushed at her jeans and swept her hair away from her face, then realized what she was doing and stopped.

"Chad Anders," he said. "You were having a rough day, not sure you remember."

His long legs ate up the ground between them until he was standing next to her in his Levis and checked shirt and open jacket, all howdy-ma'am and fresh air.

"I remember."

Sweet Mustang Sally. How tired had she been?

Chad Anders was, objectively speaking, a delicious bit of cowboy. Mel suspected that women everywhere did double and triple takes every time he walked into a room. And that he was well aware of it.

But after the shock of seeing Austin's bare chest and legs and... well. Seeing her husband naked again after a long dry spell, all rough-cut and rangy, made Chad seem like a catalog offering.

An exceptional sample of a handsome man. Two-dimensional and flat.

Whereas Austin – she shivered – he was live, in the flesh, and hers.

Maybe. Probably. Technically.

Warmth flooded into places long cold, deep inside. She wanted to get back to the house.

"Austin's gone to town. He's looking for a contractor."

"Logan Stafford's the guy to get. He's got vision, when it comes to these old treasures."

“He’s going to need it.” She allowed herself a quick once over behind her sunglasses.

Chad tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “Not such a treasure to you, huh?”

“I’m more of a city gal.” She forced a smile. “Shouldn’t you be bringing a pie or something to welcome us to the neighborhood?”

He tilted his hat further back onto his head and looked away. “I’m not much good in the kitchen.”

She stuffed her fists deep into the pockets of her jacket and took a step away.

“Was there something you needed?” she asked politely.

“We should talk honey.”

Ah, the importance of a comma. Or rather, the lack thereof. Flirting was probably as natural to him as breathing and it amused her, observing her own lack of response.

“I harvested in August,” continued Chad, “so there’s about one hundred twenty-five pounds of product to process and jar. I told Austin he’d want to sell it during the Christmas open house and it’s just around the corner.”

“Yeah. He mentioned.” She frowned. “Did you say hundred and twenty-five pounds? Of honey?”

He gestured to the shed closest to the house. “Sitting right there, waiting. All the equipment is there but you’ll still need to do the jarring and labelling by hand. It’s a tedious job; might want to find some help. Too bad there was no one to make jams this year. With a variety of products, you can make gift baskets.”

“I can make jam,” she said, her mood leapfrogging upward. The summer she was fourteen, she’d gone to stay with her grandmother. They’d made preserves of all sorts, jams and jellies, but chutney too, and salsa and apple butter.

Chad lifted his eyebrows. “You can?”

She could intubate a flat baby and bring it back to life in five seconds, but home preserving, that's what impressed people.

"It's been a while, but yeah. I can. But where would I find the fruit?"

"I can tell you who to contact for frozen berries and whatnot."

"That would be great," she said. In the back of her favorite cookbook, that also once belonged to her Gram, were numerous handwritten recipes for all the concoctions she loved best.

She remembered the pride she'd felt to line up those sparkling jars filled with preserves that they'd enjoy throughout the winter. She hadn't understood until years later that her Gram's creativity and thrift had been born of necessity.

Austin didn't believe she was prepared to pitch in; this would be the perfect way to show him.



HE PULLED HIS truck into the parking lot of Big Z Hardware, pleasantly surprised by the size of it. But Marietta had changed so much since he'd been a kid. He wondered if the town had attracted some decent restaurants. Maybe if he took his wife out on a date, she'd warm up to him again.

"Welcome to Big Z's." A friendly-looking man with a pencil behind his ear waved at him from across the customer service desk. "Can I help you find something?"

Austin glanced around him. "Yeah, everything."

The man set aside his tablet and came around the front of the desk. "Paul Zabriski, owner. I'm guessing you're a little out of your depth, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Austin Sweet." They shook hands. "If you're throwing me a life preserver, I don't mind at all."

Paul laughed, then cocked his head. “Sweet. Wait. Hey, are you connected to the honey farm north of town? Sweet Montana?”

“Guilty. I just moved in. We. We just moved in. And I think you and I went to middle school together.”

He’d switched to Livingston for high school, but he remembered Paul. Zabinski wasn’t a name you forgot easily.

Paul swatted a glove against his leg in delight. “That place is a legend. We’d just about given up anyone ever reviving it. Do you own it? You must have gotten a hell of a deal. Chad’s maintained the garden and the bees, but the house needs some serious love. You’ve met Chad, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, he’s great. But we’re just looking after it for my parents, and only until spring,” said Austin, feeling that twist of shame again. They were transient, no fixed address. Unemployed, unsettled. On a derelict farm. Gratefully accepting a family handout because it was their only option.

“We,” said Paul. “I heard you were on your own.”

Yeah, thought Austin. Probably everyone had.

“My wife was delayed,” he said.

Paul nodded, as if the comment was nothing important. “The market isn’t moving. Why commit until you’ve had a season or two to see how you like it. So I’m guessing you want to do a bit of renovating?”

“Something like that. Problem is, I’m not exactly handy.”

“Where do you want to start?”

“Let’s see,” said Austin, prioritizing Mel’s complaints on his fingers. “There’s no heat, the kitchen sink is almost rusted through, the kitchen pipes are full of e coli – her words, not mine – the plank floor is buckling, there’s a cracked window frame upstairs letting in cold air and something smells when I turn on the light in the furnace room. But the biggest problem, the one I’ve been given strict instructions to not come home unless I can fix it, today, is the toilet seat. It’s cracked. And

hideous. And it's the only one in the house. There was a situation."

Paul winced sympathetically. "A woman can put up with a lot, but a deficient bathroom is a deal breaker. Don't worry, my friend. You're in good hands."

By the time he was through the checkout line, he had a new toilet seat, complete with instructions on how to install it, plus a bucket of instant spackle, a hand planer, an array of sandpaper, and more importantly, an appointment to meet with a local contractor. Not to mention the names of several people Paul had introduced him to as they walked the store. Including a young pregnant woman who was thrilled to hear his wife was a nurse.

"Don't forget," called Paul. "Consider the furnace out of commission until we get the wiring checked out. Stick with the wood stove."

Yeah. He couldn't wait to tell Mel.



"HEY, MEL," CALLED Austin from the porch. "I'm back."

"Good," she answered, getting to her feet. She'd spent the morning while he was out scrubbing the entire surface area of the kitchen, including the floor. Now that it was clean it was... still horrible.

She shuddered. She was reasonably satisfied that they weren't going to die of hanta virus or mold or bat guano or ebola but if you could die of ugly, they were still in big trouble.

"I've got a good news, bad news situation here."

"There was the chance of good news?" She walked to the porch and began taking items from him. "Just tell me."

"I'll have the toilet seat fixed in an hour."

"Okay." She eyed him cautiously. "That's not good news. That just gets one bit of bad news up to neutral."

He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, a deliberate move.

She felt her face light up with warmth, and remembered what she'd been thinking about outside, while she talked to Chad.

“The local hardware store owner, Paul, is a guy I went to school with as a boy. Great guy. He put me in touch with a local contractor. He's coming out tomorrow.”

She sighed with relief. Austin did know how to work the schmooze factor. “That *is* good news!”

“Paul introduced me to a bunch of people including a girl who really wants to meet you.”

He lifted his eyebrows like he was about to give her a prize.

“She's about, I don't know, twelve months pregnant and getting, and I quote, a ‘little squirrelly.’”

A pregnant girl. Blood on the floor. Pain. Fingers scrabbling, so close, so close.

She took the groceries to the kitchen, pushing back the memories, not sure which were which or whether they were even real and not some bleak footage conjured by her mind to fill the holes. The incident report had been straightforward.

The hospital board had been very understanding. Too understanding, in fact.

She put the jug of milk in the refrigerator.

“Austin, I don't think I'm ready to get back on that horse.”

He plunked a bag of canned goods on the butcher block table, and made a face. “She's not a headhunter. She's a girl who wants to talk. Has anyone banned you from talking? Making new friends? Sharing your vast knowledge of the feminine mystique?”

She couldn't help but smile. “I'll be happy to chat with her if I get the opportunity.”

It would probably be good for her. She didn't want to lose her nerve entirely. Some nurses switched departments after a mistake, or left practice entirely, unable to trust themselves ever again. Unable to forgive themselves.

“And, the bad news.” Austin wrinkled his nose. “It'll take at least six weeks for a new hot water tank.”

“Six weeks!” She touched her hair. “I'll have to go to town to get shampooed.”

It was the longest conversation they'd had in ages and suddenly silence hung in the air, as if he'd recognized it the same time she did.

It felt normal, the way they used to talk. Before everything went wrong.

Their eyes met and held. She recognized the yearning in his gaze and knew that he saw the same in hers.

She saw his chest rise and fall and then, without taking his eyes off hers, he took off his jacket.

“Maybe I can help with that,” he said.

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Chapter Six



AUSTIN SET THE aluminum tub on the butcher-block table in the kitchen.

“Come here,” he said.

Melinda looked at him with caution, but he could feel excitement, thrumming around her like a field.

Fear and temptation.

She stepped up to him and he handed her a towel.

He wanted to unzip that thick hoodie and pull it off. To lift up the shirt beneath, little by little, revealing her creamy torso by inches, until he could see the lower swelling of her breasts.

“Eyes up, big guy.”

He jumped. “Sorry.” He laughed shakily. “Habit.”

He gestured to the chair. “Sit. Put this around your neck. I’d ask you to take off your top, but...”

To his surprise, she slipped out of her hoodie. Underneath, she wore a tank top and it was fantastically obvious that she was braless.

Her breasts looked larger, the nipples pink and straining through the thin fabric.

He adjusted his pants. This was going to be harder than he thought, pun intended.

“Are you going to wash my hair, Austin?”

She asked it in a smokey voice that might have come straight out of an old western saloon. Low and slow and smooth as honey.

“I am.” He helped her lean back and draped her hair into the small tub. “Comfortable?”

“I’m okay.”

He scooped a bowlful of water and poured it over her head, being careful not to get any in her eyes.

She groaned, deep in her throat, a sound that sent more blood rushing southward, a sound he’d only heard when she was in his arms, sweaty, sated and limp with pleasure.

He stroked her hair, lifting it and continuing to pour, getting every bit saturated.

Then he squirted a handful of shampoo and began massaging it into her head. He’d never done this before and water splashed onto the table.

A bit of foam dripped onto her throat, then slid slowly toward the neckline of her tank top. She lifted her hand and caught it, without looking. The sight of her fingers, caressing her skin, so close to those rosy nipples...

“Ow!”

The towel beneath her neck slipped, allowing the sharp edge of the tub to bite into her skin.

“Damn, sorry, baby,” he said. He tried to tug it up but his soapy hands slipped. He bumped the tub with his elbow and suds splashed onto the table.

Way harder than he expected. In every way.

Suddenly he was aware of Mel, giggling. She put her hand to her mouth, trying to hide it, to let him carry on.

Then she grasped the back of her head and sat up, dragging the towel with it, laughing freely.

He felt like an idiot. Washing a woman’s hair was supposed to be a sensual thing, not a comedy show.

She leaned forward, laughing with her whole body now, and he felt the humor tickle him, too.

“That,” she said, between gasps, “was the single best shampoo... I’ve ever had.”

“Liar,” he said. But her joy unlocked something inside him and before he knew it, the two of them were bracing themselves against each other, bent over at the waist, howling, while water dripped onto the floor and Mel’s still-soapy hair sagged onto her shoulders.

“We’re going to have to heat more water,” said Mel, when she got her voice back. “I need a rinse.”

Her face was flushed and her now mostly-transparent tank top had slipped off one shoulder. Dark hair, red lips, those pink nipples. She looked like a strawberry sundae, with chocolate drizzle and whipped cream on top and yeah, he wanted to eat her up.

“There’s enough hot water,” he said, taking her hand, “to do this properly.”



MEL’S LAUGHTER FADED away as the intensity in Austin’s eyes grew. He’d attempted something so sweet, so sensual, so not a guy-thing, and it touched her deeply.

The hilarity at the end lifted the weight of whatever came next and instead, reestablished the friendship.

He was safe now.

He was her Austin again.

“Give me two minutes,” he said. “Then meet me in the bathroom.” His eyes drifted down to her chest again and she saw the effort it took for him to turn away.

She ran upstairs and stripped off her damp clothing, nearly tripping in her haste. Whatever he had planned, she was ready for it. They were going to get through this nightmare after all, and come out of it stronger. She wrapped herself in her robe, smoothing over the small rise in her belly.

You were right, Mom. It’s time.

Austin met her at the base of the stairs, downstairs again, with his sleeves rolled up, his face shiny with steam.

“Come with me, my lady.”

“What are we doing?”

“You’ll see.”

His voice was harsh but she knew it wasn’t anger. He wanted her, and was holding himself back, waiting for a sign from her that it was safe to proceed.

Her throat tightened with gratitude. He understood her better than she thought.

He led her to the little bathroom under the stairs, from which a wonderful smell flowed.

“Austin,” she said, and then stopped, looking about her in wonder. “How long was I upstairs?”

“You like?”

She hadn’t noticed when she came down that all the pots of water sitting warm on the stove were gone. The old-fashioned clawfoot bathtub was filled to the brim with steaming water, thick with foamy eucalyptus-scented bubbles.

Candles sat on every surface available, and the overhead light was off, its offensive chain pull looped onto a c-hook on the wall.

He pushed the door shut so that they were enclosed in the small candle-lit room together, steam rising around them.

“I thought... you were.”

She shivered. He said it lazily, as if thgoing to rinse my hair.”

“I will.” They had many pleasures to explore and all the time in the world to do it.

“May I take your robe?”

“I’m... not wearing anything underneath.”

“I was counting on that.”

She let him pull it off her shoulders, suddenly self-conscious. He’d seen her naked a million times before. She shouldn’t feel strange about it.

But would he notice?

“Mel,” breathed Austin. “You’re so beautiful.”

She held her arms tightly against her body. In the candlelight, his blue eyes were black and glittery.

“Here.” He took her hand and steadied her as she put one foot, then the other into the billowing foam.

“Oh,” she moaned, despite herself.

“Good?”

“Amazing.”

She gripped the edges and lowered herself gently into the water, letting it flow over her, around her, loosening tight muscles and easing guarded flesh.

He put his head closer to her face. “Lie back. Rinse first in the tub, then, when you’re all done, I’ll get fresh water for a final rinse.”

She let herself slip back under the water, swishing her hair back and forth behind her, like she was a mermaid, like she was floating on the waves and nothing, nothing could take away the pleasure of the moment.

