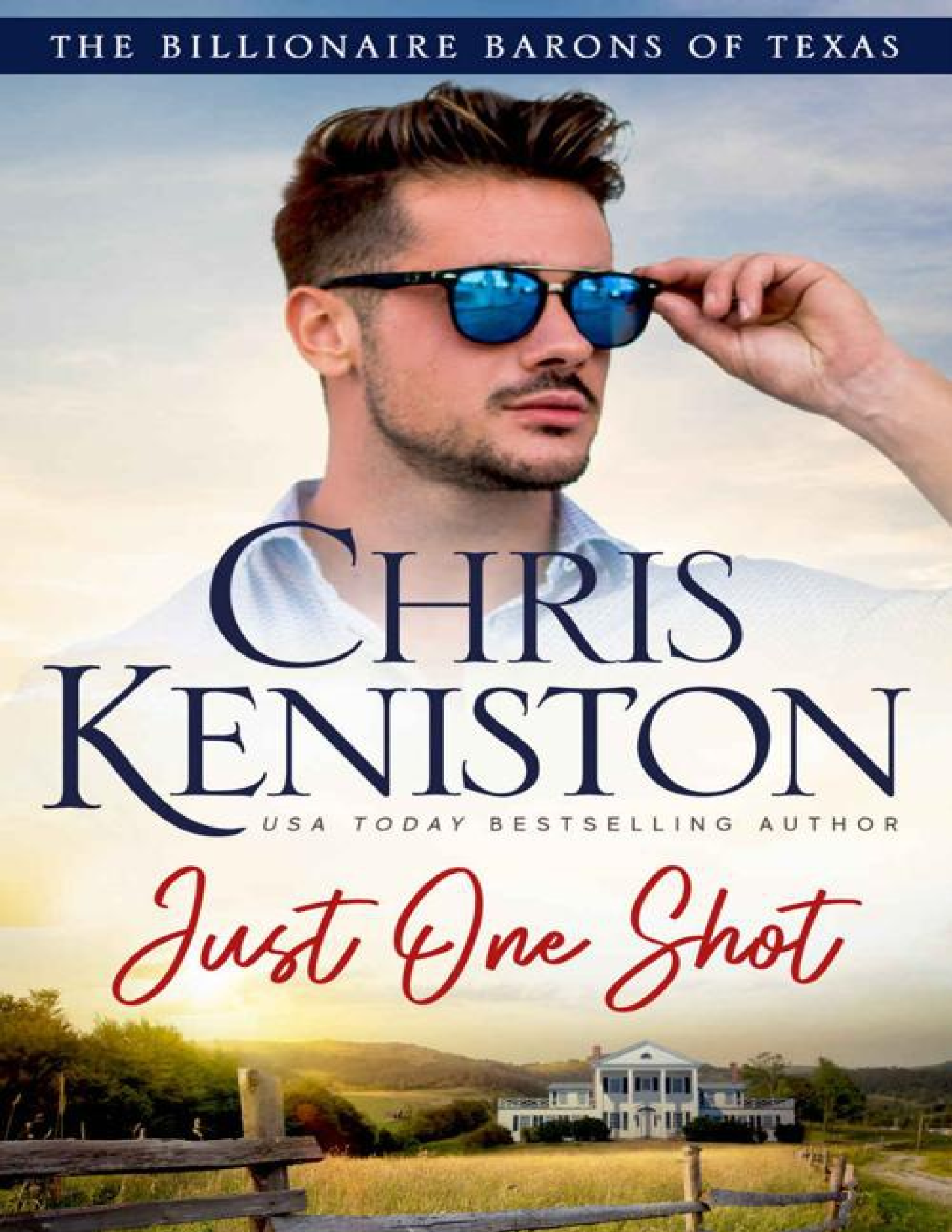


THE BILLIONAIRE BARONS OF TEXAS

A man with short, styled brown hair and a light beard is wearing dark sunglasses with blue lenses. He is looking slightly to the right. His right hand is raised, touching the top of his sunglasses. He is wearing a light blue or white button-down shirt. The background is a soft, hazy sunset or sunrise sky over a landscape. In the lower part of the image, a large white house with a porch is visible in the distance, surrounded by greenery and a wooden fence in the foreground.

CHRIS
KENISTON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Just One Shot

Just One Shot

THE BILLIONAIRE BARONS OF TEXAS BOOK SIX

CHRIS
KENISTON



Indie House Publishing

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, dead, is coincidental.

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CHAPTER ONE

“Is it always this hot in Texas?” Siobhan’s friend and former roommate, Bridget, waved her hand in front of her face. As if she was actually going to help.

Her gaze fixed ahead, Siobhan didn’t bother to look up. “You’ve got the expression, fry an egg on the sidewalk?”

Squinting at the sunlight, Bridget nodded.

“Texas invented it.”

“I think next time I visit, I’ll pick a cooler month.”

Her camera centered on a baby bird pecking at the dirt under a shrub, Siobhan snapped the shot before facing her friend. “Probably California. As long as rain doesn’t bother you.”

“I think I’d rather be soggy than melting.”

Siobhan chuckled. Her friend did have a point.

“Remind me again, why we’re traipsing out here in this horrid heat?”

“State Fair.” Texas has some of the most undervalued national parks in the country. If she wanted her photographic career to flourish at a level suitable to the Baron name, she needed some recognition. A friend and sister’s who owned an art gallery suggested that winning a ribbon at the Texas State Fair would fit the bill. Animal and nature photos dominated the history of award-winning photography, and the Texas parks had an abundance.

Bridget unscrewed the cap on her warm water bottle and guzzled the water left inside. “You’ve got twenty, thirty minutes tops to get your photograph and then we’re heading back to the hotel for a water break. Bridget’s mouth tipped up in the closest thing to a smile Siobhan had seen that day. “And a dip in the pool to cool off sounds pretty good too.”

Once again, her friend had a good point. The heat was a *tad* oppressive.

this time of year. “Deal.”

Now a true grin spread across Bridget’s face.

Ten minutes later, Siobhan lowered her gaze along the precipice side and spotted the perfect shot. “There.”

Bridget’s gaze danced left and right, then up and around. “There w
Leaning against a boulder, her arm outstretched, Siobhan pointed
lone pink bloom thriving amongst the rocky side. “Right there. That fl

When Bridget’s gaze reached the end of Siobhan’s finger and set
the flower, a deep frown formed between her brows. “Doesn’t look lik
college of a shot to me.”

at was “Oh, it will be.” In her mind, Siobhan could see it now. She just
get, “Closer.”

e heard “What?” Bridget inched forward, glanced at the drop only a fe
away, and eased back. “There has to be another... hey, be careful.”

Standing at the very edge of the hillside, Siobhan tipped her head
camera but there was no way she could get the angle she wanted. B
out a deep breath, she looked up. Even she didn’t have the nerve to
craggly along the rocky edge to get closer. Maybe if she had the right equipm
October. not barehanded. And then she spotted it. A lone tree up above.

“I don’t like that look.” Her hand shading her eyes, Bridget lifted h
upward. “Whatever you’re thinking, this is a bad...hey. Where a
going?”

?” Anxious to get her shot while the sunlight was behind her, Siobh
arks in off up the narrow path at a fast clip. “The tree.”

a level “Tree?” Bridget followed, her attention on the rocky path. “Are y
of her you Barons aren’t part mountain goat? Slow down.”

’ two at “I don’t have much time.”

ninated “You have your whole life ahead of you. That is unless we fall
both in cliff. Slow down.”

?” “There.” The lone tree stood strong and tall, if a little lifeless.

’d what “What do you want with a dead tree?” Bridget inched left, avoid
ir prize edge of the rocky path. There was no missing the moment her gaze
refill.” from the drop to her right, then back to Siobhan. A gasp could hav
seen all heard clear across the ravine. “Get off that tree!”

Already halfway up the trunk, Siobhan was convinced the roo
ressive firmly planted and even if there was little life left in the tree, all she

was to reach that first limb and she'd be able to shimmy across for her
"Siobhan Pegeen Baron, get down here right this minute!" Stomp
to one foot hard on the ground, Bridget dropped her fisted hands on her
"You're going to get yourself killed for a stupid photograph."
here?" "It's not stupid, and I'm not going to...Oops!" Her foot skidded
down at the from the rough bark and feeling the tug of gravity against her well-ripened
power." Irish derriere, Siobhan quickly hugged the tree with both arms.
titled on "Oh, dear lord. Your mother will never forgive me. You scoot back
to me much right this minute!"

Siobhan didn't have to look down at her friend to know the woman
had to both spitting mad and terrified. Now that Siobhan was literally out on
the branch there was no point in turning back without the shot. Releasing one
arm to move the camera still dangling from her neck, Siobhan shifted her
weight more heavily onto the massive branch.

and her "You're not listening to me."
blowing "Just another minute." Unable to balance both her weight and the camera
to climb Siobhan set her favorite camera on the branch and with a little
effort, but forward, clicked away. A cloud rolled by, creating partial shade beneath
the flower and she clicked some more. Mother Nature was wonderful.

her gaze The photograph taken, convinced the blue ribbon would be her
prize. These shots, she just had one thing to figure out. How the heck was she
to get out of this tree without getting herself killed?

an took



you sure

All Jack Preston needed was a few hours of shut eye and he'd be able to
more than sleep in his soup tonight. Loosening his bow tie, he shoved
it off this pocket and undid the shirt button that had been choking him for hours
he'd donned this penguin suit last night, he'd expected to be home, or
in bed, long before sunrise. What he hadn't expected was an after-party
ending all after-parties.

