



*Valentina's*  
MONSTER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
EVE LONDON

# VALENTINA'S MANSTER

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MAKE A MANSTER

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Make a Manster

Also by Eve London

About the Author

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Dear Reader,

Thanks for grabbing your copy of Valentina's Manster! I can't wait for you to meet Valentina and Jameson. If you love their story and want to read more about Mama Mae's boys, check out my One Night Series [here](#) or my Bachelors of Broken Bend Series [here](#)!

Make sure you don't miss out on any of my new releases by signing up for my newsletter [here](#). You'll get a free instalove story when you do!

SWAK!

Eve

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## **Valentina's Manster**

**There's no harm in casting a little love spell... at least not until a tall, rugged cowboy shows up.**

### **Valentina**

Love doesn't exist. At least that's what I keep telling myself. As a personal assistant to one of the most successful divorce attorneys in Houston, I should know. So I play along with casting a love spell during a girls' weekend away. There's no chance of me meeting the man of my dreams, especially when I've come up with the most ridiculous list of requirements I can imagine.

### **Jameson**

I knew someday I'd find love. I just never thought it would be at the business end of my shotgun. When I catch a curvy goddess trespassing on my land, there's no doubt in my mind she's lying. There's only one thing I know for sure. She's the woman I've been waiting for, and if I can't convince her she's meant to be mine, I'll lose her forever.

*You've Built a Bear, but have you ever Made a Manster? When 15 girlfriends spend a spooky weekend getaway in Manitou Springs, Colorado, they conjure up their perfect partner, but never expect to actually meet them.*

*This Halloween, join our heroines as they manifest the man of their dreams using a little earth magick, margarita mix, and Goddess blessings.*

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# PROLOGUE

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We're gathered in my friend Clarissa's kitchen—laughing, eating, drinking, and enjoying each other's company on the last night of our girls' weekend. We've had an amazing time christening her newly inherited eight-room B&B in Manitou Springs, Colorado. The occult is strong in this tiny community and Halloween is its favorite time of the year. It's my favorite time of year too, which made it the perfect weekend to visit.

Last night, we watched witchy movies, had our tarot cards and palms read, and enjoyed midnight margaritas. Today, we spent the afternoon at the Emma Crawford festival, had dinner at the Loop including even more margaritas, and then attended a twilight seance at the cemetery where guides told local ghost stories. I was appropriately spooked, but it was all in good fun.

“Ladies, I have the perfect way to end this magical weekend.” Clarissa grabbed our attention by handing each of us a notecard and a pen. “I want you to write all the characteristics of your perfect man. Physical, mental, spiritual. Be as specific as you can, but here's the deal. Even if you have someone in mind—an old crush you've harbored for years—you cannot write his name or any detail that singles him out. For example: If David from high school has nine toes and is the only mechanic in town, you cannot write David with nine toes who fixes my car. Doing so violates his free will and would come back negatively on you tenfold.”

Some women cackle at the idea of nine toes. I'm not one of them. There are more important body parts as far as I'm

concerned... like a heart and a brain.

“What are we doing, Clarissa?”

She smiled and grabbed a bundle of sage and sweetgrass from a drawer. “We’re casting a love spell to bring the perfect man into our lives.”

I immediately scoffed. This time she’d gone too far.

“Really?” Sabrina asked.

Leonora laughed. “That’s awesome!”

“Hell, yeah!” Luna yelled.

“I love this idea.” Tricia took her pen and started to make quick notes on her piece of paper.

“Will it work?” Stella eyeballed Clarissa with a healthy dose of skepticism. I don’t blame her for doubting the effectiveness of a spell Clarissa probably made up over a pitcher of margaritas.

“Of course, it’ll work,” Clarissa promised. “All you have to do is open yourself to the possibility of receiving love.”

I wasn’t going to ruin the evening for everyone else, but there was no way I was going to participate. The last thing I wanted to do was find love. After watching my mother sacrifice everything for men who only wanted what they could get from her, I vowed I’d never let myself get swept up in fake emotion based on some bio-chemical reaction. Love wasn’t real. It was just a surge of dopamine.

Clarissa came around like she was checking our progress. I didn’t want her to call me out, so I scribbled a few things down—characteristics that would never occur in the same man.

- He’ll own a castle
- He’ll have one red eye
- He’ll have a heart-shaped purple mark on his ass
- He’ll love to drink hot tea

Maybe I was getting way too much pleasure from putting together such a ridiculous list. Everyone else was wrapping up. I quickly scribbled down a few more items just to make sure such a man couldn't exist.

- He'll have a pet peacock
- He'll know how to speak Latin

Oh, and I may as well make him attractive if he was going to try to win my heart.

- He'll be tall and gorgeous, with a full head of hair and have the most magnificent cock I've ever seen

There. That should do it. There wasn't a chance in hell of a man possessing all of those attributes showing up to sweep me off my feet.

One by one, we made our way to the garden where the fire pit we sat around last night burned with a hint of sweet sage. Clarissa handed each of us a pink candle, instructing us to stand in a circle around the pit and hold the candle in our right hand, the notecard in our left. Then she walked around the circle with a bottle in her hand and placed one drop of oil on each of our cards.

"What's this?" Sabrina asked.

"Ylang-ylang oil," Clarissa said. She set that bottle down and grabbed a second bottle, giggling as she walked up to Melinda. "I'm not going to ask everyone to get topless, even though most of us have seen each other at least partially naked, but if you don't want to get oil on your shirt, move it aside so I can mark your heart. This is rosewood oil, and it's great for your skin as well as incantations."

Clarissa turned the bottle with her thumb over the opening, and then pressed the digit against Melinda's forehead, throat, and heart. "Mind, body, and spirit align, let love be thine."

She moved to the next person, and the next, until she's marked everyone. I had to force myself not to smirk when she

pressed the oil onto my skin. At least I'd smell good while I was casting a fake spell. Then she marked herself, put the bottle down, grabbed her card and candle, and smiled.

“Everyone ready?” Clarissa shook her hair, her whole body really, like she was trying to loosen every part of her up. “Relax and open yourself up to receive the Goddess’ blessings. Envision your perfect mate. What do they look like? How do they talk and carry themselves? See the quirk of their lips when they smile, or the glimmer in their eye when they look at you. Hold on to that image as I ask for our blessings. You don’t have to say anything until the end, when you respond with ‘so mote it be’.”

My heart pounded as I conjured up an image of the mystery man with the red eye, heart-shaped mark, and majestic appendage. All I could see was a blurry image of a tall man standing in the shadows with some sort of hat on his head. Great. I was summoning the boogeyman, or maybe even the grim reaper.

I rolled my eyes then focused on Clarissa, who was getting way into her performance.

“Goddesses of the north, south, east, and west,  
Bestow your blessings, your power best.  
Fires of passion,  
Waters of our hearts,  
Winds of love,  
To us, will you impart?  
Bring us our soulmates, for this we plea.  
With open minds and pure hearts, we implore.  
So mote it be.”

Someone murmured “so mote it be,” so I said the words, holding onto the blurry, dark image in my head.

“Now, carefully dip your candle into the flames, and when it catches, drip the pink wax onto your card,” Clarissa said. “Once you have seven drops, release your request into the

Goddess' care by dropping the card into the fire. Blow out the candle when you are done, but do not break it. I'm going to have you take it home."

I did what she said, expecting the wind to howl or the fire to extinguish itself when we were done.

Nothing happened.

That moment confirmed what I'd known all along.

Love was for suckers. It wasn't meant for me.

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## VALENTINA

I rummaged around in my purse, searching for something to relieve the pounding in my head, as I rode up in the elevator on Monday morning. My fingers brushed against a bottle of pain pills. After missing my connection yesterday afternoon, I didn't make it back to Houston until well past midnight. Lack of sleep, too much alcohol, and not drinking enough water over the weekend had left me tired, cranky, and wanting to call in sick for work this morning. I should have known I'd need a day to recover after a weekend with the girls.

I popped open the bottle and shook two pills into my palm then tossed them back with a swallow of my pumpkin spice latte. The new receptionist waved as I pushed through the glass doors to the law office where I'd worked for the past five years. That used to be my seat, but I'd been moving up through the ranks. I waved back and headed to my desk outside one of the senior partner's offices.