She sat up and waved the water over her chest, washing away the bubbles that covered her, revealing her breasts, shining and dotted with bits of foam. They were tingling, sensitive even to the suds.

“May I,” said Austin, his voice hoarse. “May I wash your back?”

“Okay,” she said, sitting up.

He scooped a water jug of bathwater and poured it over her head, again keeping it away from her eyes.

She was vividly aware of her nakedness, everything from the waist up clearly visible, slippery and shiny and each breath she took only emphasized the view.

“Mind if I take my shirt off?” asked Austin. “It’s hot in here.”

“Go ahead.”

He peeled it off and there they were, those raw, chiseled muscles.

“Wow,” she said, softly.

He dropped the cloth and put his bare hands on her and she let him, revelling in his touch as he ran the warm soap over her back, down to her hips, up her rib cage and then to her breasts, lingering on them, holding them in his palms, fingering her nipples, so exquisitely sensitive she nearly cried out.

She closed her eyes as another jugful of bathwater slid over her body, rinsing away the soap and any remaining shampoo. Then Austin moved her until she was sitting on the edge of the tub, her back to him, her feet still in the water. He dried her off, then wrapped a towel over the front of her, her bare back against his chest, her wet hair on his shoulder.

She shivered again.

“Cold?” he asked.

“No.”

He chuckled silently, the movement rumbling from his chest into her.

He took a jar of cold cream and rubbed it into his hands and from there, her arms. He applied it with long, soft strokes, her arms, then her chest above the towel, then her neck. Then more cream, and beneath the towel, over her hips, her thighs, the rough skin on her knees, then up her thighs again and then higher, where she was hot and wet and aching.

Melinda gasped.

“Shh,” said Austin.

He touched her, dipping and slipping his fingers, then settling into a rhythm that had her rocking against him, little mewling sounds coming from her throat.

“That’s my girl,” he whispered in her ear. “That’s my sweet wife.”

The orgasm burst over her like a firestorm, wilder, higher and more sudden than she’d ever experienced. He held her with one arm as the sensations rocked through her, only releasing her down into the water when her trembling turned to shivering.

She let herself slip beneath the water, her now-chilled and over sensitized skin still rippling with pleasure. She had not been expecting that.

She lifted her hand. “Join me?”

Austin’s eyes widened, the hope in them making her heart clutch in her chest. “Really?”

In a flash, he was naked, sliding into the water in front of her. She held him against her chest, hugging him with her knees as she took him in her hands and kissed the back of his neck and murmured her love, the love that had never died, but had only been waiting for the spark that would bring it blazing back to life.



MELINDA STOOD BESIDE the stove, rubbing her hair dry with a towel, the robe slipping off her shoulder, revealing the sweet curve of her breast.

She turned and smiled at him over that bare shoulder.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she said.

The image of her backlit by the fire, offering that most basic of intimacies, while shadow and light danced around them was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

But her face was shrouded, impossible to read.

Step by step, she led him to their bedroom. At the bedside she turned, letting the silvery moonlight from the window fall over her, making her skin gleam. Her chest rose and fell quickly. A muscle twitched in her jaw and there was a tiny line between her eyebrows.

Was she nervous? Afraid? Of *him*?

He slipped under the covers and waited for her to join him. But she sat on the edge, instead.

“Mel?”

She touched his lips, unsmiling.

“I have to tell you something.”

He got up on his elbow and touched her cheek with his palm. “What is it?”

“It’s good news.”

She smiled, but her lips twisted as if she wasn’t certain.

This time she let him pull her under the covers. He held her tight against his chest.

“Is it about work?”

She hadn’t said much about the incident that happened in her last week at Jackson Park.

What if she’d found a better position in a newer hospital or a nicer city?

His heart felt like a stone in his chest.

“It’s not my job.”

But now, having considered the worst, he found himself clutching her to him even tighter, afraid that he’d misread everything about this past evening.

“Austin,” she said, holding his hand over her belly. “Look.”

He glanced down. Had she put on weight? She’d always been slender. So her belly wasn’t as flat as it had been. He

didn't care.

He looked up. "You look great, Mel."

Her lips still trembled, but this time her smile lit up the room.

"Austin," she said. "I'm pregnant."

It was so far from his fears and expectations that he didn't understand the word. It didn't make sense.

That was her job, working with pregnant women.

They couldn't have a baby. They'd tried and tried. They'd had their hopes up twice, only to have them dashed.

"Did you hear me?"

"Pregnant," he said.

By the time they stopped hoping, sex had become an assignment governed by calendars and clocks.

No fun. No joy. Mel was a generous woman, but Austin knew that in the last year, sex had been a chore, an obligation, a task to cross off her list.

"It's not like I was keeping it from you," she said, holding his hand as if she expected him to push her away. Her words tumbled out too quickly, he was having trouble processing them.

"I didn't even know, not until the night of the... incident. I mean, I'd been feeling lousy, but with all the stress and not sleeping, it never occurred to me."

"Pregnant?" he said, as the cogs started to fit.

He threw back the covers and got to his feet, suddenly hot. He stood at the window, relishing the chill that came off the pane. Wind whipped outside, casting icy shards against the glass. Was he happy? He was supposed to be happy, wasn't he?

Was Melinda happy?

She looked nervous. Desperate, almost. He wanted to give her the right response, but he had no idea what it was.

“Remember that night when you came home and told me you couldn’t save Sweet and Morgan? It was damage control only and you said we stood to lose everything?”

“I remember.” He didn’t want to talk about that. They’d made love that night, if you could call it that. He’d been so angry and humiliated he feared after that he might have hurt her. She assured him that he hadn’t, but he was still ashamed of using her body as a refuge, without giving anything in return.

“It must have been that night. It was the only time.” She took a shaky breath. “Things got worse for you, crazy with lawyers and the banks and your clients, then selling the house, then your parents offered you the farm, then it was packing, and I was working so much, opposite shifts, we hardly saw each other-”

“I remember, Mel,” he repeated. “I was there.”

She was sniffing back tears and he knew he should go to her, offer comfort, but he couldn’t.

“That night at the hospital.” The words were almost inaudible.

A husband provides.

The whole thing was the epitome of failure, culminating in...he forced himself to say it.

“When you called me and I didn’t answer.” He shoved off the window and turned to face her. “God, Mel, why are we doing this? Why are you torturing yourself? And me? Can’t we just let it go?”

She’s pregnant, he reminded himself. That’s the point here.

“I have to tell you everything. That night at the hospital, it was... worse than I told you.”

“I saw the bruises.”

He'd seen her name come up on his phone, but he couldn't bear to answer. He'd just handed the house keys over to the agent and he'd been sitting in his truck, the trade-in he'd gotten for his BMW 7 series.

"I hit my head when I fell. I thought I was fine. But that's the reason I... dropped... that baby. I passed out in the delivery room, just as the shoulders emerged."

He'd had, literally, nowhere to go and it was late and his wife had just gone on shift. So he sat in his truck while his wife was on a gurney, semi-conscious.

Austin knew it was cold in the room, but he felt like he was burning from the inside out, like he might explode. With everything he had, he forced himself to stand still.

"They did a pregnancy test in the ER. That's how I found out."

Melinda's voice was steady now. Like she was reporting facts for an article.

"You should have told me."

"You should have answered your phone."

"Instead, you came to the motel the next morning, pretended everything was okay and somehow forgot to mention that you were carrying my child."

"You weren't even at the motel when I got there, Oz. Should I have texted you with the news?"

"You were in the shower when I got in, Mel. I saw the bruises. I saw how upset you were."

"That's right!"

She got on her knees on the bed, right up in his face. "And you felt so horrible about it, you could hardly look at me! We'd drifted so far apart, you and I. Our life was being torn away from us while you ran around putting out fires, telling everyone it was a minor setback. I know you were suffering, but you had to put on a brave face, keep spinning those plates

in the air, even as they crashed around you. That's why I went to my mom's. I couldn't do it any longer."

Austin walked naked to the window.

Then, without turning, he spoke.

"Is that what you thought of me, Melinda? That I wouldn't be able to handle the news that my wife, who was already carrying me financially, was also carrying our child? That I had to be protected from the news? That I wouldn't celebrate a child, no matter the circumstances?"

He lowered his hand into his face and to his horror, he heard a sob escape his throat.

Melinda leaped off the bed and stood next to him, holding him, stroking him.

"I was wrong, Oz, I'm so sorry."

He opened his arms and she wrapped herself in them, and their tears mingled as finally, finally, the barriers came down.

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Chapter Seven



MELINDA AWOKE TO a strange sensation. Even after several nights together, it still took her a moment to realize that she was in bed, with her husband, and he had his hand on her belly.

After the emotional catharsis, Austin had become incredibly tender toward her. She sensed it would be some time before he got over the pain of her not telling him, not going with him to the farm, and taking refuge with her mom.

His hand moved and she felt her body light up. She nudged her pelvis toward him and instantly he responded, dipping his fingers beneath the lace of her panties.

They were making up for lost time, she thought, as his big body covered hers and they came together again in a flurry of passion.

“Stay here,” said Austin, once he’d gotten his breath back. “I’m bringing you breakfast in bed.”

“Oz,” she complained. “You don’t have to do that.”

But she knew he would anyway and secretly, she was delighted.

He was solicitous to the point of irritation, not letting her pick up anything heavier than a spoon, wrapping her up like a mummy before she so much as stepped out on the porch and feeding her constantly.

She knew now that part of her misery and malaise during their last chaotic weeks in Chicago were normal first trimester ailments. With that behind them, and their future looking, if

not prosperous then at least secure, her spirits were higher than they'd been in months.

She threw back the covers and went downstairs to eat with her husband in the kitchen. They had lots to do and she'd wasted enough time.



THEY STOOD IN line at the ticket booth of Marietta's only theater. It was date night, and his girl had requested dinner and a movie.

Actually, Mel had changed her mind about the dinner, opting for fast food instead, probably for the sake of their budget.

"Two for the sappy romance," he said to the girl at the ticket counter.

If a Nicholas Sparks movie is what she wanted, that's what she'd get. With her hormones all over the map, he was willing to do what he could to keep them on the up-side.

Actually, the transformation in Melinda since telling him of her pregnancy was astounding.

Cliche or not, she was actually glowing. Her energy was back, her eyes sparkled again, she smiled easily and often.

Though he still struggled with the fact that she hadn't trusted him, that she had almost given up on them, he understood better how she'd arrived at that place.

It hadn't been about the house or the cars or everything they'd lost. It's that he'd stopped talking to her. Without even knowing it, he'd shut her out. No wonder she'd lost faith.

It was only fair that he shoulder the blame.

And he wasn't really complaining. They were together again, emotionally and physically. And the sex? It was out of this world. She was a wild thing, insatiable, responding quickly to his touch, uninhibited and generous with him.

Even thinking about it now had him aroused.

“Do I know how to show a girl a good time, or what?”

He put his arm over his wife’s shoulders as the lights went out in the theater.

“You always did,” said Melinda. “You still do.”

They passed the snack counter where the line-up had trickled to a few people.

“Popcorn?” she said.

“You just downed a cheeseburger, a milkshake, all your fries and half of mine. How do you still have room for popcorn?”

She shrugged. “I’m eating for two.”

“Hey!” said the clerk, “you’re the guy from the hardware store.”

“Hey, Leda,” he said, recognizing her as the pregnant girl he’d mentioned to Melinda. “You work here.”

She made a gun with her forefinger and thumb. “Nothing gets past you. Is this your wife?”

“Hi, I’m Melinda.” She extended her hand over the counter and Austin saw the light he associated with baby talk come into her eyes.

“You really are pretty!”

Mel blushed and shot him a quick glance. “Aw, he says that about all his wives. Should you be on your feet this late in your pregnancy?”

Leda snorted. “In a perfect world. What can I get you?”

They ordered their snacks and after they paid, Mel surprised him by hanging back. “Leda,” she said, “would you like to come out to the farm one of these days? I’m jarring honey for the open house and I could use a hand. Payment is in honey only, I’m afraid.” She paused and he saw her gather her courage. “If you want, you can pick my brain. Labor and delivery is my thing, after all.”

“Deal!” said Leda. “I can use all the advice I can get!”

Mel’s face widened into a smile.

“Good,” she said.



THE OPEN HOUSE was quickly approaching. Snow piled up in big, fluffy layers and the temperatures continued to drop. Austin pulled his boots on, happy to discover that they were warm and dry, thanks to Bessie.

The furnace was working now – thankfully, it hadn’t required extensive work and nothing was living in the ducts – but Melinda had made peace with the big black stove, and they’d grown accustomed to the warmth of the fire, using the forced air only as a back-up.

They’d been less fortunate with the hot water tank and there were potentially more plumbing problems associated with that, so they continued heating water on top of the wood stove.

Sharing a bath to conserve water was a hardship Austin was happy to endure, he thought as he tromped out through the snow to the honey hut.

They were finally, he hoped, adjusting. The dissolution of Sweet and Morgan still stung, badly, and he still hadn’t come up with a good answer to the inevitable questions when he met the local people. What brought you to Marietta? Are you rebuilding the honey farm? How does your wife like country living?

He couldn’t quite get a bead on that last question. Melinda had taken on her projects with a vengeance. She’d set aside repairing that purple couch until later. Preparing the honey for the open house was her main priority. But cooking and canning vast quantities of fruit preserves was the biggest surprise. He had no idea this was in her arsenal of skills. The fact that she enjoyed it was the best part.

He pulled the door open and kicked it gently to knock off some ice.

She was still restless at night though. He worried that she missed the bustle of the city, though she insisted she didn't. The other day, he'd been shocked to see her releasing a mouse outside, into the woodpile. She didn't know he was there, and he was about to comment but when she stood up, he saw that she was crying. He let her go back into the house without seeing him and didn't mention it, but his heart ached that he'd brought his pregnant wife to a strange place with so few basic comforts.

Austin shook the fresh snow off his jacket and went inside, focusing on his current task of re-insulating the hive that would be used in the open house. He should have done it days ago; without protection from the cold and wind, the bees might not make it through the winter. But with everything else going on, he'd forgotten.

He loosened his hood around his face. It was freezing. He couldn't wait to get back to the house and warm his hands by the fire.

The display hive box was attached to the outside of the structure, the entrance tube running up to the roof, well out of human reach. But the wall where it attached had been cut open and replaced with a glass panel, so that on the inside, viewers could watch the colony work and even identify the queen, all from within the shed, without disturbing the bees.