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The last two hours felt like he'd been swept back in time to a mid-
musical blockbuster. Seriously, not till last night had he ever seen a
room of guests singing around a grand piano for hours except for
movies. Dancing with every able-bodied single female in attendance
nothing unusual, but doing so until the sun sparkled through the pe-

shot. windows and Devlin Baron's maid served the surviving twenty o
ing herguests breakfast was another first.

er hips. Somehow between chatting up a stacked blonde he'd hoped to se
sparks off with, being roped into reliving his and Devlin's seni
d awayperformances in *Godspell*, and the most ridiculous game of charades t
oundedeveryone laughing till they cried, Connie Danner had caught his
moment of weakness and sweet-talked him into being her last-minu
ck hereone to a black-tie wedding. Another blasted wedding. Tonight. This la
he'd been to more weddings than he had in the previous decade.
ian wasAndrew Baron married, the core group of college buddies who
a limb,nothing of zipping over to Monaco for a good yacht party on a mo
arm tonotice hadn't been seriously affected. By the time his best party buddy
weightmarried and hung up his party hat, a domino effect of falling ba
seemed to have started. The newest crop of most eligible bachelors
the same as his long-time cohorts.

camera, Less than ten minutes on the road and his phone sounded, his m
ootingname flashing on his dashboard. With a tap of his steering wheel, he
side theup the call. "Hey, Mom."

"You're late."

rs with Glancing quickly at the clock in front of him, he frowned, forc
e goingmind to run through late for what.

"Margaret is muttering in the kitchen. You know how she hates l
food warm."

Brunch. "Sorry, Mom. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

le to do "See you then, Son." The softness returned to her voice. "Love you
it in his "Love you too." No matter how tired he might be, his mom's rou
saying love you rather than goodbye, always made him smile.

. When At the next stop light, he rolled up his sleeves, undid another bu
at leasthis shirt, and made a mental note to grab his loafers from the trunk ar
party tothe dress shoes. Even though he was no longer a teen needing to
around from his parents' oversight, he could at least try and not mak
centuryobvious that he'd been out all night.

n entire His phone dinged with a message as he pulled onto his family's pi
in oldThe dashboard spat out that Connie needed to be at the church an hou
ce was to dress with the girls, but her car was making funny noises on th
nthousehome and would he please pick her up instead of meeting her there. '

For thirty years he'd rather have had a few extra minutes to nap this afternoon, it looked like he was going to be hanging out at an empty church waiting for a wedding. Parked in front of the house, he tapped out *No Problem* for years slipping the phone into his pocket, darted up the front steps.

What had Already seated at the table, his father casually let his gaze scan Jack in ahead to toe and back before familiar deep-set lines formed between the plus-brows. "Late night?"

Last year Jack resisted the urge to make excuses and simply dipped his chin. When leaning over his mother's side for a quick hug and kiss hello. "Still thought of this afternoon?"

Comment's Smiling sweetly, his mother spread jam on a croissant and nodded. "Kyle, McKenzies are in Europe so we're playing with the Whitehalls. She's a bachelorette interesting."

Weren't Serving himself from the buffet sideboard, he pulled up an image of the Whitehalls in his mind. "Isn't she the one who cheats at cards?"

Mother's "They both do," his father muttered over the coffee cup at his lips.

Picked "We have a plan." His mother's grin turned sly. "We're going to let the men play against the women. Tiffany won't have a partner to signal."

Jack smiled at his mother. The woman always had a solution for solving his problem.

"Speaking of partners." His father set his coffee cup down on the table. "You're not getting any younger."

And here came the familiar song and dance. Ever since Jack's thirtieth birthday, his father had been more insistent that it was time for him to settle down. Ever since Kyle's wedding, his father had found a way to weave the subject into every and any conversation. "None of us are."

"You know what I mean." His father reached for a warm croissant and split it open. "Even Kyle Baron smartened up and found a nice wife. You'd ditch your dentures and raise kids at the same time."

"No need to exaggerate, Dad. I'm not that old."

"You're not that young either."

Touché. It wasn't like Jack didn't envy Kyle and his brothers just a little bit, but some men weren't cut out for settling down. Jack didn't have to be domesticated. His father would simply have to accept some time later that watching TV with the little woman and changing diapers was the cards for Jack.

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CHAPTER TWO

“Don’t look back until I tell you.” Adjusting the light meter on her camera, Siobhan glanced in the direction of the impatient groom.

Normally, Siobhan would be the assistant and backup photographer for her friend Marilyn’s wedding photography biz, but when Marilyn fell down a flight of stairs two days ago unpleasantly snapping her ankle, Siobhan was promoted to main photographer for today’s wedding of Mindy and Chad. Not wanting to disappoint Marilyn, or the bride, Siobhan needed to get every shot perfect. This was the photo that every bride loved. Capturing the groom’s reaction when he first saw her in her wedding dress.

The brick arches under the canopy of massive trees outside the ceremony tent was the best setting for bridal photos she’d ever seen. So far all the photos of the bride were going to be amazing. Especially the ones by the exotic plant that had the bride squealing when she’d seen it the first time. Now it was up to Siobhan to capture the arched background, the exotic plant, and the groom in a single shot.

“How much longer?” Chad stretched his neck, knowing better than to mess with the perfect bow tie that had taken the wedding coordinator an hour longer than it should have to set straight. “It’s hot out here in this monkey suit.”

“Another moment, I promise.” She had to bite back the urge to tell him the only options in a Texas summer were hot, hotter, and hottest.

Since the last-minute assistant that was supposed to be helping Siobhan was a no-show, setting up the shots and moving the equipment around was taking longer than she wanted. At least the bride stood waiting in the air-conditioned vestibule with the bridesmaids. No need to risk melting the woman of the day or ruining the perfect hair and makeup that had taken an hour to get right. Using the elbow of her long sleeve black shirt, Siobhan wiped sweat from her brow, longing for an Irish summer instead of this Texas oven.

wave of her arm, she silently signaled the maid of honor to bring the bride.

This whole process would have been so much easier had she not been doing the work of two people. She couldn't mess up this photo, she knew it would be the cornerstone of the couple's wedding album. Or website since no one printed albums anymore. Everything was stored in the cloud now.

Stepping away from the camera, she'd carefully set up, she hurried to where the bride stood.

camera, "Where do you want me?" Mindy asked softly.

"Right here." Carefully glancing up at the sun and turning the bride to a right angle, Siobhan took an extra minute to make sure the hair, veil, and tripped flowers were literally picture perfect.

Siobhan "Is it time to look?" the groom called out without turning his head.

and Chad. "No!" Siobhan and the bride shouted in unison before giggling to get the unexpected synchronization.

ing the "He's anxious to see you. That's a good sign." Siobhan winked at the woman. No need to relay that the man simply wanted out of the heat.

church A last second check of the camera to record the video of their first look at each other, and the camera for the still photos, she studied the screen by some both. It was time.

st time. She clicked on the video. "Turn around, Chad."

plant, With her other camera in hand, she clicked away as she captured the magic of the groom seeing his bride in her dress for the first time. Her eyes turned misty and his nervous stance relaxed.

no longer "Well?" Mindy's smile was stiff and her voice quiet. Poor thing. "I'm nervous."

remind "You are the most beautiful woman on this earth." Chad's voice came over ever so slightly.

Siobhan The bride's smile bloomed, the groom brushed his thumb across her cheek and whispered something only Mindy could hear. The sparkle in the air-couple's eyes was everything a photographer could ask for. The ring captured on film was as priceless as Siobhan had hoped it to be. In a few hours she would be proud of her.

ripped at Since it would be dark when the ceremony was over, the couple had opted for doing their formal photos now beforehand.

out the Chad took Mindy's hands. "I'm so happy to be marrying you today
ot been "I love you," the bride whispered back, leaning in for a kiss.
as surephotos to take before the guests inside revolt." She'd put in a last-min
weddingto her sisters for some help, but everyone in the family was tied up. So
l on thegood. At least the bridesmaids were trying to help when they
laughing and joking about.
rried to The first batch of photos went off without a hitch. Everyone coo
and the blissful couple managed to keep their hands to themselves.
came the new effort, moving the entire entourage to the church steps
e to thefew photos and the main show could begin.
eil, and Siobhan turned off her equipment. Two of the bridesmaids he
carry the bride's train as she walked up to the church steps. Siobhan sh
one camera onto her shoulder, but she couldn't get a good grip of the
; at theone. There was no time to make two trips; they were dangerously c
behind schedule. So much so that she actually considered pulling a s
l at theoff the street to help. She didn't even want to think how she was going
off the next few hours. "One shot at a time," she muttered, and reac
look atthe equipment bag again, still muttering, "one shot at a time."
eens of



red theAt the back of the air-conditioned church, Jack sat scrolling thro
Chad'sphone. The pew wasn't what anyone would consider comfortable, b
was so wasn't anything else to do until his date was done with photos.
okay?" Connie poked her head into the church from the vestibule. "You
cracked He waved a hand. "I'm great."
oss her "These photos are going to be spectacular. Mindy looks fabulous
e in thephotographer seems really sharp. You could come out and watch.
your legs."
noment "Sure." He slipped his phone into his breast pocket. For the mo
Marilyn every bride always looked beautiful on her wedding day. It was no s
ple had that Connie's friend looked fabulous. For those in love and happy to
more power to them. None of that was in the cards for him. Like bal
all cute, brides are all beautiful. The problem is the lifelong commitm

7.” goes with both children and wives. He wished the groom all the happiness the world, but he liked being free to travel, party, or enjoy a wife who would have company no strings attached. Even if some of his friends were late to the wedding, it was a little more than a little happy, for him, marriage was a far, so parents’ chagrin—was a hard pass.

were not Jack rose and a well-dressed older woman in the pew in front of him. She turned, her smile did little to hide her curiosity as to why he was leaving. He smiled back and followed Connie out of the church. The heat hit him. Now Born and raised in Texas, he was more than used to the summer heat, but it didn’t mean he had to like it. For a split second, he’d reconsidered leaving the air-conditioned church.

helped to The bridesmaids were lined up on the steps, shuffling back and forth according to height. Not far from the foot of the steps, the photographer juggled miscellaneous bags and equipment, reminding him of an overpacked mule. He didn’t want to be in the way, but she looked like she could help, and his mother would have his head for not helping a damsel in distress. “I’m going to give the photographer a hand.”

headed for Connie shrugged. “She’s doing okay so far.”