Michelle saw me slide my coat off my shoulders and motioned me into her office.

"Good morning. Did you have a good weekend?" I asked.

Something wasn't right. Her hair was usually swept off her face in a tight chignon, but today it hung loosely over her shoulders. Dark marks smudged her cheeks like she'd been crying and tried to wipe away her mascara.

"Valentina, I'm so glad you're here. I need a huge favor." She shut the door behind me and ushered me to a chair in front

of her huge desk.

“What’s wrong?” She was usually calm, cool, and collected—exuding the kind of lady-boss energy I want to possess someday. I perched on the edge of my seat, waiting for her to tell me someone had died or been in a major car crash, or even that we lost one of our largest clients.

“It’s Victor. I think he’s cheating on me.” Her hand gripped mine.

I wanted to shake my head. She’d been a divorce attorney for twenty years, and knew how a sneaking suspicion could make a person lose sight of reality. One of the best and highest paid divorce attorneys in the greater Houston area.

Instead, I leaned forward and squeezed her hand. “What makes you think that?”

“He’s been so secretive lately. Then yesterday, I overheard him on the phone. He’s meeting her for a trail ride at some stable this afternoon. I need you to go and take pictures. If he’s cheating on me, I’m going to put him through the wringer.”

“Whoa. I’m all for putting in extra effort around the office, but I don’t do fieldwork.” We had plenty of professionals for that. Men and women who’d chosen to make a living by capturing and immortalizing the infidelity of strangers.

“I can’t call one of our regular contractors.” Michelle’s lower lids brimmed with tears. “Word would get out, and he’d know I was checking up on him.”

Maybe she should have thought of that before she married another successful divorce attorney. Still, there had to be another way. “Can’t you look at his phone? Dig through his suit jacket for receipts?”

Her lips pursed. “Give me some credit. I’ve already done that. He’s hiding something. I just know it.”

“How do you expect me to get close enough for a photo if he’s going on a trail ride? I’m not getting on a horse, and I don’t have professional equipment.” Most of the contractors we worked with had a huge collection of lenses. I’d seen them myself when they came into the office to show us

incriminating evidence they'd captured involving our clients or their almost-ex spouses.

"I'll buy the equipment. There's a camera store a few blocks over. I'll give you cash. I don't want there to be any record of the purchase." She got up from the chair and crouched behind her desk.

"You're not thinking rationally." In my experience, people in a situation like this rarely did. We worked with them all the time. Celia had just negotiated one of the largest divorce settlements in Texas state history a few weeks ago. We'd spent most of our time trying to convince the wife she'd get everything she wanted out of the settlement if she'd let her soon-to-be-ex have custody of their cat. Their dead cat. The husband wanted to dig it up from the backyard and re-bury it at his new home.

People could get so emotionally attached to the strangest things. Jealousy and paranoia made normal people do some weird ass shit, and now it looked like my boss had been afflicted by the urge.

"Please, Valentina?" She held out a stack of one-hundred-dollar bills. A thick stack. "You're the only one I can ask to do this for me."

I didn't want to take advantage of her in a moment of weakness, but I'd been trying to figure out a way to pay for some recent car repairs, plus I had my eye on a pair of killer tall boots.

Against my better judgement, I caved. "I'll give you one afternoon. If he doesn't show, I'm not going to track him all over Texas."

She nodded. "One afternoon. That's all I'm asking."

"You realize he's probably not cheating, right?" Statistically only one in five men admitted to cheating on their significant other, though the numbers increased as men aged.

Even at twenty percent, the number was still too high for me. Marriage was for suckers, and love, well, love was for dreamers like my friends Clarissa and Melinda and Madison



and the others who'd made their lists and dropped their pink envelopes into the fire.

And my sister. My stomach twisted as I thought about my older sister Nadia. She'd had it all until she lost the love of her life to cancer. Now she was a widowed single mom to two adorable little girls who cried herself to sleep every night and slept with her husband's ashes on her nightstand.

Yeah, love sucked.

Maybe working for divorce attorneys had made me bitter and jaded. Or maybe I'd become that way from being used as a doormat by every man I'd ever dated. However it had happened, even in my anti-love state, I couldn't stand to see Michelle like this.

"Fine. I'll do it. Hurry and tell me where I need to go before I change my mind."

"Thank you." She pressed the stack of bills into my hands. "They're meeting at the Desperate Corral at two."

"The Desperate Corral? Are you sure they're going on a trail ride?" It sounded like something out of a bad western movie. Or maybe the name of a cowboy-themed strip club.

"Yes. I looked it up online. It's legit. I even printed a map of the trail they'll most likely ride. You don't even have to get out of the car if you pull up along the fence line. But you'd better go home and change first. Do you still have that wig you wore to the New Year's Eve party last year?"

"A wig? Don't you think you're going a little overboard?"

"Absolutely not. We don't want you to be recognized. And rent a car so they can't trace you."

"Are you sure about this?" Michelle had just gotten married two years ago. It was a first marriage for both of them and they seemed so in love, even to someone who didn't believe in that crap. "Wouldn't it be better to just ask him?"

"And have him deny it to my face then lie low so I don't have a chance of catching him in the act?" She put her hands on her hips and gave me the look that had earned her the

nickname the Shark in Stilettos. It didn't have quite the same effect with red-rimmed eyes and streaks down her cheeks, but underneath the wild hair and wrinkled pantsuit, I could tell Michelle was still in there.

“All right. I'm going.” I didn't have anywhere to put the cash since I'd left my purse and coat by my desk. So, I tucked it under my shirt and cradled it against my belly. Then as inconspicuously as possible with at least three grand pressed against my gut, I snuck back to my desk and shoved it into my purse.

With my head still pounding and the caffeine from my PSL nowhere near kicking in, I pulled my coat back on. Then I took the elevator back to the ground floor and tried to think up a believable story to tell the guy at the camera store.

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## JAMESON

*I* stood by my the big SUV while my brother Grant patted down his pockets in search of his keys.

“Did you leave them inside?” I asked.

“Be right back.” He jogged to the barn and came out a minute later with his keys in hand. “Thanks for helping out today, Jameson.”

“You know I don’t mind.”

“Well, we’re lucky you were around.” Grant had brought over a big Bernese Mountain dog a hunter had found caught in a trap in the woods. I’d patched up her leg and left her resting in one of the kennels I had set up in the barn. As a large animal vet, I usually traveled to my clients to take care of their needs, but I still had everything I needed on site.

“Give my love to Eliza.”

“I will.” Grant was one of my foster brothers. His wife had taken over as the Executive Director of Pups For Progress, a non-profit that rehabilitated rescue dogs to work with troubled teens. The vet who usually took care of the dogs at the shelter was out of town, so when they’d received the call about the dog in the trap, he’d brought her to me.

He was lucky he was able to make it out here with all the rain we’d been getting over the past several days. A last-minute break in the storms rolling over Central Texas had worked in his favor.

“Be careful on your way home. You might want to go around the west side of the property to avoid the mud,” I said. It had rained all night long, and the road he usually took to get back to the highway would be a mess. Even walking over to the barn had been tricky. I looked down at my feet. Thick mud covered the soles of my boots. I couldn’t wait to pull them off and get back inside.

“Yeah, I almost got stuck on my way in.” He climbed into his truck and started the engine. “I meant to tell you, I saw a couple on horseback on my way over.”

A chill slithered down my spine. “Oh yeah, where?”

“The northeast corner. That area that borders the old Fitzgibbons place.” He pulled the door closed and lowered the window. “Seems like an odd day to pick to be out for a ride.”

“Not if you want Mother Nature to cover up your tracks for you.” I’d inherited this land fair and square from my parents when they passed, but my dad’s brother had been nosing around, trying to lay claim to a portion of the acreage since he’d been farming it for the past forty years.

The section he had his eye on just happened to be the area where a surveyor my dad hired years ago thought there might be a deposit of oil.

“I’ll check out the security cameras and see if there’s anything going on.”

“Be careful, Jameson.” He wrapped both hands around the steering wheel. “You know your brothers have your back. Don’t hesitate to call if you need backup.”