They weren't very active in winter, but it was still interesting to the uninitiated.

Chad had impressed how important this was as part of their open house tour. Fun and educational, that's what got parents out in droves.

Austin found it fascinating, himself. Since they wouldn't be actively working with the hives until spring, it gave him a chance to observe a working colony from close up, without risk.

The humming sound was quieter than it had been. The bees were moving sluggishly and he could see frost at the edges of the glass.

Crap. They were too cold.

Quickly he ran to the equipment shed and grabbed the roll of tar paper that Chad had shown him. They were still alive, that was something. He cut the pieces to size, then stapled them over each exposed side of the box, making sure to keep the entrance free. The black paper would not only protect the colony from cold winds, but it would absorb enough heat from the sun to keep them alive through to spring.

He went back inside the shed to take a closer look at the queen. He found her, closely guarded by her subjects, fanning the air around her. She looked okay, but would he know if she was suffering? Or would he miss the signs?

She was the life of the hive, the *raison d'être* for every single drop of honey, every drone, every worker.

It was all about keeping the queen alive.

Winter, he thought. We're all just trying to make it through the winter.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the queen. "Give me another chance."



AUSTIN WAS STILL outside doing chores when a truck bounced onto the yard. It was the contractor. The back of his truck was loaded with what, she couldn't tell, since it was covered by tarp.

She waved from the porch, noting that he wasn't alone.

"I brought my fiancée," said Logan, striding toward her. "Melinda Sweet, meet Samara Davis. Sam, Melinda. Austin said you might be ready for some company."

"Mama," said the little girl who followed Samara out of the truck, "I wanna go with Mr. S."

“That’s my daughter, Jade,” said Samara. “And her dog. Bob’s a girl and no, I don’t know why. Jade named her.”

“Mama!”

Mel noticed that she spoke without making eye contact.

“Logan?” said Samara.

“It’s fine with me.” He swung the little girl up onto his shoulders. “Come on, Chipmunk. Come on, Bob.”

“What a lovely family,” said Melinda, watching them trudge through the snow. The dog pranced around and wagged her tail madly, but kept looking up at the girl.

“We’re not-” began Samara. Then she shook her head and started over. “Thank you. I think we will be. I’m still getting used to it. We haven’t set a date or anything. And apparently I babble when I’m nervous.”

Mel laughed and opened the door wider. “Please, come in where it’s warm.”

“Sorry to drop by unannounced,” said Samara, shedding her coat and boots, “but when Logan told me you were transplants from Chicago, I knew I had to meet you. I came from New York City in September. It’s a big adjustment but trust me, if I can do it, anyone can.”

Melinda put the kettle on for tea.

“We’re only here until spring,” she told Samara.

Samara and her daughter had beautiful olive skin and dark hair, but Jade had an Asian cast to her features that her mother didn’t. Was she adopted?

She and Austin had discussed adoption, but his family put a lot of value on blood relations. And now of course, they didn’t need to.

She hugged her belly, holding her precious secret close.

“Oh. Well, too bad for us then,” said Samara. “Logan didn’t mention that.”

“Austin might not have told him,” Mel explained, surprised at the disappointment on Samara’s face. “His family owns the property and they’d rather we stayed. We’re here to fix the place up for resale.”

Samara looked around her. “Really? You don’t want to stay? It’s so pretty out here. I love these old homes. That’s what drew me to the area, a great real estate deal on a refurbished heritage house. Yours is just as nice as mine, or will be, once you’re finished with it.”

Suddenly Melinda envied the air of settledness that Samara wore about her. She’d moved here, deliberately, and she was staying put. Finding a home and new love, building a life here, raising her daughter here.

Maybe Mel would feel differently about Sweet Montana if it hadn’t been thrust upon them. If they hadn’t been so desperate that they had to accept it.

“What did you do in Chicago?” asked Samara.

Melinda opened her mouth to give a vague non-answer, but she was tired of dancing around the truth. It was what it was.

“My husband was a financial planner.”

“Oh,” said Samara. It was the sound of sympathy. Everyone knew someone who’d lost all their investments when the economy tanked.

“Yeah.” She sighed heavily. “His company crashed. We lost our house, everything. I’m not sure where we would have gone, if Austin’s parents hadn’t offered us this place.”

She poured tea into the cups and handed one to her guest, surprised to see that her hands were rock steady.

“And you?”

Surprisingly, Melinda found she welcomed Samara’s gentle probing. She hadn’t spoken about her job to anyone since their arrival. Hadn’t really spoken to anyone, period.

“Senior charge nurse at Jackson Park, maternity,” she said. “It’s an inner city hospital. Lots of high-risk births.”

“How exciting.”

But Mel caught the slight shudder that ran through the woman.

“Not a fan of hospitals, I take it?”

“It shows, huh?” Samara grimaced. “I’ve got some, um, negative associations I’m working through. Are you going to work at the Marietta hospital while you’re here?”

“No job openings,” said Melinda. Small community hospitals didn’t have much turnover, certainly not in maternity. And certainly not for someone at her level.

She went to the counter where a sheet of rosemary shortbread was cooling, and slid some onto a plate.

“Do you miss it?”

“Of course,” she said, automatically. But something about the candid way Samara asked the question caught Mel off guard. *Did* she miss it? She’d worked her tail off earning that position. She loved her job. Lived for it. It defined her.

And she was good at it.

Usually.

Mel took her time arranging the cookies. “I was pretty burned out at the end, though. There was... an incident...”

She cut herself off then, shocked at saying so much to someone she’d just met. And now that she was going to have a child of her own, did she even want such a high-pressure job?

Samara made another soft sound, as if she understood what Mel couldn’t bring herself to say, in essence, if not in fact. It made Mel’s chest hurt. It made her want to spill everything, pour all her feelings onto the table so she could pull them apart and order them and then put them away, finally.

But she also knew that this was not the time or place. Or the person.

“You don’t have to say anything more,” said Samara, taking a piece of shortbread. “It’s okay. You’re holding back from making friends, so it won’t hurt when you have to leave.”

Melinda raised her eyebrows at the frank statement.

“Let me just say this.” Samara leaned forward, her dark hair falling off her shoulder. “However you got here, or when you’re leaving, you’re here now. This place can change your life, but you have to let it. I didn’t want to let anyone in but I couldn’t resist. I was a little... crazy, actually. Long story. Long, ugly story.”

Couldn’t be any longer or uglier than her own, thought Mel.

“But everyone was so warm and welcoming. I wasn’t allowed to wallow. Now I’m paying it forward. For however long you’re here, I hope we can be friends. Okay?”

Melinda sensed that, if she’d had a sister, she might be someone like Samara.

“What the heck,” she told Samara. “At the risk of overshare...”

Samara leaned closer, her expression serious. “I wasn’t trying to pressure you.”

“I know. But I think it might do me some good.”

“Then I’m listening.”

Melinda held the warm mug with both hands, but it didn’t penetrate the chill.

“It was my last week of work. A patient came in, high on PCP, and in labor. I was getting her admitted when she flipped out and assaulted me.”

She let go of the mug and rubbed her thigh. She could still feel the gouge of the metal gurney. “We got her under control

and in restraints but she was crowning before we knew it. I was all ready to catch that baby...”

She trailed off. Funny how talking to a complete stranger was sometimes easier than talking to those who knew you intimately.

“I almost got him. I felt him, the slippery heat of a newborn on my gloved hands. Then I passed out.”

“Oh, Melinda.”

No need for details. Not now.

“Thank goodness my co-worker caught the kid. It could have been a tragedy.”

Samara reached across the table and put her hand on Mel’s arm. “I’m so sorry. That sounds horrific. Are you okay now?”

Another good question. She and Austin were recovering, she thought, getting their marriage back on track. But she was worried about Austin, about the upcoming open house, about what would happen in spring. This was more than she’d spoken about the incident to anyone since it had happened.

She got up, suddenly embarrassed. She wasn’t used to being listened to like that. It was dangerous. She should find something else besides cookies.

“Wow. Sorry about that,” she said, rummaging through the one functional cupboard. “I got carried away.”

“Not at all.” Samara took a sip of tea. “Everyone has a history. I consider it an honor that you trusted me with it. Now, let’s change the subject. Tell me what you’re cooking in that pot that smells so heavenly.”

They exchanged a glance, and Mel took the lifeline Samara offered. For the next hour, she showed off the jellies she’d made for the open house. Though she hadn’t done it since her grandmother had passed away, and she was delighted to find that her hands easily recalled the various tasks. And thrilled with Samara’s response.

“You’ll have to give me the recipe,” said Samara, just as the sound of stomping interrupted them.

The men were dumping equipment and supplies onto the porch and within minutes, they heard the sounds of sawing and hammering.

The door opened and Jade came in, holding her ears.

“Mama!”

“I know, honey.” Samara jumped up to help her shed her outdoor clothes, and wiped down the dog.

“Don’t worry about the floor,” said Mel with a laugh. “I think that goes without saying.”

Samara grabbed the towel by the door and mopped up anyway.

“Logan can’t work on this if it’s wet. You won’t believe what this will look like once he’s done with it. You should see mine.”

She set her daughter onto the moss-green sofa and gave her a box of cards.

“Bob is my dog,” said the girl suddenly, to no one in particular. “She’s a girl dog. She’s part Labrador retriever, part Border collie and part luck of the draw. Bob is my dog.”

Ah, thought Mel. The deliberate cadence of Jade’s speech, plus the subtle behavioral tics suggested a spot on the autism spectrum. Her opinion of Samara went up another notch.

“I’m pleased to meet you both.” She didn’t approach Jade, but gestured to Bob, the dog. “She’s welcome to sit on the couch with you, if you’d like.”

The dog leaped up before the words were barely out, curled up next to Jade and put her head in the girl’s lap.

By the time the men were finished for the day, Mel felt as if she and Samara had known each other forever. And as she waved goodbye from the porch, with Austin’s arm around her, she wondered, is this really what it could be like?



AUSTIN SMASHED HIS hammer against the rusted nails holding the pathetic metal sign on the gate. But the whole thing was fused onto the wood like a skin graft.

He had a new sign ready and waiting, but this darn thing had to come off first.

He gave it another vicious blow, then stood back and wiped his brow with the back of his gloved hand.

Mel had enjoyed her visit with Samara. Her posture had softened and the tightness around her mouth had relaxed. But he sensed it had been a reminder of her newness here. Her strangeness.

She was working hard to do what needed to be done, but not for an instant did she forget about her true goal: to return to her Real Life and the job she loved.

For his part, he didn't miss Sweet and Morgan. He missed Sean, but not the work, the constant hand-holding of worried clients. He was more relaxed than he'd been in years. The physical work agreed with him. True, he'd almost killed one colony of bees already, but he was learning. He was determined to do a good job.

And Mel was cooking and baking like a fiend, to have inventory to sell at the open house. She seemed to enjoy it, but was it real?

And the real question on his mind: what if, even come spring, they still couldn't afford to leave? They couldn't list the farm until it was ready to show, and even once they'd listed, it could take months to find a buyer.

If they found one at all at the price they needed.

What if they had to stay? Would she?

He gave the sign one last kick and to his surprise, it popped free, both nails breaking off at the head, leaving the spikes buried in the wood.

If Melinda found a good job, somewhere they could afford to live, they might be able to swing it. But she was due in May and surely she wanted some time with the baby?

He looked at the rickety, rusted sign, lying on the frozen soil, and wondered if his grandfather might want it. He was a sentimental old man.

Quickly, he drilled holes and fixed the new welcome sign to the gate. While it stayed true to the original in spirit, Austin had updated the font and brightened the colors. He stood back to admire his work.

Perfect. This was the welcome he wanted to give visitors to Sweet Montana Farms.

As he stooped to gather his tools, movement by the goat barn caught his eye. Melinda was outside by herself again, her dark hair contrasting with the brilliance of the fresh snow. She was carrying a pan. He saw her crouch down, and to his surprise, a cat slunk out from behind the shed. A moth-eaten tabby with notched ears. Then another one joined them, this one grey and fluffy like a dust mop.

He didn't even know there were cats out there.

While he watched, the cats approached the pan, then settled themselves at the edge, keeping an eye on her but not too worried. She reached out to the grey one. It flinched away, but then allowed her to stroke it.

Such a big heart she had. Some nurses became hardened after years of witnessing so much hardship and pain, but not her.

When the pan was empty, she picked it up and went back into the house, her head down, her shoulders hunched.

He picked up his tools and tromped back through the snow. If she wanted to go back to work after the baby came, they'd go wherever her job led.

And what would that mean for him?

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Chapter Eight



THE CHRISTMAS SCENES were set up in various spots around the yard and Austin wanted her opinion. Melinda walked ahead of him, letting the bright sunshine pour over her face, filling her lungs with the fresh, cold air.

She didn't know cold had a smell.

"Tacky, huh?"

Santa had rust spots on his bowlful of jelly. The nativity scene was a ragtag affair with characters and props thrown together from several incomplete sets, as evidenced by the lamb being larger than the donkey.

Electrical cords ran up and down the sheds, criss-crossing the yard like scars from a flogging.

"It will be lovely at night," she said.

"So ugly it's charming?"

She turned to him, grinning. "You should put that on the flyers!"

It felt so good to be joking with him again. She linked her arm through his as they surveyed the property.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Austin lifted his face to the sky. "How long has it been since you smelled air like this? It's so fresh, it crackles. It's good for you. Good for the baby."

A lot better than all those nights under fluorescents.

"It's been awhile."

He took her hand. "Come on. Let's see what's what."

Melinda let the country air in her lungs and felt the muscles in her chest let go a little, as if she'd opened the top button of a too-tight shirt. She imagined the air slipping into the alveoli of her lungs, the way a drop of blue food coloring swirls into a glass of clear water, first a shock of contrast, then gradual fading, the change subtle but irreversible.

“Look,” said Austin, pointing to the sky.

A group of Canada geese, black and white against the grey sky, way late in their journey. As they watched, their pattern shifted, then settled back into the typical vee pattern.

“Did you see that?” he said. “They just changed leaders.”

They took turns battling the wind resistance, then falling back to rest in the wake of the other birds, calling out to each other as they flew, to ensure they stayed together, mile after endless mile.

“Smart birds,” she said.

“It would make a great painting,” said Austin, examining the house from the perspective of the yard. He tapped his mouth with his gloved fingers. “We could stand in front of it, all pinched and stern. Our American Gothic winter.”

“Our American Horror Story winter, you mean.”