Turning back to the petite woman, she didn’t look like she was doing okay to him. No sooner did she hike one of the cameras further onto her shoulder, then one or both would slip off as she reached for another piece of equipment. “I don’t know about that.”

ugh his “Siobhan’s a professional, but it’s up to you.”

ut there An uncommon name in Texas, he squinted as he walked toward the woman. Could it be? No. There had to be more women named Siobhan. This was his best friend’s little sister. Closing in, the cherub face looked up at him and he blinked. Good grief.

and the How long since he’d seen her? Since Kyle had settled down, he didn’t see as much of any of the Barons as he used to. On top of that, Stretch spent most of her time in Ireland with her mom. Doing some fast math, the last time he remembered seeing her had to be three, maybe four years ago at Andrew’s wedding. From across the lawn, the woman in black he knew by surprise the wedding coordinator was trotting across the lawn. Apparently, he was the only one to notice the damsel in distress. The two reached Siobhan almost the same instant. He raised his hand and smiled at the coordinator who looked more nervous than the bride. “I’ve got this.”

ness in Once again, as the petite woman looked up from reaching for the
oman's one camera slid off her shoulder and almost touched the ground bef
gettingreached over to snatch it, knocking the other strap off of her should
—to hissettled on her elbow.

“Jack?” She straightened to her full height. “What are you doing he
of him He wished her startled tone didn't lean toward annoyed.

ing. He “I'm a plus-one.” He pointed to where Connie stood on the lowe
n hard.watching them before leaning over to grab as much equipment as h
but thatbalance. “You should really have help.”

ving the “Tell me something I don't know.” She hefted the one remaini
onto her shoulder. “My help is a no-show.”

d forth Jack glanced at his date still intently watching his every move
graphertossing a smile in Siobhan's direction. “Then it looks like I'm all yours

loaded Her brows shot up and her eyes rounded into perfect circles.

needed The double entendre smacked him between the eyes. *Nice goi
listress.brother's best friend. Go ahead and scare the crud out of the kid.*]

backpedal and get his size twelve foot out of his mouth. “Consider n
photography assistant for the evening.”

s doing A smile replaced the startled expression and relief washed over l
nto herleast he didn't have to worry now about one or all of her big brothers
load oftearing him apart limb from limb for making an untoward comment
baby sister.

“Normally I would say absolutely not. But at least for the next l
ard thehelp is appreciated. Just do as I say.”

an than “Yes, ma'am.” If he'd had a free hand he would have saluted.

him and The next few minutes went by in a flash. In a matter of seconds, S
rearranged the bridesmaids order in what was clearly a more p
franklypresentation than the one the girls had come up with on their own. Ne
Siobhanthe groomsmen and the groom. Then photos of the maid of honor and
ath, thebest man and groom, then the four of them. It didn't take long for
s ago atrealize the girl had an eye for this. What he couldn't remember was
w to bebrothers ever mentioned she was a wedding photographer? Heck, h
wasn'teven mentioned she'd graduated high school? No, he knew that, la
bhan atheard, she was in college. That's right. Maybe. Well, it didn't matter
dinator,big brothers couldn't be here to help, the least he could do was step in
all, he could do big brother if he had to.

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CHAPTER THREE

There were worse things in life than having Jack Preston carry her equipment around for a wedding shoot. As a matter of fact, having a good-looking man in a tux as a photography assistant could probably only give Marilyn a better reputation than she already had.

The last of the outdoor shots were filmed without a single dropped camera bag. Instead of sitting in a pew like a guest, Jack had gone on continuing to help carry her camera bag as she scurried around the church for best shots of the bride before, during, and leaving the ceremony.

The majority of guests had left the church for the beloved cocktail hour while Siobhan once again lined everyone up for family photos. The bride and groom, the bridal party off to one side were having a party of their own. The grooms produced a bottle of tequila. Just what this party needed. Siobhan sighed.

As the wedding party huddled around the person pouring the tequila, she stepped closer and leaning in as she adjusted her camera, softly whispering, "Looks like the party is starting early."

His breath skittered across her ear and she resisted the urge to scratch the side of her face. The sensation hadn't been annoying, just unexpected. More like something one of her brothers might do to irritate her—sort of.

Grabbing her mind away from the odd feeling still tickling the side of her face, she refocused on the job at hand, staring down at the shots she had taken of the bride, groom, and someone's great granny. Perfect and complete. Taking one step away from the altar steps, she called up to the bride. "That's the end of the list you gave me. Any last-minute extras?"

The bride and groom shook their heads.

"Great. See you at the reception hall." Heaving a long sigh, she knew it was done. So far so good. She couldn't help but think climbing up a

the perfect nature shot was way easier than corralling wedding party members and their families. Yes, the money was nice, but there was more to it than just the money. All she needed was one good break and she wouldn't have to deal with tipsy wedding guests anymore. She sure hoped either her sister's connection with the gallery owner or the entries for the State Fair in the fall—or something—would help. Stretching her shoulders, she turned to Jack. “Looks like it's done here.”

Jack had been holding the extra camera equipment, but his gaze was on his date for the night and the shot glass being passed around. “Does that kind of equipment happen a lot?”

Not for her. “I don't do that many weddings, but this is the first wedding where everyone in the entourage started the party before they've even been to church.”

“I've partied hard at many a wedding, but not usually this soon.”

Siobhan chuckled. “I remember.”

A crease between Jack's brows deepened.

“Chase's wedding?” she reminded him. “You, Kyle, and a bunch of friends had Chase up on a chair and were carrying him around the hall while only singing the Aggie fight song.”

A lazy smile replaced the frown. “Oh, yeah. That was fun.”

Siobhan shook her head. CJ had thrown a fit when she saw what her rowdy guy pals were doing, but it was the Governor who, with a single look, Jack's cane on the floor and the words, “We would prefer the groom in or out of his honeymoon,” had the group setting the groom back on the floor.

“Does it look like someone needs to corral the bridal party or they'll miss out on the real fun.” Jack sighed. “I'll see you at the reception.”

Siobhan nodded, studying him as he walked away. How long had it been since she'd seen him? With her brothers married off one by one, Jack had been around as much. And who was his date? Connie seemed to be more interested in partying with her friends than hanging with her date. *Interesting*. It was done. Jack had always been like an extra brother, and she was more than happy to have his help, date or no date.

Her equipment loaded in the car, she hurried to the reception. Siobhan expected to take photos of the bride and groom outside of the historical house in front of their rented white Bentley before the grand entrance.

A few minutes later, she'd pulled up to the reception hall and

ies and surprise, Jack and Connie were out front with the bride and groom, fe than for her. Once again, Jack was helping carry things about. This re to coral phase of the wedding would be so much easier. No more staged ph nection would just be Siobhan, her camera and her lenses, running from one both—the hall to the other.

e we're "I've got it from here." She hefted a smaller camera bag over her s as the bride and groom made their way into the waiting room.

was on "You sure?" Jack raised a single brow.

oes this "I'm sure." Maybe.

The next couple of hours whizzed by. Every so often, she'd glance vedding see Jack and Connie dancing, but mostly, Connie seemed to be danc left the laughing with her friends, a glass of champagne in hand, while Jack sa table chatting with another of the plus-ones.

The cake cut and the clock ticking, the party was winding do Siobhan was more than ready to call it a night. Hefting the larger cam over her shoulder, she blew out a slow breath. Just a little while lon; of yourshe could make a nice cup of tea and crawl into bed.

ll while "Need anything else?" Jack's deep timbre drifted over her shoulder

Had his voice always been so...soothing? "Actually, can I us muscles one more time?"

hat the His brows rose high on his forehead.

e tap of Just like earlier when he'd said he was all hers, she realized she ie piece have found a less suggestive way of asking for his help. "I only need

: camera for the last shots of the night, but I'd like to load most 'll missequipment in my car so I can just head out when we're finished. You

save me a few trips if you don't mind helping me lug the rest of this it been my car."

wasn't "Your wish is my command, Siobhan."

terested In half the time it would have taken her, he lifted all her spare equ For her, into his arms and turned toward the parking lot. Tossing a pleasant gri ppy for direction, he started walking. The one small bag on her shoulder, it su

hit her that staring at the man's posterior was so not appropriate. After he'd be was like a brother. Wasn't he?

I venue



to her

waiting Jack really wished he could have offered to take Siobhan home. He
reception like the idea of the kid driving all the way to the ranch at this ho
otos, it Connie was his responsibility and if he didn't get her out of here soon,
end of going to be carrying his plus-one out of the place.

After he'd finished loading the photography gear in Siobhan's
houlder returned to the reception, it took a few minutes to spot his date for the

Once again, Connie stood at the bar, dancing in place, with a fresh c
her hand. The woman was going to have one hell of a hangover ton
but at least she'd had a good time tonight. He put his hands on her sh
up and turned her away from the bar. "Time to go home."

ing and "But the party isn't over."

at at the Thankfully, the slurred words had no sooner left her mouth than
announced for everyone to line up outside and bid the happy newlywe
wn and voyage. Dancing her way more than walking, moving forward wa
era bagging.

ger and By the time they gathered her purse and shawl, and he'd wrest
half-full glass of wine out of her hand, the bride and groom were
r. away and the guests were dispersing. They meandered through the
se your lot while Jack kept a tight grip on her arm.

"It was a nice wedding," she practically cooed, zig zagging beside

"Very nice." He tugged her closer in an effort to keep her from wa
e could off, relieved to finally make it to his car. Hitting the fob to unl
my one passenger side, he held the door open. "Climb in."

of my She spun towards him, wobbling in place. "You're a good guy, Jac
u could "I'm glad you think so." At this rate, he wasn't going to get her h
gear to sun up. "Let's get in the car."

Bobbing her head nonstop, she flopped into the passenger seat and
fumbled with the safety belt.

ipment "Here." He leaned over her. "I'll do that."

n in her The buckle securely snapped in place, she smiled up at him. I
iddenly normal sultry smile, but a goofy grin that made her look like a
r all, he character. The woman was definitely three sheets to the wind.