“Will do. Now get home to your wife before she sends a search party out looking for you.”

He gave me a loopy smile—the kind of madly-in-love grin I never thought I’d see on my older brother’s face. We weren’t brothers by blood, but we’d spent our teen years together living out in the country at Mama Mae’s place. After my parents died, my uncle refused to take me in, so I’d been farmed out to a series of foster families. All I wanted was go

back home, so I kept running away. Then Mama Mae took me in, and I finally found a place that almost felt like home.

Grant waved one last time before his SUV disappeared around a bend in the long gravel drive.

“We should both go back in before it starts raining again, shouldn’t we?” I didn’t expect the alpaca standing on three legs by the edge of his pen to respond, though he did talk back sometimes.

Before I made it to the porch, tires crunched on the drive. I wasn’t expecting anyone else. There were a few kids who helped out in the barns, but I’d given them the day off because of the storms. Maybe Grant forgot something.

A gold crossover SUV came around the curve then stopped. I squinted, trying to see if I could tell who was behind the wheel. All I could see from this distance was bright red hair. Lots of bright red hair. Probably someone who’d missed the turn off to get back to the highway a couple of miles back or was trying to get to the place up the road where they offered trail rides.

I headed down the drive, trying to avoid the muddy puddles. When I got halfway to the car, the driver put it in reverse and executed a crappy five-point turn that took out a section of Halloween decorations some of the volunteers had set up.

“What a jackass.” If there was one thing I hated, it was someone who didn’t respect other peoples’ property.

Bocephus, the only animal at the sanctuary that was allowed to roam free, let out a loud bray.

“Sorry, bud. I didn’t mean to insult your kind. I should have called them something else.” I scratched the donkey under his chin and vowed to bring him an apple the next time I came outside.

The vehicle must have taken a left at the end of the driveway because I could hear it grinding gears as it traveled the curvy road leading to the back pasture. Someone was definitely lost. Either that or they were trying to nab one of the

animals we'd just rescued from a hoarding situation. I was always amazed at the lengths some people would go to try to take back something that never should have belonged to them in the first place.

I left Bocephus standing guard in the front and headed to the barn where I had a small office. My brothers and I had set some security cameras around the perimeter of my property to keep an eye on things. I pulled up the feed from a few of the cameras and watched the progress of the SUV as it cruised down the middle of the muddy road.

I hadn't planned on going out on the four-wheeler until the mud dried up a little, but I wasn't about to let some jerk roam freely over my property. I studied the screen, trying to figure out what the hell they were after.

As I grabbed my jacket from a hook on the wall, the car came to a sudden stop. The driver got out, crouched down by the front tire, then stood and kicked at the wheel. Dammit, the picture was too grainy to see much detail.

They then pulled something out of the backseat and looped it over their head. I couldn't tell if I was dealing with a man or woman and had no idea what they'd pulled from the back. At least I knew two things for sure. Whoever it was, he or she was alone, and they were definitely trespassing on my land.

I grabbed my shotgun, set my cowboy hat on my head, and fired up my favorite ATV.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, I parked the ATV behind a stand of trees and killed the engine. Noise carried way out here in the middle of nowhere and I didn't want to give the intruder any warning that I was on my way. I was out by the edge of my property along the section that butted up to the land my uncle wanted. Knowing him, he'd probably sent someone over to check on the property.

I crept along the edge of the barbed wire fence. It was more effective at keeping the animals in than keeping assholes out. The gold SUV sat just outside the fence line. I surveyed

the area to make sure the driver wasn't hanging around, then carefully stepped through the wires and walked around the car.

Hell, whoever had been behind the wheel did a real number on it. The front wheel bent in at a thirty-degree angle. This vehicle wasn't going anywhere without a tow truck.

I took a closer look at the section of fence. A bright pink piece of fabric was caught on one of the wires. Jerk probably caught their coat while climbing through my fence.

I was a large animal vet, not a trained tracker, but I'd learned a thing or two by living in the country. Someone had come through the fence, and based on the way the tall, dead grass was trampled down, they'd taken off toward the tract of land my uncle wanted.

I followed the path they'd beat down through the grass and stopped when I reached a fallen tree. It looked like it had been hit by lightning. Something on the other side of the tree moved.

"Hold it right there." I pulled the shotgun from my shoulder and pointed it at the figure standing in the shadows. "I've got a twelve-gauge pointed right at your head, and I'm a damn good shot."

"A gun? Are you freaking kidding me?" A woman shrieked, a high-pitched noise that might have pierced right through my eardrum.

"Calm down. I'm not going to shoot you. I just want to know what you're doing on private property." I walked around the tree, giving her an extra-wide berth.

"Please put the gun down. I was just trying to get some pictures."

"Pictures of what?" All I could see of her through the branches was a streak of bright red hair.

"Um, trees. I'm a nature photographer and I couldn't help but notice these gorgeous oak trees on your property."

"What happened to your car?" Like hell she was just out for a drive and decided to take some pictures of trees. It didn't

take a genius to know there was something fishy going on.

“I don’t know. Everything was fine and then it made this horrible noise when I turned the wheel. I’ve already called for a tow truck. Actually, it should be here any minute.”

“And you thought while you waited, you’d climb through a barbed wire fence and take some photos of my gorgeous trees?” I asked.

“That’s right. Only now I appear to be somewhat stuck. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to lend me a hand?”

“Stuck?”

“That’s right.”

Either she was playing me and about to attack, or she really needed help. My gut told me it was the latter. “I’m coming closer. No sudden movements, okay?”

“No chance of that.”

I walked around the downed tree and had to do a double take before I trusted my own vision. She was crouched over, both feet and a hand stuck in the mud. Even with mud streaked across her face and an ugly bright red wig sitting lopsided on her head, she was the most gorgeous woman I’d ever seen.

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## VALENTINA

“As you can see, I’m not a threat.” That was an understatement. I’d been traipsing along, trying to find a good place to wait for Victor and the mystery woman when I’d stepped into a giant pool of sticky, goopy, mud. Then my phone fell out of my pocket, and when I’d tried to reach into the mud to find it, my hand got stuck too.

There was something about this mud—it wasn’t just wet dirt. It was like quicksand. The more I struggled against it, the deeper I seemed to sink. I’d been just about to start yelling for help when the grumpy cowboy came along. I couldn’t make out his features since I was looking up at him at such an awkward angle and the brim of a black cowboy hat covered half of his face, but I could tell he was a grouch from his tone and the way his hand clamped to his hip.

“How do I know you don’t have a weapon in your pocket?” He leaned the gun against the fallen tree and folded his arms over a broad expanse of chest.

With my ass thrust up in the air and my hand buried in the mud in front of me, I felt like I was playing a very awkward, very dirty game of Twister. “You’re welcome to come over and pat me down if you don’t believe me. Might want to watch your step, though.”

“Looks like you’ve got yourself in a bit of a pickle, Miss...”

“Doe,” I supplied. There was no way I was giving him my real name. For all I knew, I was trespassing and could be

brought up on charges. I didn't care what my boss was paying me, it wasn't worth it.

"First name Jane, I assume?" His lips curved up into a knowing grin.

Just to fuck with him, I shook my head. "No, it's June."

"I see." He bit down on his lip like he was trying not to laugh.

"This isn't funny."

"Actually, June, I agree with you on that. See, you have extremely good taste. The trees in this particular pasture are so big and beautiful, they're the only ones the bears like to visit."

"Bears? What kind of bears?" He was pulling my leg. There weren't bears in the middle of Texas, were there? When my mom was married to husband number four, we used to go camping quite a bit. I didn't remember him ever mentioning that we needed to be on the lookout for bears.

"Black bears. I saw one just the other day not far from here. Let me see if I can find the picture." He pulled his phone out of his back pocket and swiped the screen a few times. "Here you go."

I craned my neck to get a peek at his phone. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. If that wasn't a black bear staring up at me, I'd cut the heels off the one precious pair of Louboutins I owned.

"That's a real bear." My legs started to shake. "You've got to get me out of here."

"Actually, I don't have to do anything. Did you see the No Trespassing sign on the fencepost before you illegally came onto my land?"