He bumped against her as they walked, the kind of casual nudge couples did without thinking about it.

“Or,” he thought for a moment, “How the West was Won?”

She sniffed. “A Million Ways to Die in the West.”

“Girl, that’s just mean. I know: Mel and Oz’s Excellent Adventure.”

At the end of the fence line she turned and spread her arms. “Nope. I’ve got it. Dumb and Dumber on the farm!”

With an elaborate bow, he conceded. “I grant you the win. However, let us not speak such words outside the sanctity of our twosome.”

He lifted his face to the sky and bellowed. “Beware, the first man who dares speak such ignominious words against my beloved. I shall not suffer him to live!”

“Oz, stop it!” Laughing, she balled her fist for a gentle punch, but he evaded her easily.

“Do you fear for the good name of Sweet in this, our new land?”

“I think your countrymen will put you on a watch list, if that’s what you mean. Let’s keep our crazy to a minimum, okay?”

“As you wish, my queen.”

She fell silent, the game over. He had such high hopes for this open house. It was Austin’s gift, finding the good in any situation, lifting the spirits of those around him, bringing out the best in them. But it made it all that much worse then to see his rugged, ever-so-handsome face slack with sorrow and disappointment.

They were tromping across the frosty grass from the furthest shed when the sound of an engine broke the silence between them.

Chad’s snowmobile was coming their way, rumbling and tumbling over the rough pasture on the other side of the barbed-wire fence, the rider’s leg muscles visible through his jeans as he stood up for the worst bumps.

“Hey, neighbors,” he called. “I heard you yelling. Everything okay?”

“I told you.” Melinda aimed another punch at Austin and this time he caught her arm and twirled her so she was tucked up against him.

“We’re fine,” called Austin. “Just admiring our work.”

The neighbor dismounted his machine and instead of using the gate, spread the barbed wires and stepped through, like this was his farm instead of Austin’s.

As if they were the visitors.

He lifted his hat at Melinda and flashed a dazzling smile. “Ma’am.”

A bell may as well have tinkled. The man could do toothpaste commercials, if he didn’t already. Again, she saw what every woman saw and was untouched.

Aside from the hat, her husband was every bit as tall and gorgeous as the cowboy, thought Melinda. If she wasn’t mistaken, Austin’s chest and shoulders were a little higher than they were a moment ago and she sensed the men exchanging measure, a subtle test of where the power lay.

“Need anything?”

Austin’s arms tightened. “We’re good.”

Melinda’s heart went out to him. No matter how he hid it, his pride was still deeply damaged from the failure of Sweet and Morgan Financial Services.

“Turns out we’re more than house sitters with hammers,” said Mel. “Especially Austin. You should see what he’s done in the house. The goats adore him. And you should hear him talk about bees.”

Chad let out a rolling laugh.

Austin put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, honey.”

Her husband’s gestures were the modern equivalent of hair-dragging her to his cave, and stopping to pee on the corner once there. While the feminist in her cried foul, she couldn’t deny the primal pleasure of being claimed. Chad straightened up and put his gloves back on.

“Beekeeping is all about the queen,” said Chad. He winked at Austin. “No wonder you’re a natural.”



MELINDA SHOVED THE scraper against the stubborn paint. The built-in shelves in the sunroom weren’t ugly structurally but

mud-brown paint?

Given what it was covering though, perhaps it had been. She could count the layers, like tree rings. There was a yellow phase, a white phase, an unfortunate peach phase and finally, a sweet blue, the kind you'd put in a baby's room.

Maybe this had been a playroom.

She imagined a jabbering toddler, slapping away at his blocks, while his mother watched from the kitchen as she worked.

Maybe it would be again.

The scraper dug in hard and a huge, satisfying peel came off. This was barely a house, let alone a home. The stipend from Austin's parents was enough to live on, and the renovation budget gave them leeway with the house, but it was hardly a long-term plan.

Hardly the way to start family life.

"Hey," said Austin, poking his head through the doorway.

She jumped, nearly dropping the scraper. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

His cheeks were red from the cold but his eyes were sparkling.

"Found a surprise in the goat pen. Thought you might want to come see."

She gestured to the shelves. "Maybe later. I want to finish this."

"I thought you might say that."

He came fully into the room. In his arms was a tiny brown and white creature with long, flicking ears and hooves so fresh and clean they looked like they were made of wax.

"Maa-aaa," it said.

Her heart melted and she reached for it.

“He’s pretty new,” said Austin. “Seems like the wrong time of year. But you know babies.”

“They come when they come,” she murmured.

Babies might come as a surprise, she always said. But never an accident.

She stroked the tiny nose. It was the cutest thing she’d ever seen in her life.

Or maybe that was the hormones speaking.

Anticipation washed over her. They were having a baby. Her chest spasmed. She’d started crying yesterday when she heard the baby’s heartbeat through her stethoscope, while Austin was outside. She hadn’t even known how worried she’d been.

Then she cried because their child would be delivered here, in Marietta’s little hospital and would be coming home to... this.

“He needs a name.”

“Oh, I couldn’t.” Mel put her finger to the kid’s mouth and immediately it latched on, suckling enthusiastically, bumping her hand with his bony little head. “How about Mocha?”

“Mocha it is,” said Austin.

He’d reluctantly agreed not to tell his parents about the baby yet. They were desperate for a grandchild. Once they knew, the pressure to fall in with Bill Sweet’s plans would intensify.

Plus, it bothered her that they only seemed to care about her as their son’s accessory. Austin’s wife, vessel for the coveted next generation. Like anyone with a functioning uterus would do.

She pulled her finger free. “Mocha is hungry and I’ll bet his mama is none too pleased that you took him away.”

“He’s got a twin, so I think mama’s fine. You should come out and see them.”

He wanted so badly for her to share in his enjoyment but she held back. They weren't staying. Getting attached would only make it hurt when they left.

And they were still leaving, right?

"I don't have time." She pointed to the area that would be their retail showcase at the open house. "See that grain? Once I get it sanded and varnished, those little jars will glow against that background."

Austin smiled. "Well, look who's gotten the refinishing bug."

"Blame Logan. Or rather, blame Samara."

"I thought you might hit it off." The same eagerness bloomed all over Austin's face again, making her wary.

"She's lovely."

"Logan said she had a rough landing here, too. Lost her husband not long before moving."

So that was the long, ugly story Samara had alluded to. She'd certainly gotten an idyllic ending, hadn't she? A nice widow who moved to a small town to restart her life, found her soulmate and was now living happily ever after.

She began scraping at a fresh spot.

"They seem very happy," she said.

"How about us?"

Melinda lifted her head in surprise. A full frontal, that wasn't like him. He nuzzled the baby goat while awaiting her response.

"You've worked so hard to make it easier for me here, and I appreciate it." She stood up and wiped her hands, wincing at the pinch in her low back. "We're good now, Oz. Aren't we?"

He didn't respond.

"Aren't we?"

A chunk of hair fell over her eye. She shoved it back. She'd been working non-stop, they both had. They were tired and irritable. The honey was ready for sale. She'd cooked up so many pots of jam, jelly, chutney, relish and salsa she ran out of jars. She'd baked batch after batch of cookies, despite the temperamental kitchen oven. She'd decorated the inside of the house to match the outside.

What more did he want from her.

"I'm good," he said quietly. "I'm asking about *you*."

"Oh." She looked down at the floor, covered with debris, and started sweeping it up. What was there to say? She was eating again, sleeping beside him at night, mostly. She'd learned to work with Bessie, to burn whatever trash they could and bury kitchen scraps in the compost heap.

He was such a good sport, her Oz. He rolled with things. It's who he was.

But they couldn't live like this forever. Even if they wanted to stay, the little hospital in Marietta had no openings for a maternity nurse.

Each day, time and money slipped by and the pressure to find a job, a decent one that could support them – and a baby – ratcheted higher.

And always, underneath that thought trailed the memory of her hands clutching and missing that slippery little body.

She shook off the thought and set the broom carefully in the corner.

"Say what you mean, Melinda."

The challenge lay there between them, pulsing, as the words tumbled inside of her. Come spring, they'd be gone. To where, or with what money, or what job, she didn't know.

It would be up to her to support them, to pay back Austin's parents and she wasn't even sure she could do it anymore.

Again Melinda pushed at the hair escaping from her ponytail. She took a deep breath and looked him hard in the eye. “I’m worried, Oz. I think you’d like to stay here permanently. I’m not sure I can do that.”



AUSTIN LOOKED AROUND the honey shed at the posters he’d put up, the visual aids, the cute stuffed bees that would go home with some lucky kids when it was all over.

As long as people actually came out. Chad assured him it would be well-attended, but what if all this work was for nothing?

So much uncertainty in their lives. Until their talk, he hadn’t realized how much anxiety Mel carried. It killed him to hear it. She didn’t need the stress now, not in her condition.

He kicked at a bale of straw. Of course his dad hoped the Sweet heritage would be carried on for another generation. Austin had explained, again, that as soon as they found new jobs, somewhere they could afford the rent, they were gone.

His dad had sputtered with outrage at the news – though it wasn’t news – and Austin had felt again that twist of humiliation. Mel would be the deciding factor. She still had a viable career.

Or did she want to stay home with the baby?

He snorted. Stay home where? Here? While they lived on handouts from his parents?

No wonder she was stressed.

He took a deep breath and forced his mind to calm. Whatever lay ahead, this was their present. The past was painful, the future unknown; only now was certain and he intended to grab whatever joy he could from it.

What was Christmas for, if not joy?

And they had the most special gift of all to celebrate.

But first, the open house.

On that note, he took a moment to review the prep work they'd done.

The shed with the decorations stood empty now; everything inside had found a place, the lights, the blinking candy canes, the multitude of colored balls that hung from every tree within sight.

A metal Santa complete with sleigh and eight reindeer pranced next to the level driveway with its fresh load of gravel.

A large frame in the shape of a star stood on the roof, a nativity scene was set up in front of the goat barn and the front of the honey shed was covered with twinkling icicle lights. They left the back side dark, so as not to disturb the bees.

In the harsh light of day and all the white, it still looked cluttered and even trashy. But when night fell and the only backdrop was the starlit sky, it was magical.

“Hey,” called Chad, waving from the fence. They'd installed a gate between the two farms, big enough for the tractor that would be hauling the sleigh to pass. He'd made a nice hard track over the snow with his ATV.

He pulled the gate shut behind him. “Ready for your crash course in apiary lore?”

Chad was in charge of sleigh rides; Mel would be in the house, serving cider and selling her fancy jars; the pregnant girl, Leda, had begged to help, so she was in charge of watching the goat pen, to make sure the kids weren't too rough on the animals, and vice versa.

Austin's job was talking about bees. And, more importantly, answering questions.

“I still think I should do the sleigh rides,” he responded.

“And you've driven a tractor how often?” asked Chad.

“That hurts, man.” He thumped himself in the chest. “Right here.”

He followed Chad through the door of the honey shed, to the display box and stopped at the workbench.

“A craft accident?”

It was the broken tree ornament that Mel treasured, the one that had belonged to her grandmother. He’d found it amongst their own Christmas decorations.

“I thought I’d try to fix it. I haven’t told her. In case I can’t.”

“Good luck with that,” said Chad. Then he turned to the buzzing pane of glass. “Now, when it comes to bee talks, these guys will do most of your work for you.”

Austin covered the pieces of the ornament and sent up a silent prayer of thanks that the hive hadn’t died of exposure at his hands.

Chad proceeded to explain how to point out the distinguishing characteristics of the different bees, how to help kids count egg cells, and what parasites and illness the bees were prone to. How to identify the queen, her unique role in the colony, and their constant, ongoing drive to make honey.

Most kids barely knew where honey came from, let alone that the colony needed it to survive. Honey farmers had to know how much they could harvest. If they took too much, the bees would have to be fed to keep them from starving before spring.

That was a concept Austin knew all too well.

He and Sean had built up a great thing with Sweet and Morgan. Then, in hopes of increasing their returns, they’d overreached, chosen the wrong mutual fund. Put too many eggs in one basket.

“There’s gonna be a quiz, you know.” Chad propped a foot up on an old paint can.

“I’m listening. The queen. You were telling me about how the colony cares for her.”

“That’s right. She’s the heart and soul of the colony.

He scrambled to remember what else Chad had told him.

“Every year the queen gets replaced.”

“Might get two years, with a mild winter.

“What about the rest of them? Do I have to replace them, too?”

“Nah. It’s a continuously renewing thing, a colony. The queen lays eggs, that’s her only job, to make more bees. When one dies, it gets wrapped up and taken out.”

“Like trash. Rough life.”

“Bees are very meticulous creatures. Death and decay is counterproductive to their purpose, so they deal with it. Very efficiently, I might add.”

Austin thought about spring, how their child would be born just as the colony came alive again. Mocha would be joined by other baby goats; the garden would be sprouting with all manner of things. The barn cats would have kittens. Birds and bees and flowers and trees, all a wild mess of procreation.

Every living thing wants to survive, to thrive, to create more life, to move on, keeping their tiny part in the wheel of life moving.

Mel was right. He would be sorry to say goodbye to it all.



THEY COULDN’T HAVE asked for more perfect weather for their grand opening of A Sweet Montana Christmas Open House. The air was filled with the scent of pine and fir sap, from the boughs they’d trimmed and put up over the doorways.

The full moon had passed, leaving the night sky a black counterpane dotted with stars. Melinda couldn’t remember ever seeing stars like this in Chicago. Too much light pollution. Plus, she was usually going on shift, or coming off shift, neither situation conducive to star-gazing.

“Nice, huh?” said Austin, coming up to stand behind her on the porch. He put his arms around her, hugging her tightly against him and resting his hands on the little mound in her belly.

“Do you think anyone will show up?”

“Are you kidding? The place is going to be crawling with Christmas spirit.”

“But do you really think it’ll be worthwhile? Money-wise?”

She’d sealed, labeled and tagged so many jars of honey, turned the windfall apples into sauce, pickled, spiced and preserved everything edible from the cold cellar. She’d even, after a fortuitous farmers’ market score on frozen red currants, made her grandma’s famous jelly.

She felt Austin shrug, his big body moving against hers.

“Even if it doesn’t, it’s good promotion.”

She stiffened.

Promotion. As if they’d be staying.

“Aw, Mel, stop thinking so much. Look at us.” He turned her to face him. “We’re alive, we’re healthy, we’re together. We’ve got little Gumball in there to look forward to. It’s not a bad way to spend the winter. Let’s not worry about what comes after.”