Her door closed, he rounded the hood and noticed a shadow s
amongst the cars down a few rows. Wasn't that where Siobhan was
Leaving Connie safely strapped into his car, he walked over to the s
"Siobhan?"

he didn't Turning slowly, she looked up at him. "Hi."
our, but "Car trouble?"
he was Heaving a heavy sigh, she nodded. "Car won't start. The lights co
and the radio works, so it's not the battery."
car and "Do you have gas?" He made his way around to the front of her ca
e night. She rolled her eyes and threw one hand on her hip. "Yes, I have
lrink in full tank." Nibbling on her lower lip, she glanced at the car then back
narrow, "I considered looking under the hood for a loose something or other,
houlder my brothers ever taught me was how to drive a car, not how to fix it."
That pretty much summed up Jack's knowledge of auto mechan
nutshell. "Let's take a look and see if anything jumps out at us."
the DJ Nodding her head, she inched closer to him.
eds bon Popping the hood open, he wiggled the battery cables just in case t
is slow something to do with her problems, and then looked for any signs o
Nothing stood out. "I don't see anything troublesome. Could be your s
led the Siobhan groaned.
driving "Have you called someone to come get you?"
parking "Can't. My cell phone died. I forgot to charge it."
He slammed the hood shut and dusted off his hands. "No s
him. dragging anyone out at this hour. I'll give you a lift home."
ndering "The ranch is out of your way. I'm sure the Governor won't mind."
ock the "Nonsense. It's almost midnight. The Governor is probably
asleep."
k." Lips pressed tightly together, he could see the wheels turning. No
ome till she was debating what was the worse fate, accepting a ride from
waking her grandfather up in the middle of the night. "I guess you're r
briefly "Good."
Bringing her camera bags with them. He tossed them into his
Connie had leaned her head against the window and her snores drifte
Not her the car.
cartoon Siobhan tilted her head, staring at Connie a moment before turnin
to him. "Long day?"
tanding Holding the back door open for her, he shrugged. "Long enough."
arked? "Is she okay?"
hadow. "Nothing that a gallon of water and a good night's sleep won't cure
The moment the back door slammed shut, Connie stirred, righting

“Are we home?”

Jack climbed into the driver’s seat. “Not yet.”

ome on, “I appreciate the ride.” Siobhan smiled at Connie.

Her eyes open wider than they’d been in hours, Connie twisted
r. seat. “Who are you?”

gas. A “Siobhan. The photographer.”

to Jack. Connie frowned. “Why are you in my car?”

but all “She’s in my car,” Jack corrected. “And she happens to be n
friend’s kid sister, so we’re taking her home.”

ics in a Eyebrows lifted a little higher, Connie leaned back, twisting to be
Siobhan before settling forward again, and flopping back against th
shaking her head. “Doesn’t look like much of a kid to me.”

hat had Backing the car out of the space, Jack looked up at the rearview
f leaks.his gaze meeting Siobhan’s. The kid was holding back a chuckle. H
tarter.” sparkling and her lips plump in a rosy sheen, he had to agree, she
didn’t look like a kid.

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“Are we home?”

Jack climbed into the driver’s seat. “Not yet.”

“I appreciate the ride.” Siobhan smiled at Connie.

Her eyes open wider than they’d been in hours, Connie twisted in her seat. “Who are you?”

“Siobhan. The photographer.”

Connie frowned. “Why are you in my car?”

“She’s in my car,” Jack corrected. “And she happens to be my best friend’s kid sister, so we’re taking her home.”

Eyebrows lifted a little higher, Connie leaned back, twisting to better see Siobhan before settling forward again, and flopping back against the seat, shaking her head. “Doesn’t look like much of a kid to me.”

Backing the car out of the space, Jack looked up at the rearview mirror, his gaze meeting Siobhan’s. The kid was holding back a chuckle. Her eyes sparkling and her lips plump in a rosy sheen, he had to agree, she really didn’t look like a kid.



CHAPTER FOUR

“Are you sure you don’t want to drop me off first and then circle back off your girlfriend?”

“Not my girlfriend. I was just a plus-one.” He pulled into a parking in front of a well-manicured townhouse. “And the sooner she gets i own bed, the better for her.”

Considering that the woman had fallen back asleep as soon as Jack out of the parking lot at the reception hall, and hadn’t woken up Siobhan couldn’t argue with him. As for the girlfriend mistake, she have realized that players like Jack didn’t settle for one girl. He proba a different date every night of the week. Heaven knows before her t met their wives, they rotated women more often than she brushed her t

The car door open, Jack unsnapped Connie’s seat belt and tried i her awake.

“Need some help?”

He handed Siobhan a small clutch. “Find her keys for me, please.”

With only a cell phone and lipstick in her purse, finding the ke easy. “Here you go.”

“Thanks. If you want to climb into the front seat, I’ll be back shor an effortless maneuver, Jack had Connie out of the car and in his arr way he managed to unlock her front door and kick it open without Connie down had Siobhan thinking this wasn’t the first time he’d c woman into her, or his, house.

To her surprise, only a few minutes later Jack was bouncing do two front steps and climbing into the car.

“Home for you now.” Jack slid into the car.

“Thank you again, Jack. I know this is out of your way.”

His gaze took her in. “I’m glad to help.”

“I could have called the Governor, or Mitch, he’s in town this week.” Jack shook his head. “Pick a man in your family, any one of them, I’ll have my head next time I was at the ranch.”

Pressing her lips tightly together, she tried not to laugh. “So we’re self-preservation?”

“Absolutely.” He pulled away from the curb and tossed a sly smile in her direction. “My mama did not raise a stupid boy.”

“No,” she leaned back, “I don’t suppose she did.”

“You must be exhausted.” Eyes on the road, Jack changed lanes. I thought of my brother Kyle, his best friend clearly had a lead foot.

“Yeah. The family paid extra for photography to stay until the parking space left.” She tipped her head back and let her eyelids drift closed. “I really appreciate your help.”

“Glad I was able to make a difference.”

She pulled away a second away from telling him not as glad as she was, her stomach growled since she hadn’t eaten out a loud rumble in protest of all work and no dinner.

“Did you eat anything tonight?” Her hand on her stomach, willing the unruly organ to be quiet, she looked at her brother’s head. “Too busy. And honestly, I wasn’t really hungry.”

“That rumbling in your stomach says otherwise.” He looked at the dashboard clock. “We’ll stop for a bite. Got a preference?”

“It’s bad enough I’m taking you so far out of your way.” She put her hand on his arm. “I’ll get something at the ranch. Hazel always has leftover in the fridge.”

He glanced down at her hand and then up into her eyes. A hint of respect and tenderness glistened in his gaze and made her go a little soft. “I’ll be there.” In her brothers, under that work hard play hard demeanor was a sweet nature. The course, as much a part of the Baron family as her brothers, he probably put her as a little sister to be protected.

“Burgers? Chicken? What strikes your fancy?” he asked.

“You don’t have to... oh, look.” She pointed at the massive yellow sign down the road. “Sonic. I love their Chicago chili cheese dogs.”

His smile softened and he seemed to stare at her for a fraction longer than a casual glance before putting on his turn signal.

Reflexively, her hand lifted to her face, feeling her nose and cheek. “I have something on my face?”

end.” “Excuse me?”

“Never mind.” Now didn’t she sound like a dumb kid.

The drive-in slots at the carhop chain were all empty save one of talking. He pulled into a space nearest the front door.

“Want anything else besides the hot dog?” He read the panel by the door, then turned to Siobhan.

“I haven’t eaten here for a while. Let me see.” She unfastened her belt and leaned over him to better see the menu panel. “I’ll have the Chili cheese dog, a side order of onion rings—no, wait, make that tater tots and a... banana pudding milk shake.”

Back in her seat, Jack stared at her again with that same curious expression. “Sure you don’t want the onion rings too, or maybe a split?”

Now he was teasing her. “I have a healthy appetite.”

“So I noticed.” A broad smile stretched across his face as he took her place and added a banana pudding milkshake for himself.

Shaking her head at him, she shifted to lean against the door and shook him. For the first time ever, she looked at Jack. Really looked at him and wonder her sister Eve had often used Jack as her plus-one and gold-digger at the man repellent. Between sparkling blue eyes, a smile that could melt snow in Alaska, and all-around magazine cover good looks, like her brothers’ hand all the bravado was a nice, thoughtful guy. Who knew?

s in the



Siobhan’s scent lingered in Jack’s nose. She’d leaned right over his shoulder. Her hair had been inches from his face as she read the menu. An aroma of chili and almond wafted around her. Fresh, sweet, and way more intoxicating than he’d expected. With her profile direct in his line of vision, there was something missing the adorable face. Not a lick of makeup on, the natural look she’d have emphasized her youth; instead she looked radiant. How different from the woman he’d started the night with. Maybe it was a Baron thing. He’d never thought Eve wasn’t big on makeup either, and even when she did wear some, it was never obvious. He’d always thought Eve was a natural beauty, but staring at Siobhan for those few moments, he had to admit, the kid had grown up to be quite the stunner.

“Is that a problem?” Her voice pulled him from his wandering thoughts.

“Is what a problem?”

her car. “My healthy appetite.”

No, it wasn't a problem. He'd been surprised at her enthusiasm for the sloppy hot dog. Most of the women he knew would barely pick at a slice in front of him. He found her lack of pretense refreshing. “Not at all.”

The food came quickly. The only thing missing from the young Chicago 1950s carhop uniform was the roller skates. Jack handed Siobhan her drink—then the tots and the drink. Taking his time unwrapping the straw milkshake, he watched her balancing the food on her lap and set the taconfused on the dashboard. Slowly, she unwrapped the hot dog as if it were a banana and dug in the way he would dig into a ribeye.

“We can get back on the road if you want. I promise I won't make it in your car.” To prove her point, she took a big bite out of the sloppy hot dog and moaned with delight, popped the tip of her tongue out to lick away a chili and then smiled up at him. “See?”

Tucking his shake into the cup holder, he smiled back. “No hurry.”
“Jack.” Somehow she'd turned his single syllable name into a giggling-syllable drawl. Not quite Irish, not quite Texas, but he kind of liked it snow improbably past your bedtime. I know it's way past mine.” She took a bite of the hot dog and chewing, held her hand in front of her mouth, muttering, “Sorry, this is so good.”

“Glad you're enjoying it.”