Every muscle in my body ached from standing in such an awkward position. I couldn't hold myself up much longer. If I didn't get out of the mud soon, I was going to fall back on my ass and get sucked completely under. But I also didn't want to go to jail. There had to be some way to get the upper hand with the grumpy cowboy.

“Let’s make a deal. I’ll tell you what I’m doing out here after you get me out of the mud.”

“Why don’t you tell me everything before I get you out?” he asked.

“Because though I look like I’m as sturdy as a tree trunk, my legs are about to give out. If that happens, I’m going to fall back and probably go under. The tow truck driver is on the way. What are you going to do when he gets here and can’t find me? Do you want to be a suspect in a missing persons’ case?” I was bluffing my butt off, but if I’d learned anything by watching a firm full of successful divorce attorneys, it was that a confident delivery made all the difference.

“I suppose that would be unfortunate.” He didn’t seem too worried about my warning. He also didn’t seem to be in much of a hurry as he walked around the mud pit. “I’m going to have to find something to set over the mud to get to you. I’ll be back, June. Don’t go anywhere, okay?”

“Wait. Where are you going?” I twisted my head around, tracking his movements until he disappeared behind the fallen tree. Panic made my heart pummel and sent blood racing through my veins. I was going to die out here. If the mud didn’t swallow me whole, I’d probably get eaten by a bear.

I strained, listening for something to indicate which direction he’d gone or when he was coming back. The only thing I heard was a loud *caw-caw* from a huge crow sitting in a tree a few yards away.

“This is it,” I mumbled to myself. “Not the way I thought I was going to go.”

The crow flew to a lower branch and stared at me with one black, beady eye.

“I can’t die. I’m too young. I haven’t done anything with my life yet.”

*Caw-Caw.* Another crow landed on a branch slightly lower than the first one.

“What? You want to hear how lame my life is too? Fine. I’ve never traveled outside the States. Pretty pathetic, huh?”

Three more crows landed on the same tree. They tucked their wings against their dark, feathered bodies like they were settling in for story time.

“I’ve never been to the top of the Empire State Building. I know I told Seth Granville that I had when I went to New York in seventh grade, but I was too scared. Pitiful, right?” I glanced up at the birds. A few more had joined in. It was like they were all there to bear witness to my demise.

“Oh, you’re not going to believe this one. I’ve never had an orgasm during sex. What do you think about that?”

“I think you must not be having sex with the right person.” The cowboy stood at the edge of the mud pit with a huge dead log in his hands.

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## JAMESON

I wished I had hold of her fancy camera so I could have captured the look on her face when she realized I'd heard her. Her cheeks flushed the same dark pink as the coat she had on.

"I thought you left me. You weren't supposed to hear that."

"Why don't we try to tackle one problem at a time?" I suggested. A wall of dark storm clouds had been moving in, and if I didn't get her out of the mud pit soon, we'd both be in trouble.

Her eyelids fluttered closed. "I'm pretending that if I can't see you, you aren't really there."

"Is it working?" I rolled the dead log over the mud, so I'd have a safe place to stand while I pulled her out.

"Unfortunately, not." She cracked her eyelids open and looked up at me. "I thought the birds were my only audience."

"I told you I'd be back. I've got to save you if I want to hear the whole truth, don't I?" Damn, she was cute. In a pissed-off, crabby, flustered kind of way.

"That's right." She swallowed, drawing my attention to her long neck. I could see her pulse beating along her jawline, almost as quickly as mine.

I set my foot on the log and took a step toward her to make sure it would support my weight. "All right, June, here's how this is going to work. I want you to start to move your feet,

just lift them a little bit at a time then wait for the mud to fill in underneath. Don't go too fast or it won't work."

"That's what she said," she blurted. "Oh my gosh, I'm sorry. I always make 'that's what she said' jokes when I'm nervous I'm about to die."

"How often does that happen?" There was something about this woman that put a permanent smile on my face, and I hadn't even gotten a good look at her yet.

"More often than you might think."

I chuckled. "Well, nobody's going to be dying today, at least not out here. How are your feet feeling?"

"I'm wiggling them. Can't you just reach in and pull me out real fast?"

"If I do that, you're going to create more of a vacuum with the mud. I don't want you to get sucked back in."

A fat raindrop splattered onto my hat. I figured we had about ten minutes tops before the sky opened up and dumped on us.

"Give me your hand." I crouched down on the log and reached for her.

She stuck her hand out. Her nails were painted a deep, dark red. Matched the color of her lips. Yeah, I noticed. I couldn't help it. The moment I wrapped both of my hands around hers, a clap of thunder reverberated through the sky. My pulse surged like someone had plugged me into an electrical outlet.

"Keep moving your feet, June. Your other hand, too." Little by little, inch by inch, I eased her out of the mud. The rain started to fall. Big, cold drops that rolled down the back of my neck. She was going to be freezing when I got her out of there.

She got her other hand free and gripped the log. "It's working."

"Good. Keep it up. We're almost there."

Finally, I got enough of her onto the log that I was able to reach behind her to grab hold of her waistband. I slid my hand underneath the top of her jeans and pulled. She flopped onto the log, and I tried not to think about how close my fingers had been to her ass.

“My boots!” She reached out like she was ready to dive back into the mud after them.

“What the hell are you doing?” I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her toward me. We tumbled off the log in a tangle of limbs and came to a rest just a foot away from the edge of the mud.

Her chin rested on my chest. My legs twined around hers. Streaks of mud covered both of us from head to toe. I lifted my head, quickly assessing for damages.

“Are you okay?” I shifted my hips, wondering what I’d landed on. Whatever it was, I’d probably have a nice big bruise on my butt.

“Those boots cost almost a full month’s rent.” She propped herself up to a half-seated position. “This has been the absolute worst day ever.”

“You can say that again. Do you realize you almost got both of us stuck in the damn mud this time?”

“They were Jimmy Choo’s.” She clasped her hands to her heart. “My boss gave them to me for putting in extra work on a case last year.”

“Your boss who sends you out to take pictures of nature?” I asked, wondering how long she was going to try to keep up that pretense.

A tiny wrinkle creased the spot between her brows. “That’s right. How am I supposed to get back to my car without any shoes?”

Lightning flashed and she shrieked. I needed to get both of us out of there and fast.

“You’re not going back to your car, Cinderella.” Before she could react, I picked her up and flung her over my

shoulder. “You’re coming home with me.”

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## VALENTINA

*I* always thought it would be romantic for a man to toss me over his shoulder, palm my ass, and carry me to safety.

The actual experience left a lot to be desired.

My legs ached from being stuck in such an awkward position for so long. My head bobbed up and down, bumping against his lower back every time one of his giant feet landed on the uneven ground. My hands grappled for something to hold on to but all I got was a handful of his jacket.

“Where are you taking me? I told you, the tow truck driver will be here soon.” That was a bald-faced lie, but he didn’t need to know that. My phone was gone. There was no one coming. I was on my own with the rough cowboy.

Rain pelted down on us, soaking through the light jacket I’d tossed on today. It was already ruined. I’d ripped it trying to duck through the barbed wire fence. Tiny white feathers had been falling from a hole in the back, and I’d never be able to get it clean. My hair plastered against my face, and I couldn’t see a thing.

After several minutes of being jostled around and feeling like every internal organ had been rearranged inside my body, he stopped.

“We need to get out of the rain. I want you to get on this ATV so I can take you back to my place.” His hands shifted to my hips, and he lowered me to the ground like hauling my

curvy frame across an entire field hadn't required any effort at all.

"No. I listen to true crime podcasts. I'm not going to be that girl."

"What girl?" His hands stayed clamped to my hips, like he was afraid if he let go, I'd take off running. He was probably right.

"The girl who goes home with a stranger since he seems like a nice guy. Then she ends up with her picture plastered in post offices because no one's seen her in months." I twisted my hips, breaking contact with his palms.

"Look. We both know the tow truck driver isn't coming. Even if you did call someone, there's no way they'll be able to get out here in this storm. You can either sit in your car and try not to freeze to death or head back to my place for a hot shower and something warm to drink." He flung his leg over the seat of the ATV and fired up the engine. "What's it going to be?"