He touched her chin then and his gaze dropped to her mouth. Her breath quickened at the passion in his eyes.

He lowered his face and touched his lips to hers. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe.

She slipped her arms up around his neck.

“Mel,” he murmured against her cheek, “everything I need in the world is right here, in my arms.”

She pressed her mouth against his to keep him from talking. All she wanted was for their life to go back to normal.

Except she didn't know what that was anymore.

A crunching sound rode across the crisp air, followed by a swath of light from a car pulling into their driveway.

They pushed apart, their breath surrounding them in clouds of white mist.

“Hello,” called a voice. “Not to interrupt you lovebirds, but I'm here for some honey. You got some?”

Austin pressed his forehead against her hair, chuckling silently, then stepped forward to meet their first guest.



THEY'D HAD AN even better turnout than he'd hoped for, thought Austin, as the last car turned off the yard and headed out into the night.

He began the long walk to the far end of the yard, to shut off lights, unplug cords, put the goats to bed and secure doors against intruders, human or animal.

Chad was busy with sleigh rides all night, for which they charged a nominal fee. Leda sat, surrounded by kids and goats, like a smart-mouthed Madonna in a nativity scene gone wrong. And he'd done okay with his first round of bee questions.

But when one of the kids had pointed out that the queen wasn't moving as much as the others, he'd found himself stumbling over the answer.

It was natural, he told them. The rest of the bees work to take care of her. She's the center of the hive; everything revolves around her. In winter, their job is to keep her warm and fed because the health of a colony depended on a strong queen.

But in truth, she was weak, probably hurt by the cold snap during which they hadn't been properly insulated. He'd neglected the hive and this was the price.

He'd neglected Melinda during the demise of Sweet and Morgan, thinking that they'd have time after the crisis to sort out everything between them. He'd been frantic, she was always working, they hardly saw each other and when they did, it was for exchanges of information, debates, decisions to be made.

Never blame. He bowed his head. She'd never blamed him, never.

He promised he'd make it up to her, but it wasn't working out that way, was it?

He found her resting in the kitchen, her arms folded on the table. To keep with the old-fashioned Christmas theme, they'd gone with safety-candles and a wood fire, which threw a soft, flickering glow over the main room.

"Hey," she said, lifting her head. She smiled and it seemed to him that the candles grew brighter.

"Tired?" he asked. He stood behind her and began massaging her shoulders.

"How did you know?"

"I'm more than just a pretty face."

"Who knew that a farmer could have such a pretty face," she murmured, so beautiful he ached.

"Ditto, sweet Melinda Sweet."

"Ever wonder why you hear people talk about farmers and farmers' wives?" She sounded half-asleep already. "I mean, what's that about? Farm women work just as hard as their husbands."

"If what I saw tonight was any indication, this place has a farmer and a farmer's husband."

"Two farmers. That's all I'm saying. Why can't they be equal?"

Her voice was loose and lispy. He put his hands on her shoulders and lifted her up.

“Come with me.”

“I need to blow out all the candles first,” she said, her voice clearer now.

“Not yet.” He led her to the half-couch she’d refinished and loved so much. How she’d patched it with the same purple fabric, he didn’t know. “Sit.”

She sat, watching him.

“It’s time for a little pampering,” he continued. “I’m going to get some fresh firewood.”

Austin dumped the split logs into the box beside the stove while his wife sat on the couch cross-legged, watching. She’d taken off the flannel checked overshirt she’d worn as part of her Sweet Montana Farmwife outfit; the black yoga top and tights showed off the strength in her arms. He could see her nipples clearly through the thin fabric, and the small round belly.

“You’d have made a great boy scout,” she said, as he stirred the embers.

Carefully, he reached inside and placed the kindling and small branches. There was no rushing a fire, he’d learned, especially when you’d let it die down too far.

Melinda rubbed her hands over her exposed upper arms.

“Chilly?”

He wanted her naked and rosy with passion.

“Not really,” she answered.

“Then what?”

The embers rushed up, strong and ready to catch, just waiting for fuel.

“Let’s call it anticipation,” she said.

He braced two bigger bark-covered logs at an angle on top, to give the blaze stamina, then sat down next to his wife and began warming her up.

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Chapter Nine



IT WAS A day full of surprises, thought Melinda, looking through her lashes at the fire.

She hadn't expected to get so caught up in the excitement and promise of Christmas but with the soft flickering lights and the sparkling tree in the corner, she couldn't help it. The laughter of children, dashing through the snow in their parkas and boots, was the perfect accompaniment to the carols playing in the background, too.

It really was magical.

Austin lifted the hair away from the nape of her neck and planted a soft kiss, then another and another.

She felt the sensation down to her toes and suddenly she had to fight back tears at the sheer joy at his touch, of connecting with him in this way again, after coming so close to losing it entirely.

He slipped the spaghetti strap down over her arm and let his lips wander further. The slight moisture from his warm mouth left cool spots on her skin as he moved on, and the contrast made her shiver.

"Here," he said, trading spots with her so she faced the fire. "You're cold."

"I'm not." She was trembling for some reason, though.

"Scoot onto the floor," he instructed. "I'll rub your shoulders."

With the fire warming her front side and Austin behind her, his strong denim-clad legs sheltering her on either side,

she felt warm and secure just how, she imagined, an infant feels before its final journey into the world.

He lifted her hair again and spread his fingers against her scalp, massaging firmly. The sensation was breathtaking and she must have moaned because Austin chuckled.

“You like, my queen?”

“Mmm,” was all she could manage.

Gently, he dug his thumbs into the hard muscles at the tops of her shoulders, working them until she felt them soften. His long fingers crept down the front of her chest as he worked, close to her breasts but not close enough.

She pulled away long enough to strip off the top, then leaned back.

“Keep going,” she said.

She dropped her head back, against his thigh, to give him access to her breasts, but he didn’t take it, focusing instead on her throat, trailing whisper-light touches from her jaw to her collarbone and back.

With a quick shift, she was on her knees in front of him, reaching for his belt, but he grabbed her hands.

“Uh, uh.” He lifted her to her feet and set her bottom on the couch again. “You warming up?”

She nodded.

“Good. Then you won’t be needing these.”

She helped him slide her tights and underwear off until she stood naked and shivering before him.

“It’s not fair,” she whispered, looking him up and down.

Austin, her Austin, the man she’d been with for over a decade, was gone and in his place was this, this...

“Life’s not fair,” he said, pushing her to lie down.

Between the warmth from the fire beside her and her husband’s touch, Mel felt as if all her nerve endings were

reaching up through her skin, like buds surfacing through winter-cold soil, following the life force of the sun.

She quivered as he rubbed the stubble of his jaw against her instep, then moved upward, against her ankle, then her knee, then her thigh, then down the other side, ignoring the one place she wanted him most.

She'd heard pregnancy sex was good, but this new-old Austin had her quaking with desire, crawling out of her skin.

He ran his fingers over her torso, bringing fresh chill-bumps. He cupped her breasts, then leaned down and put his mouth over one hard bud and suckled.

Nerves sizzled from her nipple down, down her body, the normal hormonal reaction exquisite and excruciating all at once.

She grabbed Austin's shirt with both hands and tore it off him, pulled him until he was lying next to her on the couch, her hands working frantically on his jeans. It was too much, too much sensation, too much intensity.

Too much love.

Too much to lose.

"Hey," said Austin, catching hold of her hands. "What's going on? Mel? Are you crying?"

"No! Don't stop," she said, closing her eyes and turning her face away. "I need you. I need this! Please, just keep going. Ignore me."

He quickly stripped off the rest of his clothing and fit himself between her and the half-back of the fainting couch.

"I can't ignore you, Melinda," he murmured into her ear. "You're my life. Understand?"

His hand trailed down her belly, making circles around her navel. The heat and desire was back and this time, she allowed herself to be carried away, to a place of wholeness and joy and forgiveness and the pleasure of being loved.



CHRISTMAS EVE AT the farm was like a page from a children's book, thought Melinda, standing in the shadows of the porch. Lights twinkling across rooflines, the star shining in the darkness, pointing visitors to the nativity scene.

A couple of kids, barely school-age, danced up and down, their tongues out, racing to catch the fat, lazy flakes of snow drifting softly over them.

She hugged her middle, feeling as light as one of those flakes, herself. The last month had brought a new well of gentleness between them. His smile was bright with their shared secret. They touched each other more now and when she caught his eye, it felt as if everything inside her connected briefly with everything inside him.

They were one again. A unit. Pulling together.

And look at what they'd accomplished.

The biggest rush of open house was over and it was perfect, thanks to Austin. She'd never seen him so focused and purposeful and yes, happy.

She was happy too. Despite the worries always lingering in the background, the past weeks had been fun for her too, much more than she'd expected. She had a small turkey prepared for tomorrow, but they'd agreed not to spend money on gifts. Now she wished she had something to tuck under the tree for him tonight, something that might show how much she loved him.

They'd keep the lights and decorations up for another week, as many families enjoyed outings on the days between Christmas and New Year. It would be sad to take all this apart. But to everything a season. She thought of her grandmother's ornament, lost in the move, after all those years. She'd have to find a new one to remember her by.

Leda came trudging up from the goat barn. "It's completely, totally awesome out here, isn't it?"

She was beautiful in an innocent schoolgirl kind of way, like she might be a high school cheerleader, all legs and hair and bright white teeth. Except for the puffy cheeks and the enormous belly.

Melinda couldn't wait to waddle proudly like that.

"No arguments," she said. "You taking a break from goat-herding?"

"I gotta pee. Aren't those goat babies the cutest darn things you ever saw in your life?" She stroked her belly, following Austin with her eyes as he chatted with another group. "You're so lucky."

Melinda laughed. She *was* lucky.

"Despite our sad story?" The tale of losing their home had grown easier with the telling, though she kept it superficial. The saddest part was a burden for her and Austin alone.

"I mean, to have a guy like that. He loves you a lot, you know."

She said it with the melancholy of a woman whose luck had yet to land in such a spot.

"Leda, how old are you?"

"Twenty." Leda wrinkled her nose. "At least I escaped teen pregnancy, right?"

"No baby daddy, then?"

Leda shook her head. "I followed my stupid boyfriend to Marietta, but guess who found a better job the second I got here? He didn't want a baby. Didn't want me, either, I guess."

"I'm so sorry. That's a rough start." She touched the woman's shoulder with her gloved hand. "But don't give up on love, okay?"

Leda tucked her chin and wrinkled her nose. "I swear, I don't normally indulge in pity parties."

“You’re tired, it’s Christmas and you’re awash in hormones. I’d say you’re entitled. Just this once. Go in and take a break. You must be freezing.”

She thought for a moment about the health care team who would assist her. She’d attended normal, low-risk births at Jackson Park. But the moms usually had partners or coaches with them and honestly, there wasn’t much for the team to do. They were the “boring” cases and she thrived on the adrenaline.

But now she wondered. No tox-screens, no restraints, no social workers waiting in the wings. Just a strong, young mother and her normal, healthy newborn.

Had she been so hooked on the rush that she’d lost sight of the slow-blooming miracle that was also childbirth?

“What are you still doing out there in the cold,” said Leda, coming back out to the porch.

“Got distracted, I guess,” said Mel, joining her inside. “Feeling better?”

Leda shrugged. “It’s all relative, isn’t it. I dreamed last night I tried to blow a softball out of my nose and my face exploded. Kind of freaked me out.”

The laugh grabbed Melinda by surprise. “Now there’s one I haven’t heard. Believe me, honey, nothing’s going to explode. Now, it’s time for you to put your feet up.”



AUSTIN WATCHED HIS wife go inside the house with Leda. Her laughter rang out over the cold air and he smiled in response. She was back, Melinda, the woman he loved.

He wondered how they’d cope once they rejoined the rat-race, how they’d keep from getting sucked back into a life that had given them so much stuff, but so little value.

Another laugh, and then the door slammed shut against the cold. It was good for Mel to have people like Leda around

again. She thought she could hold herself apart because this wasn't their 'real' life, but she was wrong.

"Mr. Sweet?" said a little girl. "Is there really a bee that's a queen?"

He let the child take his hand and draw him into the honey shed.

"There most certainly is, young lady," he said. "Would you like to meet her?"

An hour or two later, when he'd answered the last question from the last child, he actually felt as if he was an expert. He waved goodbye and glanced around the yard, checking for stragglers.

But as the families left, he realized that they were left with a different group, the people who had nowhere else to be on Christmas Eve and were loath to exchange the warmth and good cheer for whatever awaited them at home.

He couldn't blame them, he thought, as he made for the house himself. A chill wind was picking up and the forecast was for heavy snow overnight.

He quickened his pace, eager to see if Mel had enjoyed herself as much as he had.

But as he approached the porch, he saw two familiar figures approaching the house.

His parents?

Here?

On Christmas Eve? He and Mel were looking forward to a visit with Delores, following the holidays. But Austin's parents celebrated with their snowbird friends.

He went to meet them, mentally preparing himself.

"Mom, Dad. Merry Christmas. I thought you were in Arizona!"

“Merry Christmas, sweetheart,” said his mom. She reached forward and drew him into a hug. “We were. Some friends invited us to go skiing at Big Sky. We thought we’d surprise you!”

“Mission accomplished, Mom.” He kissed her cheek soundly. No suggestion that they spend the holiday together, but it was good to see them, at least.

“Son,” said his dad. “Merry Christmas. It’s quite something, what you’ve done here. I’d forgotten all about the open house.”

Austin took the outstretched hand and returned the greeting. His dad’s smile looked as if it might crack with the cold.

“Can I take you on the Christmas tour?” he asked, taking his mom’s elbow. Her long white coat and high-heeled boots weren’t the best for trouncing around a farmyard.

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” she said. “But I’d love to see the house. I so admire these old estates, so much history.”

“We can’t stay long,” said Bill, ignoring his wife.

“Come in, have a mug of cider.” He put an arm around each of them and propelled them toward the door. “Say hi to Mel.”

They walked up the porch steps, where sparkling lights and glittering tinsel set off the new wood and fresh paint. As he ushered them through the door, pride nudged his cold lips into a smile.

Three slow-cookers simmered, the rich scent of apples and cinnamon adding to the fresh smell of pine from the enormous tree in the corner. All that junky old furniture had been polished and arranged in what Mel called ‘conversation hubs’ or something. Between the candles and old Bessie, the entire room had a cozy, time-gone-by Yuletide atmosphere.