She swallowed and took a hard sip of the milkshake. “I am, thank you, but it's a long drive to the ranch from here and even longer back to my place.”

The idea of simply watching her devour her late-night meal with gusto held more appeal than it should have, but Siobhan was probably the only woman in the world. Starting the car, he backed out of the spot. Traffic was unlight, and he had to fight the urge to watch her more than the road.

Siobhan took the last bite of her hot dog and sighed. “That was a pleasure, as always. Thanks for stopping, Jack.”

“My pleasure.”

Tossing all the trash into the paper sack, she set the bag at her feet and reached for the radio, flipping through stations. “Ooh. This song is perfect. She turned up the sound. A few moments later, she was rapping along.

ights. Eminem tune. Though most people might not call her misguided rapping.

“You like Eminem?”

over a “I do this song.”

salad in “That song came out eons ago. I don’t think you were even born yet.”

She blinked at him. “Not that it matters but I was most definitely server’s born when this song first came out. But the reason I know the song is hot dog it’s one of my mother’s favorites.”

for his It took him a moment to process that the kid was not a kid at all drinkfully legal adult by more than a few years. When the heck had that happened?

reasure Rap was not his favorite form of music, but as cute as Siobhan

bobbing her head to the song, she was truly and rightfully butcher a messtune. That unbridled exuberance was the kid he remembered. He not dog, probably watch her for hours. There was no worry over how she appeared to others. Definitely a Baron through and through. But right now precious cargo to get home to her family.

For the rest of the ride to the ranch, she flipped from station to station a two-head bobbing, sang along to different tunes. Disappointment actually it. “It sits itself at home in the pit of his stomach when he reached the family ranch another pulled into the long driveway.

mouth, “We’re here.” Siobhan sat up straight. As soon as the car came to she hopped out before he could come around and open her door. “You long drive back to your condo. You don’t need to stick around.”

nk you, “Sorry, kid. I always see a lady to her door.” The ranch was most to your the safest place for miles, but driving away with a woman standing doorstep was not an option for him, never mind when the woman in question such was the baby sister of his best friend.

ly dead A light burned in the front window and he saw movement. A r usually later, the front door swung open. Siobhan’s grandmother smiled

Preston. What a nice surprise.” Her gaze drifted over his shoulder to mazing and then narrowing slightly, she looked at Siobhan. “What happened car?”

“It wouldn’t start and Jack was there so he offered a ride.”

’eet and “In that case.” She stepped back from the door. “Thank you, Jack great.” driving Siobhan. Please come in.”

g to an The thought of politely refusing crossed his mind, but he’d been a

effortsthe Baron household long enough to know when Lila Baro
instructions, it was best to do as you were told. “Thank you, but
moment, I have a long drive still.”

“Nonsense.” Lila closed the door behind them. “You’re staying v
et.” As you’ve already pointed out, it’s late and you have a long drive.”

already “Grams is right. You know we have more spare rooms than a
becausehotel.”

Jack’s gaze bounded from Siobhan to her grandmother. He knew v
l, but awas outnumbered. “I guess I’m staying.” The question at hand now w
pened?did the idea of waking up with the Barons—especially one Baron—
lookedmuch appeal? More so, how much trouble would that appeal get him in
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the Baron household long enough to know when Lila Baron gave instructions, it was best to do as you were told. “Thank you, but only a moment, I have a long drive still.”

“Nonsense.” Lila closed the door behind them. “You’re staying with us. As you’ve already pointed out, it’s late and you have a long drive.”

“Grams is right. You know we have more spare rooms than a Baron hotel.”

Jack’s gaze bounded from Siobhan to her grandmother. He knew when he was outnumbered. “I guess I’m staying.” The question at hand now was why did the idea of waking up with the Barons—especially one Baron—hold so much appeal? More so, how much trouble would that appeal get him into?



CHAPTER FIVE

Anyone would think after eating as much as Siobhan had before going that she'd still be stuffed to the gills. Nope, she was ravenous as usual. A bite of Hazel's from scratch blueberry pancakes and her eyes closed in delightful appreciation. By the time the three of them last night had chatted a bit about the wedding and car rescue and her grandmother had set her up with a bed and a change of clothing for the morning, she was now running on only four hours of sleep and in desperate need of a gallon of coffee.

"Didn't they feed you last night?" The Governor sat at one end of the table. "Slow down, girl. Breakfast isn't a race."

Siobhan wiped her mouth and put down her napkin. "Yes, sir."

"I hear Jack had to bring you home." Mitch stood at the buffet table and poured himself a glass of orange juice.

"My car broke down." She turned to her grandfather. "Which is a pain for me. We're going to have to get the car fixed or towed before the hall opens or it's still there."

"Already taken care of." The Governor looked to the doorway where Hazel carried a full pot of hot coffee.

"Bless you." Siobhan smiled up at the family housekeeper who was clearing the table, filling the empty coffee cups before setting the pot down on a warmer on the buffet.

"So where is our knight in shining armor?" Mitch took a sip of coffee.

"Ready for one of Hazel's scrumptious breakfasts." Jack appeared in the dining room freshly showered and dressed. For as long as Siobhan could remember, her brothers and Jack swapped clothes like a couple of girls. Having them all the same size had made impromptu sleepovers a piece of cake.

A well-raised Texas boy, Jack stopped first to shake the Governor's then circled to the other side and kissed Grams on the cheek the same way any of the family would have.

"It was our good fortune you were at the wedding to rescue our Grams grinned up at Jack as if he were one of her own precious grandchildren. The scene brought a smile to her face.

He chose the seat next to her and swiftly unfolded the cloth napkin onto his lap. "I was a last-minute plus-one. Glad I was there. I hate to think how long she'd have been stuck there." His gaze met hers and she recognized a silent reproof in his eyes. She could read this man as well as any other brother and knew as sure as her name was Siobhan Pegeen Baron that a momentary stern glare was in reference to her dead cell phone.

With a short nod of her head, she let him know 'message received' and dug into her pancakes again.

"Not the best of neighborhoods." Mitch shook his head. "We appreciate you stepping in."

"Nothing y'all wouldn't have done."

No one could argue with that. All her brothers and cousins were raised to be gentlemen. Old-fashioned chivalry was alive and well in this part of Texas. Even the players in the family were respectful and protective of the women in their lives. No matter how well they did or didn't know their place, it was part of the family and, of course, he would make sure she was safe the same way he took care of getting his own date home safe and sound. Even the rest of her family, she was very, very glad that Jack had been there where

"Did you have a good time at the wedding?" Grams asked him.

"Actually, I had more fun helping Siobhan."

"How's that?" Mitch lifted his gaze from his plate to Siobhan then back to Jack.

"You all know I was replacing Marilyn as principal photographer and his hot assistant she hired never showed up."

Jack raised his hand. "Meet her temporary assistant."

"Wasn't that sweet of you?" Grams grinned from ear to ear, showing their appreciation, Honey, the border collie at her grandmother's side, lifted her head from the floor and began swishing her tail.

Listening to Jack retell the events of the night from his perspective, the impromptu photography assistant had Mitch staring back and forth intently.

's hand, both of them. Though there was no reason for it, his scrutiny had her v
ne way to shift in her seat.

“Siobhan did a great job.” Jack snagged a slice of toast off of a
ir girl.” “The way she coaxed just the right expressions and reactions from the
recious party was impressive. Not an easy feat to corral everyone for the photo
quite a few were already drunk.”

l across “Oh, my.” Her grandmother pointed to a framed print of one of l
nk how Bend photos that hung across the room, a smile taking over her face
zed the “She is quite the photographer.”

of her Jack turned his head, his gaze narrowed as he studied the phot
that the then whistled. “That’s a lot of talent.”

“Thank you.” She smiled up at him, thankful for the support.
ed’ and “Weddings are just a side gig. Help pay the bills until I can make
for myself.” The wedding gigs had actually been fun, but her first lo
preciated definitely her wildlife photography and her action photos like the B
racing next. Most of her childhood she’d dreamed of either captaining
yachts or photo journalism.

aised to Her cell phone played “Irish Eyes” and a smile tugged hard at the
part of of her mouth. The most difficult part of having an Irish mother
e of the American father was splitting her time between the two. She loved the
m. Jack so much, but it was increasingly looking like her life was unfolding
ife. The more than across the pond, so hearing her mother’s voice always m
but, like smile. “It’s Mum. She probably wants to hear how the wedding went.
right if I put her on speakerphone?”

“No phone at the table is a rule that can always be broken for M
The Governor smiled sincerely and Siobhan tapped at her phone. Co
en back morning get any better?

but the



“Hi Mum. You’re on speaker.” Siobhan’s eyes lit up.
As if Though he tried his best to be discreet, Jack couldn’t help but watc
mother’s “Hello to everyone.” A chorus of hello, hi, and good morning
around the room. “Tell me, girl, how was the wedding yesterday
mother’s musical lilt came through the phone.
tive as A wide grin on her face, Siobhan leaned back in her seat and
ently at

wanting to recount the events in more detail than before. With each story of the
Siobhan's enthusiasm grew. Practically bouncing in her chair, he
platter bloomed and her eyes sparkled. Her love for her mother seemed to be
the bride for every sentence. The same could be said for her mother. Jack didn't
know when to stop the words, but the tone. In every question her mother asked, the
her voice couldn't be missed.

her Big The delight in Siobhan's voice and her sweet relationship with her
mother washed over him. She looked downright adorable. Though he was pre-
pared, Siobhan would give him an earful if she heard him think that. Grow-
ing up, not, her smile was infectious. No way could he watch her excitement
smile back.

When the call was over, Siobhan gave a wistful sigh before digging
a name into her food.
ive was "Your mother sounds good." The Governor sipped his coffee with
a graceful hand and scratched behind Moon's ears with the other. Honey's lit-
tle legs raced and leaned into the Governor's leg. Those two dogs were as lucky as the
the Baron clan.

corners "I worry about her all alone sometimes, but it's good to hear all is
and an And wasn't that the icing on the cake. Not only did the kid love
her mother, she worried about her too.

ing here "Governor?" Siobhan wiped the corners of her mouth with her nap-
kin. She was planning to hit the mall today. There are a few things I need to pick
up. Is it all the camera store. Since I don't have my car, may I borrow one of the
ones?"