There was no one coming. No one except Michelle even knew I'd left Houston. I could either wait out the storm in my broke down rental then try to walk somewhere for help... barefoot. Or I could take my chances with the cowboy.

"Fine. I'll come with you." For now, I almost added. Once we got somewhere dry, I'd figure out my next step.

"Let's go." He gestured to the small space on the seat behind him.

I sucked in my breath and climbed on. The only way my ample rear was going to fit was if I snuggled up tight against him. Silently cursing my boss with every bitter bone in my body, I smashed my breasts to his back and held onto his shoulders.

He revved the engine, and we were off. My grip tightened. It was like he was doing his absolute best to hit every bump and dip he could as we raced over the muddy trail. Finally, I could see the glow of lights in the distance. The trail evened out and we passed through a few gates. He pulled the ATV

into an outbuilding and cut the engine. The vibrating sensation under my ass ceased.

“Home sweet home. The first thing I’m going to do is get you into the shower to rinse off all that mud, then into a nice, warm bath with some bath salts.” He climbed off and offered me a hand. “It ought to help the stiffness in your joints and relax your muscles. How does that sound?”

“You promise you’re not going to try to kill me?”

“If I didn’t wring your neck when you rolled me off the log and bruised my butt, I’d say your chances of survival are pretty high.”

“Thank you for pulling me out of the mud.” I took his hand. Something deep down in my gut told me I could trust him. All he’d done so far was try to help me.

“You’re welcome.” He squinted at me as he helped me off the ATV. Then he reached over with his free hand and brushed the red hair sticking to my forehead out of the way. “Did you hit your head? It looks like you’ve got a bump and a bruise.”

I tugged the stupid wig off then brushed my fingertips over my forehead, wincing as they skimmed over a tender spot. “I think it happened when we fell off that log.”

“So you’re not a redhead after all.”

“What?” The red wig dangled from my fingers. “No, I just like to accessorize with wigs sometimes.” That sounded so stupid. He’d never buy that.

“Come here,”—he tugged me toward the door leading outside—“I’ll get you some ice to put on that while you soak in the tub.”

Tired of playing the “what’s the worst thing that could happen” game in my head, I let him lead me out of the garage and toward a sprawling house a couple hundred yards away. We entered through the attached garage, and he stopped to hang his hat on a hook then turned to me.

“What happened to your eye?” I asked. One of his eyes was bloodshot and rimmed in red.

His fingers brushed over his eyelid. “Oh, that’s nothing. You should see the other guy. Ready to rinse off that mud?” he asked.

I nodded and followed him into the house.

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## JAMESON

She'd rinsed off in the shower and was probably now soaking in the oversized tub in my bathroom. I would have given just about anything to join her. Instead, I stood in the small shower in my guest bathroom, trying to warm myself up and wash away the layers of mud, grit, and dead grass that had seemed to find its way into every crevice I had.

She'd lied about the tow truck. I'd called my brother Kane who ran the only garage in Broken Bend, and he said no one had called in a pickup for him on my property. He offered to go get her SUV once the rain stopped. Until then, we were under a flash flood warning which meant Cinderella wasn't going anywhere.

It had been a long time since I'd spent the night under the same roof as a woman, and even then, it had never been at my place. The curvy brunette was exactly my type, too. It was like the universe had combined every single trait I might look for in a woman and put her in my path.

The best course of action would be to get something in her stomach and show her to the guest room. If only I had a guest room. Since I hadn't had a guest since I'd moved in, I'd turned the guest room into a workout room. Unless she wanted to sleep on my treadmill, she'd either be on the couch or in my bed.

My bed.

My cock rallied at that idea.

After what she'd been through, I wasn't going to offer her the thin foldout mattress on my sleeper sofa. Thinking about her in my bed, her long dark hair flowing over my pillow, my sheets tucked in against her breasts made my dick throb. I couldn't go out there with a hard-on, so I did the only thing I could... squirted a generous amount of body wash into my palm and pictured her full red lips taking my cock into her mouth.

Relief coursed through me as I came against the shower wall. Damn. That helped, but I still couldn't get the image of her on her knees in front of me out of my mind.

By the time I dried off and tugged on a pair of gray sweats and a white t-shirt, I'd gotten my cock under control enough to leave the bathroom. She perched on the edge of one of my kitchen chairs with the robe Mama Mae had given me for Christmas last year wrapped around her body and her hair twisted into a towel on top of her head.

She stood when she saw me. "I hope it's okay I put on your robe."

"Looks a hell of a lot better on you than it ever did on me." I stopped about ten feet away and let my gaze drift over her. Even with mud covering her from head to toe, she'd been attractive. But now, with her dark brown eyes staring up at me and skin that looked it had been permanently kissed by the sun, she was breathtaking.

She gave me a tentative smile. "Any chance of taking you up on your offer of something warm to eat and drink?"

I snapped out of the testosterone-fueled spell I'd been under. "Yeah. Coffee? Tea? Cocoa? What's your pleasure?"

"You have tea?"

"Yeah. Do you want green, black, orange or chai? I've also got some herbal tea that's caffeine free." I moved toward the cabinet where I kept my broad collection of loose-leaf teas.

"You know about tea?" She followed me, stopping next to me at the counter.

“I spent a few years in England when I was a kid. Tea was everything.” I left her to look through the choices while I filled my electric kettle with water.

She picked out one of my favorites, a spicy chai. “How’s this one?”

“Good choice. Here,”—I reached up and handed her a mug from the cabinet—“you’ll want to let it steep for about five minutes. Any longer and it will get too bitter.” This close to her, the scent of my shower gel rolled off her skin. I recognized it, but it smelled different. Lighter. More feminine. Utterly Intoxicating.

Dark lashes fluttered against her cheeks then she glanced up at me.

The bruise on her forehead had darkened. I reached out to brush my fingertips over it. “I meant to get you some ice for that.”

Her hand circled my wrist. That feeling of certainty washed over me again. I’d never been a man who’d been afraid of taking chances, especially when it involved something I wanted. Or in this case, someone.

“It’s okay. I don’t know that ice will help that much.”

“I know something that might make it feel better than ice.” I didn’t know how I could be so sure about a woman I’d barely met, but I knew from the first second I saw her she was meant to be mine. Now it was time to see if she felt anything similar to the swell of emotion rising in my chest.

“What’s that?” She pulled my hand away from her forehead but didn’t let go.

I could see her pulse flutter, hear her heart pound, feel the warmth from her hand. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you the best way to treat an injury is with a kiss?”

“A kiss, huh?” Sparks of gold danced in her deep brown eyes.

“That’s right.” I shifted a hand to her shoulder. “I’m a medical professional so I know about these things.”

“You’re a doctor?”

“Doctor Ferris, at your service, ma’am.” She didn’t need to know most of my patients walked around on four legs instead of two.

“Well then, by all means, please heal me with your extensive knowledge.”

I leaned forward, put my hands on her shoulders, and pulled her close. Then I pressed my lips to the edge of the purple and blue bump on her forehead. My whole world shifted upside down at the contact. Her hands fisted in the plain white cotton t-shirt I’d tossed on after my shower, and she tugged me closer.

Sensing this woman was the one I’d been waiting for, I nudged my hip against hers and gently backed her up against the counter.

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## VALENTINA

*H*is mouth moved from my forehead to my cheek to my neck. I couldn't get enough. Fire burned through my veins. My attraction to this man didn't make sense. I knew nothing about him beyond his name and that he was a doctor. Oh, and he had muscles layered on top of muscles and could carry me across a field without losing his breath. I suppose I'd gone out with guys in the past on much less information.

There was something about him that made me think I'd met him before, but I'd definitely never forget a man like him if I had. He knew I was lying about my name. Knew I was lying about a lot of things. It didn't seem to matter.

Maybe a night with a strong, gentle, cowboy was just what the doctor ordered. Especially since he knew one of my deepest, darkest secrets and it hadn't sent him running.

"So, about that confession you made to the crows..." his lips lingered on a spot right behind my ear. I'd never thought of that particular part of my body as being an erogenous zone, but Dr. Ferris had been lavishing quite a bit of attention on that spot and it was creating a hollow ache right between my legs.