It was perfect.

And there, in the sunroom stood Mel, his everything, his anchor, the missing piece to the puzzle of his life, deep in conversation with the pregnant girl.

Instantly, his nerves calmed.

He got his parents set up with a mug of cider each and a plate of Mel's shortbread cookies.

"Sit here and enjoy the fire. I'll get Melinda," he said, wishing his mom would stop brushing imaginary things off her coat. Wishing he'd put vodka in his dad's mug.

"Hey, honey," he said. "Hi, Leda. I hate to interrupt, but my parents are here."

Melinda's face dropped into confusion, followed by wariness.

"Your parents? Came here?"

They didn't know about the separation, which could probably stay a secret, or about the pregnancy, which would be shared, only when Mel was ready.

He took her by the arm but addressed the girl. "I promise to bring her right back, as long as you promise not to give us a live nativity scene here tonight."

Leda made a face. "I'll do my best! Go ahead, Mel. I'll watch the inventory while I enjoy my drink. The last thing I need is to pee more, but your cider is so delicious, I can't resist."

"That's nice of them to come all the way out here," said Mel. He watched her put on a welcoming smile, an armored faceplate he wished she didn't need. Then she walked ahead of him, shoulders straight, head high.

He was so proud of her, it hurt.

"Bill, Ducky," she said. She leaned in to hug them in turn, kissing Bill on the cheek. "Merry Christmas. Welcome to Sweet Montana Farms. What a wonderful surprise!"

“We had to see what our son has gotten up to out here in the sticks,” boomed Bill.

“It’s lovely, just lovely,” said Ducky. “It’s like a wonderland. And so many people! That’s one thing about our Austin, he makes friends wherever he goes, doesn’t he?”

“Mom and Dad are going skiing at Big Sky with some friends,” said Austin. “They stopped by to surprise us.”

“I’m so glad,” said Mel. “You’ll stay with us, I hope?”

Her grace never failed to amaze him.

“Goodness, dear,” said Ducky. “Aren’t you kind. But we’re staying in town.”

Of course they were. His mother didn’t sleep on anything less than 700-thread-count sheets.

“We’ve got a gift for you,” said Melinda.

She came back from the sunroom with an enormous wicker basket containing preserves, jars of honey with little wooden twirlers attached, biscotti and shortbread and all sorts of goodies. She handed it to Ducky with a warm smile, knowing full well that her mother-in-law wasn’t a made-with-love sort of person.

“Well, isn’t this darling,” said his mother. She fingered the packaging, as if unsure what to do with it. “All homemade, too, you clever thing. Bless your heart.”

Austin sucked in his breath, but Mel caught his eye. *Don’t.*

Bill took the basket from Ducky and put it on the floor without looking at it.

“I hope whatever your friend has is catching,” he said, gesturing toward Leda.

Leda smiled and gave a little wave, which Bill ignored.

Ducky leaned forward, her eyes bright. “Now that’s the Christmas gift we really want, dear!”

“Mom!”

He understood why Mel insisted they announce it the way they wanted, when they wanted. His parents had a way of co-opting things.

“It’s okay,” said Melinda, putting her hand on his arm. “I’m just giving advice, Ducky. Helps me not miss my job.”

Ducky’s face fell. “Oh.”

“Why would you miss handing out bedpans,” said Bill, “when you could be a mother?”

“Dad!” He had the sensitivity of a chainsaw. “Mel’s career is far more than that and you know it. Her choices are none of your business.”

“But it’s the perfect time and place, Austin!” said Ducky. “She’s not getting any younger-”

“She’s right here,” interrupted Mel. Twin spots of color sparked her cheeks. “And she’s had enough. You know nothing about me, what I want, what Austin and I have been through-”

Her voice shook and she stopped. Austin watched her pull herself together. “I’m sorry, I have to go. There are people waiting. Merry Christmas, Happy New Year and enjoy your skiing.”

Her jaw was set in a hard line and he felt waves of heat rippling off her. She returned to Leda without looking at him.

A log hissed and shifted inside the wood stove. Deliberately Austin turned his gaze to a pair of young women admiring the various gift bags Mel had made, smaller versions of the one at Bill’s feet.

Telling his parents about the baby would thrill them to no end, but doing it now would be like rewarding bad behavior. Maybe they’d invite them to the kid’s first birthday, tell them then.

Or maybe later. Like high school graduation.

The first time she'd miscarried, it happened before anyone knew about the pregnancy, and they'd been grateful to be spared the questions and explanations. They'd made it longer the second time, again keeping their excitement and then their grief, to themselves.

Even now, he knew his wife was afraid of jinxing things.

"You're both way out of line," he said, when he could speak.

"We just want you to be happy, Austin." Ducky put her hand on his knee. "It's hard to see you with someone who doesn't understand how important family is to you. I'm sorry, honey, but it seems selfish."

"Coming from you two? That's rich. You weren't even planning to see us until it happened to align with your ski trip."

"Now, now," said Bill. He flicked his hand as if the whole interaction was a mere annoyance. "We came here for a reason. I'll make this quick. I'm giving you the deed to the farm."

"Very funny."

But his father wasn't smiling. He pushed a thick envelope across the table. "Merry Christmas."

Austin stared at the envelope.

"You can't be serious."

"It's what your grandfather wanted."

It was exactly what Melinda predicted, that his parents would find a way to manipulate them into staying, fulfilling an inconvenient familial obligation that no one else would touch.

"It's such a small farm," said Ducky. "But your father's attached to it."

She took a sip of her apple cider and raised her eyebrows, as if surprised to find it delicious and Austin was suddenly reminded of her blue-blood, ultra-wealthy background.

Was that part of the problem? Bill had married above his station and Ducky's land-baron father had never let him forget it.

But this, Sweet Montana Farms, was Bill's property, his father's before him, and his father's father before that. It might not be much, but it was independent of Ducky's family or their money.

A husband provides for his wife.

Unless his in-laws get there first.

He felt a pang of sympathy for Bill Sweet, farmer's son-turned-accountant, never quite good enough for the debutante he fell for.

"It's very generous, Dad," he said, calmer now. "But Melinda and I will have to talk about it."

"What's to talk about?" said Bill. "It's a home. And after all..."

Beggars can't be choosers.

The unspoken message hung in the air between them.

And it was a generous gift, of course. Too generous.

"It's getting late, dear," said Ducky, glancing at her watch.

"I've already had my lawyers draw up the paperwork," continued Bill. "Come up to Big Sky, do a little skiing. We'll talk the details over then."

Mel didn't ski, as he'd explained to them both, several times.

"Dad, I'll discuss it with my wife, but we're more than happy to take our percentage of the proceeds when the farm sells."

"When it sells?" His father laughed. "In this market? I'm giving it to you, Austin, because I know you'll take care of it."

"But Dad, this isn't where we want to live. Melinda's looking forward to getting back to civilization. I'm sure you

can understand.”

Bill’s eyes narrowed. “I’m giving it to *you*, Austin.”

Whatever sympathy he’d felt disappeared. He clenched and unclenched his fists.

“That was not the deal, Dad.” He forced himself to speak slowly and evenly. “And the offer is to me and Melinda together. That’s how we make our decisions. As a team.”

He stood up abruptly, feeling his face twist.

“Until that offer has both our names on it, it’s meaningless. And even then, unless Mel convinces me she wants it, one hundred and ten percent, we’ll be respectfully declining. Now.” He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry *we* won’t have time to join you for skiing, but *we’ll* be busy all week.”

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Chapter Ten



“**T**HAT LOOKED INTENSE,” said Leda.

They’d sold several baskets within a few minutes but now there was a lull. Mel sat down with a fresh mug of cider, wishing she had better ability to hide her emotions.

“In-laws.” She attempted a light tone. Failed.

It looked like Austin was having the same problem. That spot at the back of her neck was aching again. Part of her wished he’d tell them off properly. The other part admired the respect he showed them.

Didn’t understand it, exactly. But it wasn’t her journey.

“Ooh.” The girl’s eyes sparkled with interest. “Don’t hate me, but it makes me feel better to hear that. You and Austin are so perfect-”

A bark of laughter escaped Mel’s mouth and she pressed a finger against her lips.

“Are you kidding? You’re so pretty, he’s so handsome, you’re so in love it’s sickening...Nice to see you’ve got the same problems as the rest of us.”

Mel tried not to see Leda’s frayed scarf and nails bitten down to the quick. Her clothes looked second-hand and there wasn’t a spec of make-up on that flawless skin.

“Schadenfreude, honey. Believe me, if you knew the extent of our misfortunes, you’d be delighted to no end.”

But who was she to make a claim on misery? Hardship was hardship. Everyone has their share and no one can take the measure of someone else’s Hell.

They were lucky to have each other. Despite everything.

“I should get going,” said Leda, easing herself up. “Give Mocha a juicy Christmas kiss for me.”

She frowned and put a hand to her belly.

An older gentleman at the door waved goodbye and Mel waved back. Leda’s hand didn’t move.

“Braxton Hicks?”

Leda made a face, still waiting for it to pass. “My OB told me they’d get stronger as my date arrived.”

Melinda let herself slip back into professional mode, braced for whatever bleakness might come with it. But to her surprise, all she felt was excitement.

“That’s right. Your uterus is warming up for the main event. How does baby react?”

“Still punching,” said Leda stroking her belly. “But would you mind copping a feel? Or is that too much like work? Or against regulations or something?”

“Too much like work?” Melinda laughed again. “Take off your coat.”

She glanced around the room quickly. There were still several people perusing the honey selection. The purple couch was behind a table laden with poinsettias; she rearranged them for a bit more privacy and pointed at Leda to lie down.

Looked like Austin’s parents were gone.

Thank goodness.

Leda’s frame was so slight, the pregnancy could have been a basketball shoved under her top. Melinda wondered if she was eating properly.

She pressed her hands onto the girl’s belly through her top, and a wave of what she could only describe as homesickness washed over her. How she missed this.

Mel thought about all the things that could go wrong, how fragile that tentative hold on life was and how incredible it was to hear that first cry.

She pressed gently against a hard knob and felt an answering bump. *Hi, baby.*

Exquisite sweetness tightened her throat, making it impossible to speak. She'd be feeling her own child move soon.

Please. Please.

"You felt that, right?" said Leda. "It's not as hard as it used to be. It's like instead of kickboxing, she's doing Tai Chi now."

Leda's good cheer pushed away the fear. "That sounds about right. There's no room in there for kickboxing anymore."

The head had dropped, good anterior presentation, baby was probably about six pounds. Reluctantly, she took her hands off and stepped back.

"Everything seems normal. But it's good to keep an eye on those kicks. We still want some movement, even if it's only Tai Chi."

"Got it."

"Leda?"

"Feels good to lie down, that's all." She took a deep breath, then opened her eyes and got to her feet. "I wish you worked in the Marietta hospital."

Maybe, thought Mel. Maybe.

They hugged awkwardly with the baby between them, and Melinda felt her tense up again.

"Another one? So soon?"

"Yeah. Why? Is that bad?"

"You probably just need to get off your feet." But Leda heard the hesitation in her voice.

She clutched at Mel's arm, her eyes wide. "It's too early! I don't even have a crib yet. My sister's not here until tomorrow."

Melinda eased out of her grip and walked to the porch to check the weather. Their visitors were hurrying to their cars and she could see why. The picturesque puffy flakes of earlier had grown heavier.

She took Leda's cold hands and squatted down beside her. "There's no one at home with you?"

"I thought I had time," said Leda in a small voice.

Good chance Leda's sister wouldn't be on the roads tomorrow.

"You probably do. But you can't drive yourself home, not that distance, not on snowy roads and certainly – am I making myself clear? – certainly not alone."

She looked around her at the disheveled room, wondering how she'd ended up responsible for a pregnant girl on Christmas Eve.

"I'll tell you what. You lie down in the spare room upstairs, see if things settle down. I'll finish up here. If you feel fine, I'll escort you home. If not, I'm driving you to the hospital."

Leda gave in reluctantly and trudged up the narrow stairs.

Melinda straightened her Sweet Montana apron and went back to her jams and jellies, where another lineup had formed.

"We need to get going," said the woman first in line, beckoning her over. "It's past the kids' bedtime."

"And the wind has really picked up, too," said the man behind her. "Everyone needs to get home, and stay home."

With their customers all eager to take their purchases and hit the road, it didn't take long for the farmhouse to empty out. Through the kitchen window, she thought she saw the lights on

the sheds blink out. Austin was closing up too. He was walking quickly, his shoulders hunched against the flurries.

Melinda turned on the overhead lights and quickly gathered up the cash; she'd sort through it tomorrow. She swiped a mop over their wooden floor to get rid of the snow melting into it, then went from room to room, blowing out candles.

Just as she hung up her apron, a pop sounded and everything went dark. No clock on the microwave, no humming from the refrigerator, the iPod speaker dock stopped singing Christmas carols and the only sound was the hiss and crackle of logs inside the cast-iron stove.

And one other sound. A faint moaning. Coming from upstairs.

Melinda ran.



AUSTIN SAW THE lights go out in the house. Instantly, it felt colder outside. He glanced behind him, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling. The world was a collage of black-on-black, deep and dark, the stars above the only break.

His father's 'gift' weighed on him like an anvil. He needed to tell Mel about it. He knew already what she would say, and he didn't blame her.

Maybe they should consider it, though. The numbers Chad had given him on previous years' performance told him that the farm could produce a decent living. Nothing like they'd had before, of course, when they had two incomes.

But look at how much better they were doing. He felt as if somehow this whole last year had been leading up to this. They'd drifted so far apart. Could that drift have grown into two separate paths?

Would she have come back to him, if she hadn't been pregnant?

He plodded through the snow, his chest and throat seared by the icy air and tight with emotion.

He'd nearly lost her. He realized that now. His Mel, his heart. His life.

How could he have not seen how unhappy she was? Or more likely, how had he convinced himself that it wasn't real? He hadn't wanted to face the truth and so, he hadn't. It was that simple.

No way he would let that happen again.

He reached the porch and thumped the snow off his boots, eager to get her into his arms again.

They'd evaluate the information, make an informed decision, together, regardless of his parents' desires. As long as he had his wife, he could face the future.

So, whatever she wanted, that's what they'd do.



“MY WATER BROKE,” gasped Leda, her eyes enormous in the flashlight beam. The light also picked up a shiny patch on the floor, dripping from the sheets.

“So I see. I have to examine you. Here. Hold the flashlight.” Her hands shook and they were freezing. It felt like the temperature in the house was dropping by the second.