Maura." "I can take you." The words slipped out before Jack had time to
think of a better offer.

Eyes wide, Siobhan's gaze raced back to his. "You don't need to
go of your way again."

The way Mitch and the Governor's attention had whipped around
him almost thought twice about his offer, but instead, his mouth kicked
gear before his brain could stop him. "I need to stop at the mall also. That
is as good as any."

echoed "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"?" Her His gaze casually took in the additional sets of eyes staring at him
the heck, it was just a ride to the mall, he wasn't asking for the kid's
hand began marriage. "I'm sure."

e night, “Then I guess I don’t need a car after all.” Siobhan pushed to her smile “Give me two minutes to grab my purse and I’ll meet you at the front corner.” Containing the urge to smile back as brightly as she was, Jack nodded. Siobhan bounced out of the room, her absence leaving a vacuum. Jack dared to look at the others at the table. He couldn’t swear to it, but he saw a glimmer of suspicion in Mitch’s gaze. Same with the Governor. Shaking his imagination clear, he stood. He had to be reading into Siobhan’s expressions. Siobhan was just a kid and he was just helping out a little sister. Walking to the other end of the table, he kissed Lila and not “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Thank you for rescuing our girl.” The older woman smiled up at Jack again.

“My pleasure.” Nodding at the Governor, he turned, noticing Mitch no longer seated. He found Siobhan’s brother at the front door, his expression directed at him. Jack stopped a few feet from him.

rest of “Our baby sister thinks she’s all grown up.”

Jack nodded.

well.” “Just so we’re clear.”

like her Again, he bobbed his head. He knew better than anyone that not long ago he was partying hardy with Kyle and the others while Siobhan was a kid. “I still in pigtails and braces. So why had he not let her use one of the trucks up at ranch cars?”

ie other Siobhan appeared at the top of the steps, her purse over her shoulder and a baseball hat in her hand. She bounced down the stairs. “Ready?”

o think “Your carriage awaits.” Holding the door open with one hand, he stepped outside and ignored the way Mitch continued to watch them.

go out Buckled in, he put the car in gear and resisted the urge to chuckle. Siobhan plopped the baseball hat on, backwards. Reaching for the radio, she turned to him, with the stations until she found one she liked, then twisted to face him. “What are you needing at the mall?”

’oday is Scrambling quickly, he ran through his to-do list, thrilled to remember that his mother’s birthday was coming up. “I need a gift.”

Her head tipped to one side. “Oh.”

1. What “Promise not to laugh?”

hand in She nodded.

“Mom’s birthday is coming up and I haven’t a clue what to get.”

er feet. Frankly, I could use a little input of the feminine persuasion.”
door.” “Cool.” She twisted around and leaned back in place. “I’m great.
led. Lady shopping.”

um. He He knew his brows had just shot up high. “Uh, just don’t say that
thoughtmother. She still refuses to consider herself middle-aged.”

vernor. She kicked her head back and laughed. “Got it.”

to their “Your mother seems really nice.”

friend’s “Oh, that she is. When God handed out mothers, I won the lottery
again. always been a huge support. When people tell me that I should settle
and get a real job, Mum was the first to tell me to ignore the naysay
at him follow my dream. Even though I get to talk to her all the time, it’s not
the same as having her here to share a cuppa with or just get a hug.
tch was wish she were closer to share in all the things happening. But she’s
a stern the most requested wedding coordinator in the county, getting away
easy for her. I know she loves what she does, but I really do think
happy I’m here in Texas following my dreams.”

“That picture in the dining room really is wonderful.”

“Thank you. The goal is to turn my love of photography into a full
all that career. It’s not quite the same as an engineering or accounting degree,
ian was entered in the State Fair and hoping to get some recognition to one day
e other photography showing. There’s a woman who owns a small gallery in
district. She’s a friend of Paige’s and really liked my work. She sugge
der and can get some formal recognition, she’d be willing to hang some of mine
the next time she does a show of up-and-coming artists.”

waved “That’s great.”

Her shoulders hunched up, her smile widened and her eyes sparkl
e as she know. I haven’t told anyone yet, you know, just in case. Not even Mum
fiddled I usually tell her everything.”

m. “So, “If I’ve learned anything watching you since last night, it’s that you
talent.” And spunk, he thought. “I’m sure you can make it work.”

ber his “I hope so.” A peppy tune came on the radio and she nearly sprang
the seat. “Oh, I love this song.”

Next thing he knew, the windows were down on her side of the car
her fingers were snapping in time to the music. With her arms up in the air
she bopped to the beat, pretty much dancing in her seat. On top of that
get her. was singing at the top of her lungs, though she couldn’t sing worth a

but he didn't seem to care. Once again the word adorable came to
t at oldalong with Mitch's parting words. *Our baby sister thinks she's all gro*
Baby sister. Every instinct he had screamed back off, walk awa
t to mywhether Mitch liked it or not, this free spirit was most definitely not
anymore. And whether he liked it or not, at the top of the best frie
Code, in big bold letters, little sisters were off limits. Which l
question: what the heck was he getting himself into?

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but he didn't seem to care. Once again the word adorable came to mind, along with Mitch's parting words. *Our baby sister thinks she's all grown up.* Baby sister. Every instinct he had screamed back off, walk away. But whether Mitch liked it or not, this free spirit was most definitely not a baby anymore. And whether he liked it or not, at the top of the best friend Bro Code, in big bold letters, little sisters were off limits. Which left one question: what the heck was he getting himself into?



CHAPTER SIX

“Do you have any ideas about what to buy?” Siobhan unsnapped her seat belt.
Jack clicked the fob on his key ring and locked the car with a beep. “I
have no ideas. I hadn’t thought too hard about it, hoping inspiration
strike me.”

The mall was crawling with people, it was a miracle they found a parking
spot so close to the doors.

“Is she like Gram and the Governor, buys what she wants when she wants
it, or does she have a long list of things she wants but no time to shop for
them?”

He fell into step beside her. “Is a little of both a helpful answer?”

“Only if you have a list of what she hasn’t bought herself?”

“And that’s the rub. I freely admit if she mentioned anything, I did pay
attention.”

Siobhan blew out a huffy breath and muttered, “Men.” Inside she thought
back to the time or two she’d met Jack’s parents at a gathering at the
home. Mrs. Preston had struck her as rather down to earth, well dressed,
overly dressed, and always smiling. Mr. Preston seemed to like his cigar
bourbon with the rest of the older men. “Does she have a favorite clothing
store?”

Frowning, Jack pressed his lips and seemed to be considering the
question. “I think I’ve seen her come home with shopping bags from C
lothes. Does that sound right?”

“It does.” Siobhan smiled. She’d thought his mom was practical. “I
there’s a shop here in the mall too.”

Halfway across the mall, the ground floor pavilion had a model train
display that had set up a massive display. The line of mothers and children to
and see the trains was trailing down the side and around a corner. Still
Jack had just reached the storefront when Siobhan noticed a woman

with an infant on her hip, a two or three year old gripped tightly and kid running ahead.

“Josiah, get back here!” the frazzled woman shouted as loudly as dared in public.

The kid stopped in his tracks and looked back at his mother struggling to open one of the many folded strollers that had been outside the storefront.

“At least he stopped.” Siobhan kept her eye on the harried mom.

“What?” Jack stopped beside her.

“Hold on a sec.” Scurrying the few feet to where the woman was trying to balance a baby, and with her free hand both corral a toddler and the stroller. “May I help you?”

“Oh, lord, yes.” The poor woman looked as though she hadn’t slept for a month of Sundays. Her hair up in a messy bun, what looked like a large stain, probably from the kid’s lunch, was prominently displayed on the breast pocket of her shirt. “I knew not bringing my husband was going to be a problem.”

The next thing Siobhan knew, instead of stepping out of the way to let her to open the stroller, the woman, without a second’s hesitation, couldn’t pay the baby in her arms. Within seconds the fussy baby had stopped crying. Large blue eyes studied her with intense curiosity.

“Well, aren’t you a sweetie.” She absolutely loved babies, and if they knew it. The mom was lucky she hadn’t handed the kid off to someone uncomfortable around babies. Wiggling her fingers in front of the baby’s face and managed to coax a wide smile. “Atta girl. Are we having a good time?”

Behind her, the mom had managed to open the double stroller, send the toddler into the back seat, and had placed the older son’s hands firmly on the handle of the stroller with strict instructions not to move an inch or the kid’s. “No ice cream for dessert tonight.”

Siobhan liked the woman’s style.

l. “And” “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the help.” Mom held her attention to the baby, and to everyone’s surprise, she frowned and leaned into Siobhan.

That coaxed a smile out of Siobhan. “Well, I like you too.”

The mother stood, her hands on her hips, and her eyebrows high. “She and she normally doesn’t cotton to strangers. You either have kids of your own or the magic touch.”

another “My mother often says we’ve been blessed by the leprechauns. Not babies and babies like us.”

As she’d “I’ve never heard it put that way, but I’d have to agree.” Once again, her mother clapped her hands lightly and then stretched them out to the baby.

At the same moment, the older boy seemed to see his chance to slip out of his mother’s watchful eye, and carefully eased one hand away from the stroller.

Jack squatted down. “Are you going somewhere?”

The little boy shook his head and quickly grabbed the stroller as it was still again with his wayward hand.

A smile on his face, Jack nodded. “I bet you’re a good big brother. Help your mom with your little brother and sister, don’t you?”

The silent child nodded and a second later decided he wasn’t in a hurry to get out. He smiled. By now the mom had retrieved the baby, latched her in the left front of the stroller, and taking her place behind the older boy, smiled at them. “I cannot thank both of you enough. Y’all are going to be great someday.”

“Oh, we’re not...” Jack started, but the woman was already making her way to the mall exit.

“Back to your mother’s gift.” She turned and looked at Jack who, to his surprise, was studying her much like he’d done last night when she had told him most of what she might have something on her face.

Blinking, Jack nodded. “Right.”