"I thought I was dying. No one was supposed to hear that."

"But I did." He shifted his head and touched his forehead to mine.

Yes, he did. Thinking about exactly what he'd heard sent a fresh wave of heat rolling over my cheeks.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“We’ve got a few hours to kill before there’s any chance of me getting you back to town. I’d be more than willing to break that streak for you.”

“That’s so generous of you, Dr. Ferris.”

He laughed, a deep rumble that made my skin pebble. I wanted him to break my streak. Wanted to lose myself in this strong man’s arms for a night. I didn’t do one-night stands, but something made me slip my hand behind his neck, made me tilt my head to the side, made me drag his head down so he’d touch his lips to mine again.

Without breaking our kiss, he swept me into his arms and carried me to his bedroom. I should have freaked out, but a part of me knew this was supposed to happen. I couldn’t explain it, but a deep knowing took over. I’d always made my best decisions by listening to my gut, so I leaned in, tightened my hold on his shoulders, and kissed him back with everything I had.

He laid me on the bed and the robe slipped from my shoulders. It was way too big to begin with. Now it fell open, exposing my bare skin underneath. I waited for the urge to cover up. Instead, I looked up into his eyes—one blue, one streaked with angry red lines.

One red eye... a man who loves tea... the words I’d written down on my list over the weekend came back to me. But that was impossible. Magic wasn’t real, and neither was true love.

Chalking it up to coincidence, I lifted my arms and pulled him into me. “There’s something I should tell you.”

He propped himself up on his elbows. “What’s that?”

I bit my bottom lip, trying to decide how much I should share. “Can I trust you?”

“What’s your gut telling you?” he asked.

“I don’t know why, but I think it’s saying yes.”

“Smart gut.” Emphasizing his point, he leaned over and pressed a kiss to the spot just above my belly button.

My internal body temperature rose a few degrees as his whiskers brushed against my sensitive skin. “I need to tell you something, Dr. Ferris.”

“What’s that, June?”

I took in a deep breath. “My name’s not June.”

He didn’t say anything right away. Then he undid the loop holding the robe in place and ran his palm over my bare skin. “I know, Cinderella.”

“Don’t you care?” The fact I’d lied didn’t seem to bother him.

“Of course, I care. I just think there are more important things we should be using our mouths for right now.”

*Ohhhhhh.* I could get on board with that. He leaned over and cupped my cheek with his palm. Then he lowered his mouth to mine, and I lost the desire to do anything except slide my tongue against his.

His erection pressed against my belly through his sweats. I reached down to run my hand along his length and wasn’t a bit surprised to feel the tip of his cock poking out above the waistband of his pants. Somehow, I knew he’d be big. Call it intuition or wishful thinking. Whatever it was, the thick, long cock under my hand made me wonder if he really could put an end to my orgasmless streak.

Now that we’d started heading down that path, I was eager to find out.

His teeth nipped along the skin on my neck before dropping down to my breasts. Whatever he was doing to my nipple with his tongue had me fisting the thick bedspread with one hand and sliding his pants down over his hips with the other.

Desire raged through me. I wanted him, needed to feel him inside me. I’d never been so eager, so desperate for a man before.

“Are you with me, Cinderella?” His words rumbled over my skin then he sucked my nipple into his mouth while he slid a hand between us.

I nodded.

“Good. You’re wet, princess. Do you think you’re ready for me?” His voice rubbed against me like silk gliding over my skin.

“Yes.”

His finger dipped into my curls. I gasped when he brushed over my clit then lifted my hips, so eager to feel him again.

“I’m just getting a condom.” He continued to stroke me with one hand, sliding a finger in and out of my pussy while he reached for the bedside table with the other.

“Can I do it?” I wanted to touch him, slide my hands over his thick cock before I had to cover it up.

He handed me the condom. “Whenever you’re ready, let me know.”

Then he sandwiched his head between my thighs. The first touch of his tongue to my clit made my hips buck up off the bed. I willed my ass back to the mattress. He knew exactly where to touch me, how much pressure I could handle, when to thrust his tongue deep inside me, and when to back off and suck on my clit instead.

My release started to build. I held it back, not wanting him to stop, not wanting it to ever end. I’d been on the edge like this before. I was afraid if he switched to pumping his cock inside me, I’d lose the wave I was riding. I didn’t want to stop, but I also had to know if he’d be the only man to ever give me the release I craved.

“I’ve got you, Cinderella. I’m going to make this happen for you. Trust me.”

I slid the ring of latex over his huge cock and unrolled it down his massive length. “I’m ready.”

## JAMESON

She didn't have anything to be nervous about. Even though I'd been primed and ready to blow since the moment I touched her, I wasn't going to let myself go until she came on my cock. If I wanted her to believe she was meant to be mine, she needed this, and I'd do everything in my power to give it to her.

I positioned my cock at her entrance. I'd made sure she was soaked, so it didn't take much effort to slide the tip of my dick just inside her. Fuck, she felt amazing. Once I made her mine, I'd get to feel her with nothing between us. I couldn't wait.

She gripped my arms and angled her hips up to meet me. The way she bit down on her bottom lip made me want to pump into her with everything I had. She had no idea how fucking sexy she was.

I pushed into her, pausing so she could stretch to accommodate me until I was seated deep, deep inside her. "You feel that, princess? We're a perfect fit. We were made for each other."

She was in her own little world, her eyes half-closed, her hips bridged to take me. "It's good, Dr. Ferris."

I chuckled, realizing I'd never even given her my first name. "I'm Jameson. No more Dr. Ferris."

She nodded. "Jameson."

Hearing my name on her lips made me want to possess her. I pulled out, so fucking slowly it was painful. Then I pushed back into her until my balls brushed her pussy. Over and over and over, I eased in and out. When she seemed ready for more, I slipped my hand between us and circled her clit. Her chest rose and fell, her breaths coming faster.

I bent down, sucked her nipple into my mouth, and scraped my teeth against it. Something told me my girl was going to like things a little rough once we got used to each other. As if she could read my mind, she raked her nails down my back and pulled me closer. Her hips bucked as I thrust, sending me deeper. I shifted the angle of my hips to make sure I grazed her g-spot.

“Let go, princess. I want to see your face when you lose control.”

“Valentina.” She gasped. “My name is Valentina.”

I couldn't hold back my grin. She'd given me her name. “Valentina,” I growled. “Look at me. I want to see your gorgeous brown eyes and hear you calling my name when you come.”

“Jameson. Oh, I'm there.” Her nails dug deeper into my back, and her hips bucked wildly against me. Then she opened her eyes. Her pussy clenched around me. Her eyes widened. “This... this is what all the fuss is about.”

I waited until I was sure she was on the other side of her release. Then I let myself go. I buried myself as deep as I could. My balls tightened, my ass clenched, and then I was coming. It lasted for-fucking-ever, yet not nearly long enough. Before I'd stopped pumping into the condom, I was already wondering how soon it would be before we could do it again.

## VALENTINA

I woke up naked, Jameson's bulky, muscled frame draped over me like he owned me. After last night, I was pretty sure he did. We barely knew each other but there was something so familiar about him, something so comforting. It felt like we'd known each other all of our lives.

I'd tried not to think about Clarissa's spell while he'd been buried inside me, but I couldn't get it out of my mind. The red eye on its own wouldn't have been a big deal, but he also liked hot tea. Was it that unusual? A lot of men drank hot tea. Especially the ones who'd lived in England for a while. Now that I thought about it, loving hot tea was probably legally required over there.

Just a coincidence. I took a deep breath and relaxed against him. It was barely light outside. I could snuggle up against him and sleep for a couple of hours before I had to go back to reality. I'd just adjusted my pillow when a strange noise came from right outside the window. It was a quick, loud screech, like some animal had just been impaled or something. I flung Jameson's arm from my chest and sat up straight in bed.

"It's okay," he mumbled. "Just the peacock."

My heart pounded. "You have a peacock?"

"Yeah, a couple of them. Go back to sleep." He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to his chest. His breathing evened out right away, but I couldn't fall back asleep. Not when I'd just crossed off item number three on my list.