Leda's hands gripped the sheets, but she relaxed one enough to take the light. There was no chance of getting her anywhere tonight. It was lucky, in fact, that she hadn't begun the drive home.

Mel shuddered, snapping on her latex gloves, glad that she always kept her medical kit stocked.

“Three centimeters dilated. We've got time. Don't know how much, though.”

“I'm scared,” said Leda.

Melinda heard the door slam downstairs. Austin was in.

“Up here, Oz,” she called.

His footsteps pounded up the stairs, but when he reached the doorway, he skidded to a stop.

“Surprise.” Leda shone the light over his face. “You know that nativity scene you mentioned earlier? This is your fault.”

“We can’t... you can’t... have you called the ambulance?”

“Phone’s dead. Way the snow’s coming, the road will be shut anyway.”

Leda cried out as another pain hit.

It was time to be a nurse again. She let her mind click into place, then began giving orders.

“We need to get her downstairs, Oz. It’s going to be freezing up here soon. We need blankets, we need lots of firewood, we need every candle and storm lantern you can find.”

It was a nerve-wracking trip down the staircase in the dark and Mel didn’t think she took a full breath until Leda was safely on the fainting couch, propped up with pillows.

“What else do you need?” he asked.

“Warm water, to clean off the baby. Towels.”

“No problem.”

“How are you doing, honey?” she said, wiping a strand of damp hair off Leda’s brow.

“Sorry to do this to you, Melinda.” She sounded near tears and gruff with embarrassment. “This isn’t how it was supposed to be.”

“Babies come when they come,” said Mel.

“At least we’re in good hands.” She gave a quavering laugh.

“That’s my girl. I’m going to take a listen to this little gal, okay?”

Mel put the stethoscope in her ears.

She was used to a well-equipped unit, full of sterile drapes and instruments, drugs galore, monitors, bright lights and stirrups. Nurses, aides, obstetricians, paediatricians.

A team.

How could she do this alone?

She thought of the fist-sized bump in her own belly. So much was depending on her.

The rush of Leda's pulse filled her ears, as well as the fainter, faster heartbeat whooshing beneath it. For a moment she let the sounds surround her, blocking out the thoughts scrambling in her head.

Just breathe. You've got this.

In and out. Just like you're going to coach Leda, shortly. In and out.

She forced her chest open, sucking in air, the only thing that would quell the panic.

And the fear receded.

"How's it going?" called Austin, cradling another load of firewood. The room glowed and flickered once more from the light of candles and fire. They had warmth. They had shelter. She knew what she was doing.

"Good," she said, smiling at Leda. "We're all good."

She was going to do this. And it was going to be fine.

She had Austin.



Hour after hour, Austin's admiration for his wife grew. He always thought he understood her occupation. Nurses take your temperature, they give you pills in those little paper cups, they write stuff in charts, that sort of thing. They help the doctors, who make the real decisions.

But watching Melinda work now was a revelation.

She was calm, in charge, thinking, aware of her patient's emotions and working constantly to ease the woman's anxiety.

It was like she'd donned her favorite coat, after setting it aside for a season, to find it was still the perfect size.

He'd enjoyed his work with Sweet and Morgan, no question. And he'd been good at it. But it had never been to him what this was to Melinda.

It was her passion.

She couldn't give that up. He couldn't ask that of her.

"You can come closer," said Leda, from the couch. "I haven't turned into a toad or anything."

"Oh," said Austin. He looked at Mel.

"Grab a seat," she said.

"Things are about to get juicy," added Leda.

He winced. "Not what I wanted to hear. At all."

So far, he'd kept himself busy with the fire, making cups of tea and honey and checking on the animals as the snow got deeper and deeper.

He sat gingerly on the chair positioned at Leda's head. "Should I do anything?"

"You could massage my shoulders." Leda grimaced. "Oh, here comes another one."

She grabbed his hand and squeezed hard.

"Youch!" he yelped.

"Don't be... a baby," said Leda, between breaths.

"You've got a grip like a lumberjack."

He repositioned the cushions behind her back. He could feel her shaking.

"I'm tougher... than I look."

“Oh yeah?” he said. “Next contraction, let’s see who blinks first, okay?”

“You got it, city boy.” She fell back against the cushions, her eyes closed.

“That’s good, Oz,” whispered Mel. “I’m going to be busy here. She needs someone to talk to, someone to hold onto.”

“You’re amazing,” he said. “I hope you know that.”

“Thanks,” gasped Leda. “You’re a man, so I hate you. Aaahh!”



LEDA’S LABOR PROGRESSED much faster than Melinda anticipated, especially for a first baby. She kept checking the baby’s heart rate with her stethoscope. A few late decelerations, but nothing too worrisome yet.

“You’re at eight centimeters,” she said. “Show time’s coming up.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” said Leda.

Austin held a bowl under her face, rubbed her back and cleaned her face with a warm, wet towel.

“Easy, girl,” he murmured, “you’re going to be okay.”

Mel’s beautiful husband had gathered every bath towel, every washcloth, every dishcloth and tea towel in the house and stacked them in a basket beside the fire. The rest of the house had gotten chilly enough to see your breath, but where they were, huddled together, it was toasty warm.

There was hot water on the stove, to give the baby a quick clean up, when she arrived. They were as ready as they could be.

Melinda had often imagined the kind of father Austin would be. He’d be the guy who’d swing them by their heels to make them squeal. He’d carry them on his shoulders and push them on the swings, toss them into the pool, roll down grassy hills with them.

He would do the fun stuff, because that's who Oz was.

It was harder to see him changing diapers or walking a colicky infant hour after hour or cleaning spit-up off his tie.

But here he sat, wiping the brow of a woman he barely knew, holding her while she retched, joking and teasing to keep her mind off the pain, as the wind howled around them and the night stretched toward dawn.

"It hurts," moaned Leda. "It hurts so much. I can't do this anymore. Make it stop."

Her voice rose as another contraction rolled over her and there it was, the first glimpse of the baby's head.

Mel slid closer, spreading her towel-draped knees, holding her hands, ready, so ready.

But what if...? Her arms shook. It was all down to her.

"You're doing great, sweetheart." Austin's voice penetrated, and for a moment, it seemed that he was talking to her. "Hang in there. You can do this. You're almost done. Come on, it's time to meet this baby, okay?"

He was talking to Leda, but then he looked over the mound of blankets, straight into Mel's eyes.

"You got this, baby," he murmured, with such a smile of confidence, her fears disappeared.

"Thank you," she mouthed, her throat tight with gratitude.

"Something's happening," cried Leda. She sat up and a deep groan came from her throat.

"She's crowning," said Mel. "It's time to push."

"No shit," roared the tiny mother-to-be.

She cursed wildly, hollering out in vivid detail the suffering she wished upon the absentee father of her child.

Mel was glad for the noise. It kept her from thinking about catching the child.

She looked at the thick layer of towels beneath Leda, the flannel sheets folded on her lap, the pile beside her, all ready to enfold the slippery little bundle as she emerged.

“She’s got brown hair,” she called.

“I don’t care!” yelled Leda. “Get that... sucker out of me...before I split apart... like a tomato!”

Melinda cradled the baby’s head securely, wiping her little face, clearing her airway. She checked for the cord – not noosed around her neck, thank goodness.

She heard Austin crooning words of encouragement and it didn’t matter if they were for Leda or her or himself.

With a whoosh of fluid and a final howl from Leda, the infant slipped free, directly into Mel’s waiting arms and the protection of the thick, fire-warmed towel.

“Is that it?” said Leda, lying back against Austin’s arms. “Is it over? Is she here?”

“She’s here,” said Mel softly. “She’s here and she’s perfect.”

She tucked the mewling child under the blanket, right next to Leda’s heart. “Time to meet your mama, little one.”

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Chapter Eleven



BY THE TIME the power returned on Christmas morning, the sun was bright-white and bone cold. Sun-dogs stood sentry on either side. Chad had come over by snowmobile to check on them and, after he got over the shock of Leda's baby, he got out his plow and cleared their driveway so they could get out.

Melinda packed mother and child into Leda's SUV and drove them to the hospital. Austin had to do a quick check on the animals, then he'd follow them in his truck.

He stopped by the kitchen to get his keys and saw the envelope still lying on the table. In the chaos of the night, he'd forgotten all about it. He picked it up. The papers inside were bunched awkwardly, as if they'd been folded hastily.

Had Melinda seen it? She'd been busy with Leda all night. And even if she had, she knew Austin wouldn't accept something like that. Not without discussing it with her.

He stuffed it into his jacket pocket and headed out to feed the goats.

He and his wife would make that decision together and together, they would tell his parents.

Melinda knew that, right?



"MY CHRISTMAS BABY," said Leda. "My little Christmas miracle."

Melinda glanced at the rear-view window, watching the duo coo at each other.

She should be exhausted, but instead, she was exhilarated.

“Merry Christmas,” she said to Leda.

“Got that right. You, Melinda Sweet, are officially my hero.”

Mel laughed. “Endorphins are great, aren’t they?”

Behind them, Sweet Montana Farms grew smaller and smaller.

Was it just the brilliance of the day, or the hormones, or was it a lot prettier now than it had been when they arrived?

Did she really want to return to the crazed life they’d led before? She and Austin were closer now than they’d been in months. Maybe years.

They had their own baby on the way.

That’s what mattered.

She thought of the hurt he tried to hide all those nights when she’d slept on the couch instead of going to him. Intentionally or not, she’d made him suffer along with her.

She never stopped loving him, even when they were apart, but did he know that?

Through everything, she’d never doubted Austin’s love. It was there in every word he said, every gesture he made. She thought of the envelope she’d seen on the table. He hadn’t told her about it, but there hadn’t exactly been time.

But what if he didn’t intend to mention it? Sweet Montana Farms was not what she wanted; it never had been. He knew that. It would be just like Austin to refuse the gift without a second thought, to sacrifice his own happiness, without even telling her, to spare her the guilt.

They pulled into the emergency room drop off bay and she set aside her thoughts.

“Here we go, baby girl,” said Leda in the back seat.

Their arrival caused something of an uproar, with the general opinion being that Leda’s baby was a miracle. Mel

hung back as caregivers surrounded them, acutely aware that she had no role here.

The camaraderie underlying their brisk actions made her ache.

“Okay, we’re good to go.” The young man in green scrubs touched Mel’s shoulder. Dex, according to his name tag. “Sorry, family only while we check her out. But I’ll show you where to wait.”

“Oh,” she said, stepping back further. “Of course.”

“You dunce,” said Leda. “She’s my sister. Cousin! She’s my cousin.”

She reached out and grabbed Mel’s sleeve, causing the gurney to wobble. White coats flurried to settle it.

“My mistake, ladies.” Dex looked from blonde-and-blue to olive-and-brown. “The resemblance is uncanny.”

Mel’s eyes filled. What a night. What a place.

“Sorry, honey.” She hugged the new mom, kissed the baby’s fragrant head. “I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

“You’re the worst cousin in the world.”

“Tell Austin to meet me at the hotel.”

She sprinted to her car. There were things to do and no time to lose.

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Chapter Twelve



IT TOOK AUSTIN some serious sweet-talking before he was allowed in to see Leda and her baby and when he got there, Melinda was nowhere to be seen.

“Everything okay?” he asked, once he found them.

“We’re perfect, both of us.” She beamed up at him. “Melinda did such a great job, my OB said I don’t even need stitches!”

“Whoa,” he said, backing away. “I’m here to get her. Where is she?”

“Oh, yeah. She said to meet her at the hotel. Why?”

“The Graff?”

“Yeah.” The baby started grizzling and Leda tugged at her top.

“Breastfeeding is trickier than you’d think,” she said. “Fortunately, I’ve got small nipples-”

“I’ve gotta go.” He whirled around and dashed for the elevators.

“What’s the matter? Austin?” she called behind him, but he didn’t bother answering.

What could Melinda possibly want with his parents?

He drove as fast as he dared, grateful that the streets of Marietta were empty and it wasn’t far. Grateful that the snow removers had been out early.

The cheerful decorations adorning the lamp standards waved to him as he rushed past. When he got to the hotel, he

left his truck in guest parking and ran inside.

He skidded to a stop, nearly slipping on the wet tile.

“Hey,” said Mel.

She was sitting on an elegantly tooled metal bench, her hands folded in her lap. He couldn’t tell what was going through her mind.

He sat beside her and covered her hands with his.

“Mel,” he said. “I have to tell you something.”

She dipped her head at him, smiling gently. “It’s okay, Oz. I saw the envelope. I know your dad’s giving you the farm.”

“Aw, Mel.” His heart dropped. “I meant to tell you. They only told me last night and then the power went out and we were busy with Leda and-”

“I know.”

When Melinda went to stay with her mother instead of following him to Sweet Montana Farms, he hadn’t seen it coming. He should have, but he chose to ignore the signs. When she called to say that it would be best if they had some time apart, he didn’t believe it. That she’d been trying to tell him how unhappy she was, but he refused to listen.

He wouldn’t let that happen again.

“Mel, I won’t let them decide our future for us. It’s you and me. Okay? Together?”

His eyes felt hot.

“I’m not worried about that, Austin. Not anymore.” She shifted on the bench so she could face him. “But family is family. I’ve been polite to your parents but I’ve always kept them at arms’ length. I’ve been glad that we don’t see much of them and that’s wrong of me.”

“No! If anyone’s in the wrong, it’s Mom and Dad. And me.”

She leaned forward and this time, she was smiling, tearfully. “I’m into my second trimester now. I think we should tell them about the baby. It will make them so happy. My mom knows, so it’s only fair.”

“But what if-”

Mel looked down at her hands.

“Even then, we shouldn’t bear it alone. I love you so much, Austin Sweet. I’m not afraid of what life has in store for us. And it’s time I started showing it.”



AUSTIN BRUSHED PAST the tastefully decorated tree, but the hostess – who had she pissed off to get put on Christmas? – caught up to them.

“Happy Holidays, sir. May I help you?”

“We’re looking for someone.”

The few people who were left lingering over their coffee and dessert looked up. Bill and Ducky were at a corner table, oblivious.

“Found them. Thanks.”

“Austin,” said Ducky, looking up in surprise.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Merry Christmas, Ducky,” said Melinda. “Merry Christmas, Bill. Where are your friends?”

The table, noted Austin, had been set for only two.

Color rose in Ducky’s carefully powdered cheeks.