Siobhan marched toward his mother’s favorite store, her mind lit up by the sweet baby smell. Why were all babies so cute? This one was no exception. More than a baby had a right to be. And the way Jack got down on his hands and knees to meet the little boy at eye level, that surprised the heck out of him. He’d be glad to help but wonder, what other surprises might Jack Preston have in store for her?



comes out
Siobhan.

The image of Siobhan smiling and cooing and playing with that baby the little girl grinned back at her would not stop replaying in his mind. “I’ll be your own sight of her with the baby in her arms had done something to Jack. Something he couldn’t explain, and didn’t quite fully understand. Children were

We liked it. He was an only child and the Baron clan was the closest to him. None of them had kids so he had the limited experience with short people. And yet, somehow, watching Siobhan help the mom with her wayward son meant getting to his level.

"That was nice of you to offer to help." What he really wanted to say was she looked amazing smiling at the baby.

Walking, Siobhan shrugged. "It was the decent thing to do. Poor mom was clearly frazzled."

Decent thing to do. That's how his mama had raised him: open door. You ladies, pull out chairs for them, help them on with their jackets or cover them.

And yet, actually doing something to help an overwhelmed mother in trouble occurred to him until Siobhan so seamlessly stepped in.

Her arm shot up and she pointed straight ahead. "Chico's is at the end of the mall."

It took him a long moment to shift from the images of her and the mother what she was saying, and another minute still to remember why they were here.

"Your mother's present. Remember?"

"Yes, sorry, my mind wandered."

"After that, we can hit the photography store. What I need will only take a minute."

To his surprise, and relief, it had taken all of ten minutes, fifteen minutes to pick out a dress that he was positive his mom would love, along with a few pieces of matching jewelry. Siobhan had headed straight for the dress store to mannequin. "This looks like your mom."

His mother was always in sleeveless dresses like that, so he had to have in "I think you're right. She often says dresses like this are more comfortable than her pajamas."

"There you go." Siobhan picked out some subtle but substantial jewelry pieces.

He'd been less sure his mom would wear the large pieces, but Siobhan seemed convinced, and just like that, he was done shopping for his mom.

Out the door, a tie store across the way caught his eye. There were things his dad had taught him from an early age; the best deals in life were not his made on the golf course, and a man's tie says a great deal more about

hing tothan his handshake. To his father's delight, Jack had taken to both the he hadof golf and to ties.

Siobhan, Siobhan stopped in her tracks beside him. "What?"

g down He blinked and turned to face her. "Sorry, you might say my krypt ties. I'm probably the last guy in the world under forty who loves tie: say waswear them to the office."

She cocked her head. "I have time. Let's go in."

woman "That won't be necessary. I need another tie like I need a hole head."

ors for "Ah." Her face lit up. "It's way more fun buying something you l /er-ups.don't need." Before he could stop her, she'd turned away and marche had notthat direction.

Once again she had him smiling. He guessed he was buying a tie to ie other A crisp and classic tie caught his attention first. Hermes, of course and true.

baby to Siobhan looked from the tie to him and frowned. "Seriously, Jack: y wereyour choice be more boring?"

"Boring?" He looked down at the article in his hands. "These are t ties on the market."

"Perhaps. But it's also staid and predictable."

ily take "What's wrong with that? Who wants to do business with so frivolous and unreliable?"

tops, to "For someone who played hard with my brothers, you have a lot h a fewabout stepping out of your comfort zone." Taking hold of his ha ; on thedragged him to a rack of ties with more color flashing at him than the a Baron racing yacht.

o agree. He braced for impact. Sure enough, she picked up a tie with a sc fortableneon fish blazoned front and center.

"No."

jewelry Her gaze narrowing, she studied the tie. "Okay, maybe fish isn't you anyhow."

Siobhan Thank heavens for that. Her next choices became wilder and wild ther. sweet bouncy kid he remembered had clearly grown into a bit of ; ere twoApparently, she took after her brothers more than her sisters. He'd nev will beEve or Paige even wear a ball cap, never mind backwards. And singin out himfront seat, bouncing about with the windows down? Nope, not Paige

the game either. Now, Kyle... Lord, help whoever fell for this woman, they together would be one helluva ride.

"Here." She thrust a tie at him that looked like paisley had dropped on it. "Really?"

"Yes. It's wild and it will match those gray suits you probably have." He laughed. Most of his suits were indeed gray. A few dark blue, but mostly gray because it made it easier to match shirts and ties. "No."

Rolling her eyes at him, she kept trying. "How about this one?"

For all the crazy options she'd pointed out, this one was oddly sensible and its flamboyance. Grays, blues, and reds came together in swathes with black lines as well. It actually didn't look that bad.

"It's a Jerry Garcia tie."

His gaze dropped to the signature and back. "As in the Grateful Dead?"

Smiling, she nodded enthusiastically.

"You like the Grateful Dead?"

She shrugged. "I like all music, but isn't the tie great?"

Who'd have thought that a musician from the era of sex, drugs, and rock and roll would one day have a line of ties. "Actually, I kind of like it."

Her smile grew even wider. "Now, you're talking."

Apparently, he was buying a hippie tie. What would his father have to say about him now? The thought brought a smile to his face.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Let's buy a tie."

Everyone in his office was going to think he'd gone crazy. There he was in a shopping mall with his best friend's little sister, having the best time buying ties. Yes, he may very well have gone completely crazy.

Siobhan had been right about more than one thing today, her stop at the camera store had taken even less time than their run through the dress store.

The funny thing was he wished he needed to shop for something else. The real test would be the walk from the camera shop to the mall exit, while thinking on his feet.

He'd been making polite chit-chat about the dress, trying to extend the day, he'd been making polite chit-chat about the dress, trying to extend the day.

That was a riot. His parents were trying to get him to settle down and man up and Siobhan thought he needed to loosen up a bit.

Holding the door open for Siobhan, he'd not come up with a very reasonable excuse to extend their time together when she came to a stop in front of him. "Do you like Renaissance Festivals?"

eir life “I suppose. Haven’t been since I was a kid.”

l acid. “I had plans to go tomorrow with my friend Bridget, but her mum
that her grandma went to hospital for emergency bypass surgery s
flying home sooner than planned. What about you?”

e.” “Sorry to hear that. I hope she’ll be okay, but what about me?”

ue, but “Do you want to go with me?”

“Oh.” His head spun at the solution to spending more time w
landing at his feet, so to speak. Another whole day? And why not?
date inbecause she had four big brothers who he was pretty sure would not
ith thinidea. An idea that was quickly growing on him. Yep, now he could c
he’d definitely gone completely crazy. “I’d love to.”

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“I suppose. Haven’t been since I was a kid.”

“I had plans to go tomorrow with my friend Bridget, but her mum phoned that her grandma went to hospital for emergency bypass surgery so she’s flying home sooner than planned. What about you?”

“Sorry to hear that. I hope she’ll be okay, but what about me?”

“Do you want to go with me?”

“Oh.” His head spun at the solution to spending more time with her landing at his feet, so to speak. Another whole day? And why not? Maybe because she had four big brothers who he was pretty sure would not like the idea. An idea that was quickly growing on him. Yep, now he could confirm, he’d definitely gone completely crazy. “I’d love to.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

The thought of dressing up for the Renaissance Festival in period garb briefly crossed Siobhan's mind, but just as quickly she discarded the idea. That had been her original plan with Bridget, but this morning with Jack the idea simply didn't feel right.

Unlike most mornings at the ranch, she was the only family member at home when Jack's car pulled up to the front door. Bottle of water in hand she flung the door open and pulling it tightly closed behind her, trotted down the steps.

"I guess you're ready to go?" Jack chuckled as she climbed into his car.

She laughed. "I love the Renaissance Festival. Wish it came to town more than once a year."

"Ah, but then the law of diminishing returns would kick in and the anticipation and fun simply wouldn't be there."

Her head fell back against the seat and she resisted the urge to close her eyes. "Bringing up economics sounds like something my grandfather would do."

"Thank you." Jack put the car in gear and cast a cheeky grin her way. "I happen to like the Governor. I'll consider that a compliment."

"I like him too. Love him in fact, but I suspect the day will be more entertaining if we leave economics out of it."

This time Jack let out a deep belly laugh. "Agreed."

Asking Jack to take her to this festival had been an impulse. The words had just come out of her mouth before she gave herself a chance to think it through. It had been out a tie for him yesterday had been more fun than she would have expected. Not once did he treat her like the little sister of the family. Any moment he kept expecting him to stick his arm out and ruffle the top of her head the way he and her brothers would when she was still bouncing around in

uniforms. Her gut kept reminding her that he was still her brother friend, had always been like an extra brother; and for her not to run much into his treating her like an equal—as if there weren't at least ten years between them. Right now, she didn't feel much like paying attention to her gut. The plan was to simply enjoy the day and the company.

The second they crossed through the makeshift gates, the medieval atmosphere surrounded them.

"Okay, this was impressive when I was a teen and it's still impressive now." Jack's gaze cut across the booths and stands and back. The two archers' eyes reminded her of the proverbial kid on Christmas morning. "As much as I love the atmosphere, I'm ready for a juicy turkey and corn on the cob. I don't know what they do differently, but the corn is always so darn good."

"First of all, you do realize it's only ten o'clock in the morning and she held back a chuckle. "And secondly, they probably roast it instead of their own."

"That's what the Governor says. One of these days I'm going to test the theory. And for the record, it's never too early for lunch."

Jack let out a deep rumbled laugh. "Sounds like a plan."

"Oh, look." Spotting the archery booth, her arm pointed straight at the "Care to give it a go?"

He studied her, but she couldn't read his face. "Sure. Have you ever done archery before?"

"A few times, maybe more. You?"

"A few times." He chuckled softly. "I can probably give you pointers if you like."

The man had no idea what he was getting himself into. "I'll take the first."

"I'll go first." Jack momentarily set his hand on her lower back and nudged her forward.

At the booth, she motioned for him to step up and choose his bow. The target field was set back beside the booth, pointing away from the crowd.

"The key is to choose the correct size bow for your strength. Bigger is always better."