I didn't want to admit it, but I was starting to think there might be more to Clarissa's spell than I'd given her credit for. What else had I written down on that damn piece of paper? I couldn't remember. Something about a birthmark?

I eased Jameson's arm off me and looked over his skin. Nothing on his back except for a few long red scratches I'd inflicted in the heat of the moment last night. He really did have an incredible body. I paused to admire his morning wood then forced myself to move past it. If all went well, I might get another repeat performance of last night before I had to return to my real life in the city.

My fingers grazed his hip. A big purple bruise covered one side. That must have been where he'd fallen on the rock when he kept me from diving back into the mud. Thinking of my lost Jimmy Choo's made my chest tighten. I suppose they were worth the sacrifice of finding out it was actually possible for me to have an orgasm during sex. What had Jameson said yesterday? That I just hadn't been having sex with the right person? He was certainly correct about that.

The bruise looked funny. Almost like an upside down... Fate was for sure fucking with me... it was a heart. A heart-shaped purple mark on his ass. I needed to leave. One or two characteristics could be explained away, but not a whole laundry list.

I eased off the bed and pulled his robe on over my shoulders. There had to be something in his drawer that wouldn't fall off me. Trying to stay quiet, I dug around until I found a t-shirt and a pair of sweats. I needed to get out of there before he woke up and started speaking Latin.

I slid my feet into a pair of cowboy boots I found in the front closet and escaped to the barn where he'd parked the ATV. I wouldn't be able to ride it all the way to Houston, but at least I could get to a gas station or somewhere I could find a phone to call Michelle.

With a final look back at Jameson's place, I turned the ATV toward the road and hit the gas. The rain had stopped, and I'd learned my lesson on trying to drive through mud so I



managed to avoid the big puddles. I kept expecting him to pull up behind me at any moment, but I made it all the way to the gas station I'd passed yesterday.

The guy behind the counter didn't blink twice when he saw me. He even let me use his phone to call Michelle who picked up on the second ring.

"Hello?" Her voice was laced with sleep like I'd just woken her up.

"Michelle, you've got to come and get me."

"Valentina? Where are you? I didn't hear from you last night, and I was worried."

"I'm still outside Broken Bend." I turned my back on the cashier, hoping to keep some level of privacy around my conversation. "My car broke down and I got stuck in the mud and I never did find Victor."

"It's okay. Victor's here. It was all a big misunderstanding. He was out with a client looking at some land her husband owns that's only accessible on horseback." She sighed. "You were right. He wasn't cheating."

My stomach twisted as I processed what she was saying. "You mean there was no reason for me to come all the way out here?"

"I guess not."

"To get stuck in the mud? Threatened with a shotgun? Kidnapped by a tall, grumpy cowboy?"

"What happened? Tell me where you are, and I'll send a car right now."

"I don't know where I am." There had to be an address or a sign or something.

"You're at the Mini Mart about two miles northeast of Broken Bend." There was no mistaking Jameson's deep, rich voice. Not when I'd listened to him making promises of all the sweet sexy things he wanted to do to me all night long. Even though I was the one who'd left him, a peaceful calm enveloped me at the sound of his voice.

I turned around slowly, the phone still pressed to my ear. He stood at the counter, his cowboy hat sitting crooked on his head, the five o'clock shadow on his cheeks looking more like a legit beard.

Seeing him standing there, his eyes full of apprehension, my grip on the phone loosened.

“You left.” Those two words seemed to hold a lifetime worth of hurt and accusation.

“Valentina?” Michelle asked. “What’s going on? Do you need me to send a car?”

“I’ll take you wherever you want to go. I’ve got my truck right out front.” Jameson nudged his chin toward a huge black pickup parked in the first row. “Just give me a chance to talk to you on the way?”

“Looks like I’ve got a ride,” I said into the phone. “I’ll call you later.”

I handed the phone back to the cashier and clomped my way toward the door in way-too-big-for-me boots.

Jameson opened the door to the truck for me then closed it and ran around to get behind the wheel. “When I woke up, and you were gone, I had to come after you. I was afraid I’d never see you again.”

“This is going to sound so strange,” I started. “What happened between us last night wasn’t real.”

“It felt pretty damn real to me.” He threaded his fingers with mine and rested the back of his hand on my thigh.

The feel of his touch instantly made me regret leaving his bed this morning. I couldn’t let myself get suckered in by some half-cocked spell. He needed to know I’d made the whole thing up. Whatever we felt was nothing more than some manifested infatuation and sheer coincidence.

“I was in Colorado last weekend with some girlfriends. One of them thought it would be fun to manifest the perfect man. Even though I thought it was ridiculous, I went along with it, so I didn’t hurt anyone’s feelings.”

Jameson shook his head. “I refuse to believe what’s going on between us isn’t real.”

“I’m sorry. It can’t be real because I don’t believe in love.” I didn’t want to hurt him, but I had to be honest. “Love hurts. Love leaves. Love doesn’t last.” I shifted my gaze to our joined hands. “I work for a bunch of divorce attorneys, so I know all about it.”

I expected him to frown or laugh or say something to try to convince me otherwise, but he didn’t. I looked up to see him smile. A big, broad grin that made a dimple pop on his cheek and sent shivers slipping and sliding up and down my spine.

“Love does last, Valentina. Sometimes it doesn’t last as long as we want it to, but I’ve seen it.” His eyes lit up while he spoke. Warmth radiated out from my chest. “My parents were in love. Their love story was cut short by a tragic plane crash, but what they had was real. That’s what I want. Whether it lasts a few months or endures a lifetime, I’d rather know true love for however long it lasts than never experience it at all.”

“Then I hope you find it.” I squeezed his hand. “If you can take me home now, I’d appreciate it. Head toward downtown Houston, and I’ll let you know where to turn off when we get close.”

He held my gaze for a long beat then shifted into gear and backed the truck out of the lot.



## JAMESON

She needed a little more time, and I was more than willing to give it to her. I held her hand as I drove toward Houston.

“Tell me what you asked for in the spell,” I said.

“It was silly. I just wrote down a bunch of things I never thought would go together.”

“Such as?” I wanted to know. If I knew what she’d written down, I’d be able to prove to her that I was the man she’d asked for.

“Well, your red eye for one. I wrote down that my one true love would have one red eye. When I met you, your right eye was bloodshot.”

“One red eye? Who wishes for that?”

“That’s exactly my point. Nobody should have one red eye, especially not the man of my dreams.”

“Well, right before you decided to trespass, I’d been patching up a big dog’s leg. I thought my brother had a good grip on her, but she caught me off guard and swiped her front paw over my eye. It’ll be fine in a day or two so it’s not permanent.”

“Your brother asks you to take care of his dogs?”

I kept forgetting that even though my soul recognized her as its mate, we didn’t know the little things about each other. “I’m a vet.”

“You said you were a doctor...” Her furrowed brow gave way to a grin.

“An animal doctor.” I squeezed her hand again.

“Good to know. The other thing that caught me off guard is that you like hot tea so much. That was on my list.” She looked out the window as we passed through Broken Bend. “And I happened to see the heart-shaped bruise on your ass under the covers this morning.”

“You wished for someone to fall on his ass and get a bruise?” I teased.

“No. I just wrote down random stuff. Like a heart-shaped purple mark on his butt.”

“I’m glad you didn’t wish for someone with a broken leg.” I squinted at her from my side of the truck cab. “You’re not a sadist, are you?”

“Oh my gosh, no! I just have a very active imagination when it comes to making up random crap.”

“What else was on the list?” I was getting into this now. Based on the things she’d written down, I was becoming more and more convinced that our meeting wasn’t random.

“Just two other things.” Her cheeks flushed.

“And?”

“The peacock. I wrote down that you’d have a pet peacock.”

“His name is Percy. He used to live at a restaurant way out on the other side of Broken Bend. They went under and didn’t know what to do with him, so they left him there.”

“What kind of people abandon a peacock?” Her forehead creased, and she looked appropriately disgusted.

“I took him in, and he’s been annoying the hell out of me for the past three years. I’ve got a menagerie of animals on my property and you’ll get to meet them all. What’s the last thing? So far, I’m four for four.” My fingers tightened around hers, encouraging her to spill all.