“They, uh,” said Bill, pushing his plate aside. “Turns out their kids are at Big Sky.”

“We didn’t want to intrude,” said Ducky. She was blinking too fast. Neither of them seemed to know where to put their hands.

“May we sit?” asked Mel.

Before they had a chance to object, she pulled a chair closer to Ducky and sat down.

“I wanted to apologize,” she said.

“Don’t Mel,” he interrupted. “They’re the ones who should apologize.”

His mother’s eyes were like saucers, the color in her cheeks now gone, leaving them ashen.

Bill pointed to a chair. “Sit down, son. Don’t make a scene.”

“We don’t hold anything against Melinda.” Ducky’s voice was a little too high, her words a little too fast. “We understand the stress she’s been under. There’s no need to dwell on it.”

“It’s you, Mother,” said Austin, “who needs to make amends. You’ve been rude and thoughtless to Melinda as long as I can remember and I’ve had enough.”

“Oz,” said Melinda. “Not like this.”

An alarming shade of purple rose in Bill’s already-ruddy cheeks. He half-rose to his feet and poked a fat finger at Austin’s face. “Listen to your wife, boy.”

Time slowed then, as something unfamiliar, dangerous, yet strangely irresistible rose within him, like heavy clouds over parched hills. You know the rain will bring lightning strikes, but you welcome it anyway. Better the snap of fire than another endless day of drought.

Austin grabbed the finger, hearing the rumble of thunder in his ears. The arc ran through him, razor-sharp and furnace-hot.

“I love you, Dad. But I swear to God, if you say another word, I’ll snap that finger clean off.”

“Austin!”

Melinda touched his face, made him look at her. The calm in her eyes pulled him back, just enough to peel his fist off Bill’s hand.

The man dropped back heavily into his chair, breathing hard.

Conversations around them had grown silent and he was dimly aware that management was gathering. He'd probably be thrown out soon.

He braced his hands on the chair arms, leaning over his father, staring into his eyes and for the first time, Austin saw fear in them.

"You offered us a soft landing when we needed one and I'm grateful for that. But you lied to me from the start and Melinda knew it."

"It doesn't matter anymore," said Melinda.

"Neither of you have ever treated Melinda right and bad on me for allowing it. A husband takes care of his wife. That's what love is."

He pulled back then, feeling the heat thrumming in his ears. His arms were shaking.

"And," said Melinda, her eyes shining on him, "a wife takes care of her husband."

Ducky was crying silently, her hands pressed to her mouth. His father was breathing heavily, cowering into the chair.

The anger was gone and melancholy took its place. He'd made his mother cry. On Christmas.

"Mom, try to understand. Melinda is my life. If you make me choose between you or her, you'll see my dust before the words are out of your mouth. She is my family."

"We're all family." Mel reached across to clasp both his parents' hands in hers. "We can do better. I'm willing to try. Regardless of where we end up, or what we do, we appreciate your support. Bill, your offer of the farm means a lot to Austin. Ducky, I know it's a little rustic for you, but would you have Christmas dinner with us tonight?"

Ducky's eyes flew to her husband's. "I don't know... the Thompsons..."

"Oh, give it up, Ducky." Bill kept his hands safely under the table.

Ducky noticed. She observed her husband thoughtfully for a moment before coming to a conclusion.

She took a breath, collected herself, and addressed her daughter-in-law.

"I'm so sorry, Melinda. Dropping by unannounced last night was terribly rude. It's just... well." Her chin quivered and she looked down as she fought for control. "We didn't want to spend the holidays alone. We miss our son."

Austin's jaw tightened.

Ducky lifted her head and smiled softly into Melinda's eyes. "And it's time I got to know my daughter."

"Oh," squeaked a woman at a neighboring table. Then she immediately flushed red and put her hand over her mouth.

Austin was dumbstruck. He stared at his mother, then his wife, then blinked and shook his head.

"I'd like that," said Melinda.

She and Austin stood up.

"Come anytime," said Melinda. "We're roasting a honey-brined turkey. And, oh!"

She turned to Austin as if she'd just thought of it.

"We have a surprise for you. Don't be late!"

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Chapter Thirteen



THEY BUMPED OVER the little bridge that led to their turnoff. The wind of the night before was gone. Enough snow had fallen since then that every tree limb and fence post glittered with a fluffy layer.

“It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas,” said Mel.

Austin reached over the console and took her hand.

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

“Hm,” she said. “Don’t think I’ve heard that one. Or maybe it’s a movie? Or a book?”

“Ah-amazing Mel,” he sang. “How Sweet her love.”

They pulled into the yard and he turned off the car.

“Sweetheart,” he said, taking her hands in his. “You are the bravest, kindest, smartest woman I’ve ever known. I’m so lucky to have you.”

She shrugged playfully but her eyes were full of tears. “I’m a crabby, tired pregnant woman who’s about to start cooking a turkey. Let’s see how you feel about me in an hour.”

“What you said to my parents, Mel.” He stopped, as if he couldn’t find the right words. “You’re first in my life. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“But letting them in like that, on your terms, Mel-”

She pressed her finger against his lips. “I should have done it years ago.”

He pulled away. “About the farm-”

Again, she stopped him. “There’s no rush. Whether we live here or we go somewhere else doesn’t matter. As long as we’re together. As long as we’re a family.”

“Aaa-rooo.” Jackson stepped slowly off the porch where he’d been waiting.

“But you know,” she added, “moving is a lot of stress on an old dog. It wouldn’t be fair to him.”

Austin’s whole face twinkled like a Christmas wreath. “Now you’re talking crazy. Come on, girl. Let’s go inside. I want to give you your present before my parents get here.”

Mel gasped. “We agreed!”

“I lied.”

She stepped out, the cold air refreshing on her hot cheeks.

Once inside the house, he busied himself lighting candles and getting the Christmas carols playing on the iPod again.

She waited with her arms crossed, knowing that there was nothing he could give her that could make her happier than she already was.

Finally, he turned to her with that grin she so loved and handed her a small box.

“I hope you didn’t spend too much.”

She thought of the surprise she had for him, later.

“Even better. I didn’t pay a cent for it.”

She undid the ribbon and peeled off the paper taped around it and lifted the lid.

Her breath caught in her throat. Inside, nestled on a square of white cotton batting was a Christmas tree ornament, a silver star, glittery lines of glue showing where the cracks had been.

“Is this... oh, Oz... this is my grandmother’s ornament.”

He nodded.

“But how did you... what made you think of fixing it for me?”

He shrugged. “I saw it when I got out the decorations. You’ve had it forever. Each year you take it out, open the lid and look at it. Then you cover it up and put it away.”

She lifted it out, very carefully, by the metal hanger by which it would hang from the tree. She ran her finger over the delicate silver swirls, the sparkling lines, the glittery edges.

Her throat was tight and the back of her eyes stung. She knew her grandmother was smiling down on her with approval.

“It’s beautiful, Austin,” she whispered. “But how did you do it? I don’t even know if all the pieces were there.”

Again, he shrugged it off, as if it was no big deal. “Contrary to popular opinion, guys can use glue guns. It wasn’t as badly broken as you thought it was. I spread it all out on the table one night in the honey shed, where I knew you wouldn’t see it and it just worked.”

He took the star from her hand and gently replaced it in the box.

“It was something precious to you,” he said. His eyes were glistening. “And you saved it. You didn’t know how to fix it, but you refused to let it go. It took some work, on my part and it’ll always have some scars. But I think it’s more precious than ever. What about you?”

“I think I love you.” She cleared her throat. “There’s another thing I kept.”

His eyes darkened. “Do tell.”

She pulled him close. “Do you happen to remember that little black teddy you bought me, way back when?”

“And they say hoarding is a bad thing.” He nuzzled her neck. “You gonna model it for me?”

“Might look a little funny, with Junior and all.”

“You’ll be even more beautiful.”

He tugged her toward the stairs but she held back.

“Patience. Your parents will be here any time. We’ve got a lot to do.”

“PB & J sandwiches don’t take long. They’re traditional too, right?”

Go Tell It On The Mountain began playing on the iPod.

She pulled him away from the stairs and began swaying with him to the music.

So much to be thankful for.

“You know what this is?” said Melinda, sweeping an arm around them. “It’s A Wonderful Life, a Miracle on 34th Street and The Gift of the Magi, all rolled into one.”

Austin twirled her into a dip, then kissed her until she couldn’t breathe.

“This,” he said, “is a Sweet Montana Christmas.”

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Epilogue



“I THINK IT’S great if the woman is older,” called Leda, lying on her stomach on the grass. Five-month old Hera lolled drunkenly against a pillow, and kicked at Jackson. The old dog – who looked much younger these days – lay on the picnic blanket, gazing adoringly at the baby.

“I’m definitely looking for someone younger than me,” the girl added.

It would be too hot outside for the babies once summer hit, thought Melinda, but now, in spring, it was perfect.

“She’s never allowed to babysit our son again,” said Austin. He sat on the porch beside Melinda’s rocking chair, whittling. Very badly. He had this idea that whittling would be a good thing to teach his son.

“I’ll get a restraining order if I have to,” he added.

As would she if he got any closer to their precious boy with that knife.

Melinda looked down at Abel, gurgling at her breast. “She’s talking about the kids.”

Scrape, scrape.

“Arranged marriage, huh?”

“Go for it,” called a voice from the kitchen. “Regular marriage isn’t tracking so hot.”

Mel smiled. Turns out new motherhood was a pretty sweet deal. Her mom, Delores the love-sceptic, was inside chopping vegetables for supper.

“Your experience with Melinda’s father has made you cynical, Delores.”

Ducky came out to the porch with a bowl of cut-up celery and carrots. A regular store-bought miracle, what becoming a grandmother had done for Austin’s pressed and polished mom. And instead of becoming rivals, she and Delores had become friends. Baby-sharing, soup-making, dish-washing friends.

The mind boggled.

“You’re rocking the apron look, Granny,” said Austin, taking the plate. “We need a picture.”

Ducky lifted her chin. “Thank you, son.”

Scrape, scrape, chunk.

The knife slipped and Austin almost dropped it. “I’m fine! See? No blood.”

“You never, ever, try to catch a knife,” Mel said. “How many times do I have to patch you up?”

“See?” said Leda. “He doesn’t listen. He’s older than you, isn’t he?”

“When’s Dad getting here?” asked Austin.

“Oh, in good time, I’m sure,” said Ducky, somewhat mysteriously.

Austin and Bill were coming to terms about Sweet Montana Farms, starting off with Austin’s insistence that any paperwork had both his and Melinda’s name on it. That was non-negotiable.

It could be the hormones, but Mel still got teary, thinking about it.

The ownership details hadn’t been decided yet. She and Austin had agreed that they needed more time, that they should have a full year on the farm before they could fully judge it. But she’d already decided that she’d never part with the goats, especially little Mocha, and there weren’t a lot of goat-friendly rentals out there.

Being in business with family was always a risk, they knew that. But staying away from family carried a cost as well.

Melinda looked around her, at Leda babbling with her daughter, at her handsome husband valiantly attempting something new, never afraid to fail. At the mothers chattering over the sink.

At her father-in-law as he drove onto the yard, his fancy car splashed with mud.

At the delivery truck that followed him onto the yard and then out to the honey shed.

“What’s that, Dad?” asked Austin.

“Equipment delivery,” said Bill, waving to the driver. “If we’re going to get the production really going, we need to replace those old hive boxes. Your extractor is old too. All sort of things.”

“Didn’t exactly need a big truck for that,” commented Leda.

The driver turned the truck around, then backed it up to the kitchen door.

Melinda looked at Ducky, who was trying to hide a smile. Delores looked innocent.

The delivery men brought out a big square item and crab-walked it to the door.

“Need a proper kitchen stove to cook all those jams, right, Melinda?” said Bill.

“Your shortbread was marvelous already,” said Ducky. “Imagine how good it will be with a reliable oven.”

“Even if you don’t stay permanently,” added Bill, hastily, seeing Austin’s face. “Whoever takes over needs proper equipment. I’m investing in the business. Nothing more.”

Then Melinda saw the last item.

“That’s not a business expense,” she said. She stood up and carefully handed Abel to Ducky.

She looked into the main room, then stepped off the porch. She hadn’t even noticed it was gone, with all the activity.

“We hope you like it,” said Ducky, brushing her lips against Abel’s downy head. “We tried to match everything to the original.”

“No strings attached,” said Bill, gruffly.

He lifted a corner of the protective packaging. It was the purple fainting couch. Reupholstered, refinished, solid, fresh, beautiful.

“Hera and I kind of messed up the original fabric,” said Leda, cheerfully.

Mel touched it. The wood was warm, as if it was alive.

“For me?” she said.

“We asked Austin what we could do that would be special,” said Ducky.

“Do you like it?” asked Austin. “I know you talked about refinishing it yourself.”

Melinda laughed, and tears filled her eyes.

“I love it! This is so thoughtful. I can’t believe it!”

“Then let’s get it inside where it belongs.” Bill gestured to the workmen and within moments it was sitting in pride of place.

Melinda sat down. Then she beckoned Austin. Ducky put Abel into her arms.

“There’s your picture,” she said, nodding with satisfaction.

She aimed her phone at them and snapped several quick shots.

“Hey, wait,” called Melinda to the delivery driver. She gave him Austin’s phone. “We need another picture.”

She stood Bill, Ducky and Delores behind the couch. With Austin on one side of her, Leda and Hera on the other, and her darling Abel in her arms, it was the perfect picture.

“Now,” said Melinda. “No one smile.”

“What?” said Delores.

“No smiling!” said Melinda. “Look stern, everyone.”

“Got it,” said the driver.

Austin looked at the shot. “Perfect. Okay, everyone can smile again.”

He kissed her. “Our American Gothic.”

“Sweet Montana Farms style.” And she kissed him back.

The End

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About the Author



Born under a Scorpio moon, raised in a little house on the prairie, **Roxanne Snopek** said “as you wish” to her Alpha Farm Boy and followed him to the mountain air and ocean breezes of British Columbia. There, while healing creatures great and small and raising three warrior-princesses, they found their real-life happily-ever-after. After also establishing a successful freelance and non-fiction career, Roxanne began writing what she most loved to read: romance. Her small-town stories quickly became fan favorites; print editions of her latest series were recently launched in France.

Roxanne’s personal heroine’s journey contains many on-going but basic lessons: introversion isn’t fatal; creativity is essential; and you always get lost coming out of the Vancouver airport. Accept it. Oh, and never, ever leave home without a book.

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