“It’s embarrassing.” She closed her eyes and shook her head.

“More embarrassing than telling me you’d never had an orgasm during sex?”

“No. Nothing will ever be more embarrassing than that.”

“Then spill it.”

“I can’t believe I’m telling you this.” She opened her eyes and shot me a glance before redirecting her attention to her lap. “I wished for a man with a magnificent cock, okay?”

My laugh exploded from my chest. I was pretty comfortable with that part of my anatomy, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever be confident enough to call it magnificent. “Did I come through for you on that?”

She rolled her head to the side and stared out the window. Then in a quiet voice, she mumbled, “Yes.”

“There you go. Five out of five. How can you say we don’t deserve a chance?”

Her smile faded, and she turned to face me. “Because it’s not real. I made you up. No matter how right it feels now, it can’t last.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, princess. You think you asked for me? You might have just cast your little spell out in Colorado, I’ve been sitting on this list for years.” I pulled my hand away and slipped a piece of wide-ruled notebook paper out of my back pocket. “Here, read it.”

She took the well-worn page and unfolded it. I’d carried it around with me for so long, I was surprised it hadn’t fallen apart yet.

“What is this?”

“Just read it.”

“Dark brown hair and eyes the color of smoky quartz. What color is smoky quartz?” she asked.

“The color of your eyes. It’s also a gemstone that’s supposed to help with depression. I wrote that down right after

my parents died when I was feeling pretty damn lost.” I hadn’t admitted that to anyone. Getting it off my chest, especially to her, felt like a huge burden had been lifted.

“Loves spicy chai.” She swatted my arm. “That’s an easy one. Who doesn’t love spicy chai?”

“Keep going.”

“Willing to risk her life for the things she loves. That doesn’t sound like me.” Her mouth screwed up into a frown.

“Your shoes? You were willing to dive back into the mud for a stupid pair of boots.”

“Jimmy Choo boots. I think I’m going to have to go into official mourning for those.” She let out a deep sigh. “These are all too much of a coincidence. What’s next? Incredible in bed.” That pink stain spread over her cheeks again. “You were the incredible one last night.”

“It takes two, princess.” I could have recited the rest of the list from memory, but I wanted her to read it out loud. Wanted her to realize that we didn’t just belong together, we were made for each other.

“These are so sweet, Jameson. You want a woman who’s strong-willed but not afraid to ask for help. A great sense of humor and a gorgeous smile.” Her lips curled into a grin. “I hope you find her, I really do.”

I pulled over to the side of the road, unable to keep going until I made her understand. “I have found her. It’s you.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Read the last thing on my list,” I urged.

She held my gaze for a moment then bent her head over the paper. “A woman who I’ll fall in love with at first sight. The first time I see her I’ll know with my whole heart and soul that she’s the one.”

I waited for her to respond. As far as I was concerned, that left absolutely no doubt in my mind that she was the woman I’d been waiting for.



“Do you need me to tell you what that feels like, princess? Because it’s exactly what I felt when I looked at you yesterday. You had on that awful wig, and you were covered in mud. Every word out of your mouth was a lie. Because of your ridiculous love of your shoes, you almost got us both injured.”

She let out a soft laugh and looked up at me through those impossibly long, dark lashes.

“But the moment I saw you, I knew you were the one I’d been waiting for. My heart grew too big for my chest, my mouth hurt from smiling you, and everything seemed to click into place. It doesn’t make sense, but I love you, Valentina. Loved you before I even met you. *Tu autem.*”

“What does that mean?” Her eyes narrowed, and she gripped my fingers so tightly she could have cut off the circulation.

“It means you’re the one.”

“No, what language?”

I didn’t know why that mattered, but I lifted my hand and brushed the hair away from her cheek. “It’s Latin.”

Tears filled her lower lids and spilled down her cheeks. “Who even speaks Latin?”

I didn’t know what was happening, didn’t know what I’d said or done to make her so sad. “I’m sorry. I figured it would help when I went through veterinary school.”

“Don’t be sorry.” She put her palms on either side of my cheeks. “Just kiss me, Jameson. Then tell me where the castle is. I’m done fighting this. It’s got to be real.”

# EPILOGUE

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## VALENTINA

*I*t took me two weeks to find the castle. Jameson had no idea what I was talking about, but I insisted that it had to be there somewhere. I'd already given myself over to believing the spell had come true. Especially when he told me he'd written those things down over ten years ago.

Now that I was a believer, I wanted to seal our fates together, so I dug that damn pink candle out of my suitcase and tried to remember what Clarissa said to do with it when I got home.

Tonight was Halloween, and it was going to be a full moon. I figured there would be no moon more powerful than this one to bind us together.

We went out to the firepit he'd built out back and that's when I saw it. The chicken coop. It had four turrets, and the wood had been painted to look like stone. There was even a tiny moat running around the structure with a drawbridge that lowered every morning to let the chickens out to their enclosure.

"There's the castle." I held his hand and rose to my tiptoes to kiss him.

"I forgot about that. I've got volunteers who come help with the animals, and a few of the girls decided the hens needed to be treated like queens. They painted the coop to look like a castle." He wrapped his arms around my waist and leaned down to kiss me. "Do you feel better now? I know that's been bothering you."

“Yes. I mean, I figured six out of seven wasn’t bad, but now that I’ve got seven out of seven, I think it’s safe for me to say I love you.” I held tight to his shoulders as he picked me up and swung me around.

“I love you too. Now let’s get your spell wrapped up because I have big plans for the rest of the night.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” I laughed, hoping his big plans were the same ones I had in mind. Based on how things had been going over the past two weeks, I was positive we were on the same wavelength. “Hey, I almost forgot to tell you. Good news about your uncle. He and his wife are reconciling. You don’t need to worry about her sniffing around your property any more.”

“I can’t believe she thought she’d be able to claim that as part of his assets. Do you know any family law attorneys who can help me go over my parents’ will to make sure neither one of them have a claim?”

“I’m sure I can find someone.” I smoothed my palm over his chest. Now that I believed in love, maybe I’d try looking for a job in a different area of law. Being around people who were arguing all the time brought too much negative energy into my life.

He kissed me again then pulled back and held out the candle I’d brought back from Colorado. “Do your thing, princess.”

I twined my fingers with his and held the candle while he lit the wick.

“Thank you Goddess for the blessings that come. So mote it be.” I cocked my head, waiting for Jameson to say the same words.

“Thank you Goddess for the blessings that come.” His lips lifted at the edges. “Like a wedding and babies.”

“A wedding and babies?” I arched my brows. “Don’t you think we’re moving a little fast?”

“I’ve been waiting all my life for you, Valentina. I don’t think we’re moving nearly fast enough.” He reached into the

pocket of his jeans and pulled out a ring box.

My heart jumped into my throat. This was too much, too soon. Then I thought about my most recent conversation with my sister. When I told her I'd met someone and he filled out every item on my list, she told me to hold on to him and love him like each day might be our last.

“Will you marry me?”

I opened the ring box and stared down at the beautiful smoky topaz stone set in a platinum band with several diamonds framing the edges. Then I looked up at the love of my life, so grateful he hadn't filled my backside with buckshot the first time he met me.

“Yes.” Nodding, I waited for him to slide the ring on my finger. Then together, we said the words that would bind us together forever.

“So mote it be.”

I HOPE you enjoyed this Manster. Please check out the next Manster here: **Madison's Manster** by Jade Royal.

IF YOU ENJOYED Valentina and Jameson's story, read more about his foster brothers, including Grant, in my One Night series **here!**

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# MAKE A MANSTER



*You've Built a Bear, but have you ever Made a Manster? When a group of girlfriends spends a spooky weekend getaway in Manitou Springs, Colorado, they conjure up their perfect partner, but never expect to actually meet them.*

*This Halloween, join our heroines as they manifest the men of their dreams using a little earth magick, tequila, and lime.*

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\* Features one of Mama Mae's boys as the hero

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When Eve London was a girl she wanted to be a trapeze artist. Instead, she grew up to be like most women—a juggler—trying to keep bunches of balls in the air.

Now she spends her days writing about the kind of men she likes – sexy, shameless, and just a little bit sarcastic.

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