Biting back a smile, Siobhan nodded and picked up her bow and followed Jack to the field. Since Jack was up first, she stepped a few feet back. He nocked his arrow and let it fly. An acceptable shot, he'd hit the

r's bestcenter, but not a center bullseye.

ead too Letting his bow down to his side, Jack stepped back. "Now you try

n years Curious to how the pseudo-Big Brother would behave, she picked

1 to herbow, pretending to struggle. He stepped closer to her, put his large ha

hers, and softly talked her through the motions. His breath skittered

l worldher ear, only this time it felt nothing like an annoying tease by a big l

A girl could get used to Jack standing close, whispering in her ear, an

ressiveshe wasn't going there.

inkle in The first shot barely nicked the target.

"Let's try again." Jack moved in closer, standing directly behind l

leg andcould feel his breath on the back of her neck. Tingles skittered do

here isspine. Maybe this joking thing hadn't been her best idea. His arms

wrapped around her as his hands helped her pull back the arrow and

?" Jackit fly. The arrow landed closer to center but not close enough.

boiling He stepped out of her space and the loss punched her smack in t

She had to shake off the sensation. Straightening her spine, she put on

try outand looked up at him. "You up for a wager?"

He cocked his head. "What kind of wager?"

"Whoever scores the fewest points buys lunch."

ahead. His brows rose high on his forehead and he sucked in a hissing br

don't know. That feels too much like taking advantage of you."

u done Having learned a thing or two growing up in a competitive fam

shook her head. "What's the matter? Chicken?"

A mischievous twinkle lit his eyes. "You're on."

1 some She stepped out of the way. "Age before beauty."

"Ha ha," he quipped. Standing in place, he went through his qu

em." arrows. All came close, but not a single one hit the bullseye straight on

ck and Retreating for her to take her turn, he smiled almost guiltily

"You'd have to hit the red circle just about every time to beat my score

w. The Trying really hard not to give away that he was about to be wallop

vds. avoided looking at him and set up her first shot. First arrow landed jus

ger isn'tthe red dot. She didn't dare look over her shoulder at him. Second

landed a smidgeon closer to the inside. Jack let out a small "hmm"

arrowsgnored him. Third arrow hit the red dot dead center.

side as From behind her she heard Jack mutter, "I think I've been had."

e target As with the three arrows before, the last two pierced dead center

bullseye.

.” Grinning from ear to ear, she turned around to see Jack smiling up the shaking his head. “I have most definitely been hustled.”

ands on “Me? Would I do that?” She knew she was grinning like the cat l acrossswallowed the canary, but it had been so much fun to show him she w brother.definitely not a defenseless little kid anymore. She was most definite d... oh,grown up. What she hadn’t quite figured out was, why had that su become so very important to her?



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From what Jack remembered, his favorite part of the annual Rena Festival as a teenager had been the jousting and collecting souvenirs. pretty sure the caricature of him in a jester’s hat was still hanging in room at his parents’ house. What he couldn’t remember from all thos ago, was having such a good time. As much as he’d love to say it v freshness of exploring the ancient scene with adult eyes, he knew da the joy had been in seeing everything through Siobhan’s eyes. The was bright, carefree, had a killer sense of humor, and yeah, she cou little cheeky at times. No doubt something genetic she shared w brother Kyle. But mostly, she kept Jack on his toes. Her verbal sparr as tight as her archery skills.

He honestly couldn’t remember simply enjoying a day so muc anyone. Who knew his best friend’s little sister would grow up to be : amazing person? When she was really little and visited from Ireland summers or holiday breaks, he remembered her as a bit annoying. wanting to tag along, always talking, even tattling on them a time when they did things they weren’t supposed to. Eventually she blo into a sweet teen. The only interest she’d had in hanging out with her t was on the sailboat. He remembered her holding her own helping th with the sails. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he had a vague mer her beating the pants off her brothers in a game of poker. As a matter he remembered owing her about a hundred bucks from that night, wasn’t sure if he’d ever paid her or not. For the most part, she didn’ hang around much as she usually had a girlfriend or some other kid w Jack had paid so little attention to the kid, that somehow he’d con

missed that she'd grown up.

ng and They'd eaten their way across the fairgrounds, enjoyed the joust
marionettes, the pickles, and even the story time. For several hour
: who'dpractically forgotten he lived in the twenty-first century. Laden with
as mostarray of souvenirs, including a sword and shield, Jack put all their
ly veryacquired trinkets into the back of his SUV.

uddenly In the car, Siobhan kicked her head back and plopped her feet
dashboard. "I think I could sleep for a week."

"Ditto." He started the car, carefully backing out. "I haven't tak
many steps since I gave up marathons."

"I know what you mean. My feet are sooo tired."

issance His phone sounded and hitting the button on his steering wheel, he
He was up the call. "Hey, John."

his old "What time you coming, man?"

ie years Coming? He looked at the clock on the dashboard wishing the
was the thing had a calendar.

rn well "Brats are on the grill, the water's just the right temperature, and G
woman a bonfire big enough to see from the moon."

ld be a Crap. John's birthday party was tonight. "Sorry, something came
with her running a bit behind."

ing was "No problem. But if you can, pick up a couple of bags of ice. I
maker in the house is on the fritz."

th with "Got it. Ice." The two men said their quick goodbyes and Jack ho
such an could get away with just soaking his tired feet in the hot tub. Maybe
during would notice if he just took a nap.

Always "Did I mess up your plans?" Siobhan twisted in his directi
or two expression heavy with concern.

ssomed "No. I forgot about my friends' birthday party."

rothers "You have a friend other than my brothers?" she teased, the
ie crew returning to her eyes.

nory of He chuckled. "Yes. Believe it or not, my life does not revolve arou
of fact, your family." Thankfully, she didn't call him out on spending the la
and he days with her.

t really "Does your friend live far from here?"

ith her. "Actually, he's on the way to Paradise Ridge."

pletely "Oh." Her frown was back. "I know it's been a long day. If you

just go to your friend's, I can get an Uber home."

ing, the "Seriously? You think I'd make you Uber home?" Had she really said that to him? Even if she didn't have four over-protective older brothers, what kind of man did she think he was?

newly "Sorry. I was just trying to help."

Now he felt bad for taking the sparkle from her eyes.

on the "There's an easy solution, if you're up to staying out a little later?"

Her face lit up as she straightened in her seat. "Always."

en that "Want to join me at the party?"

"I heard the words bonfire. Will there be s'mores?"

He could not stop himself from cackling out loud. "You can't pick anything up, still be hungry?"

"I'm always hungry, but I'll come even if there aren't any s'mores."

"Okay, then. One stop for ice and we're off to a birthday party." A few minutes ago the idea of heading to a party after such a long day held a certain appeal as swimming with crocodiles in the bayou. Now, with Siobhan and Greg Hashim, a long night sounded just fine.

He was starting to get used to her taking control of the radio, singing up. He was swaying along to whatever tune she found. Even when she lowered the windows and sang loud enough to cause a scene for the cars driving by. The ice cream could do was smile. By the time he pulled onto the double-wide circular driveway at John's house, the long line of cars told him the party was in full swing.

opped he "Hey, Jack." John slapped his friend on the back.

no one "John, this is Siobhan Baron."

His friend shook her hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

on, her "You have a lovely home."

"Thanks." He turned and waved a poker across the way. "The drinks are on the table, food's over there, and there are plenty of fixings for s'mores if you're so inclined. Just go ahead and make yourselves at home, I have to go to the fire. Excuse me."

and just Siobhan looked up at him, the smile on her face as wide as the night sky. Grande. "S'mores."

If all it took to put that huge grin on Siobhan's face was a little chocolate-covered marshmallow with graham crackers, then he would gladly provide a lifetime supply. And didn't that hold way more appeal than it should have? He wanted a lifetime with Siobhan?

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Across the lawn, large flames darted upward from a lit pile of logs were benefits to living outside city limits with no close neighbors nearby speakers, music played and Siobhan danced toward the fire m way she bounced to the tunes in his car.

“Love a woman with rhythm.” His friend Eddie, who had clearly partying a long while ago, grabbed her hand and spun her around, twisting around in such a way that Jack expected him to fall flat on l any second.

And if the man didn’t let go of Siobhan sooner than that, Jack jus help Eddie hit the dirt.

For the first time, Jack noticed a sharp similarity in Siobhan w sisters. The fun-loving, carefree young woman had stiffened ever so s She smiled politely at Eddie. The same plastic smile that Jack had s every socialite he’d ever had to spend a fundraising evening with. Si simple words of, *thank you for the dance*, as she backed away remind of the same graceful demeanor her older sisters had used when dispatc unwanted suitor. Not till this very second did he realize there were tw to Siobhan Baron, and the one he was looking at right now was ver grown up.

“Just one more dance,” Eddie slurred.

“Sorry, pal.” Jack did his best to plaster on the same polite smile than shove his tipsy friend across the field with a single blow. “My tur hand in his, he spun Siobhan in the opposite direction and then twirl again and again, had successfully moved her a safe distance from Coming to a stop, still holding her hand, he slightly shook his head. about that. Eddie sometimes doesn’t know when to stop.”

“Seems more like he doesn’t know when to start either.” Her gaze

over his shoulder at his friend. "It's early but I get the feeling he drinking for a while. What's he trying to drown away?"

Jack nodded his head, intrigued by her insight. "A few months girlfriend, the one he'd bought a ring for, decided that she'd rather date with more zeros in his bank account so she broke up with him and play for John."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. That about covers it. He's been drowning his sorrows ever If he doesn't snap out of it on his own, we may find ourselves doing . There old-fashioned intervention."

. From A peppy but more mellow tune kicked in and still holding her hand uch the pulled her in a little closer. "May I have this dance, Miss?"

"Why, I'd be delighted, kind sir." Siobhan's effort at a thick s started accent came out more like a muddled Irish brogue and almost ma his feet laugh.

his face Instead, they swayed to the rhythm as if this wasn't the first time danced together. A lot about the last few days felt like they'd been frie t might years. Had he ever felt that way about a woman? He almost shook hi answering his own thoughts. Women were never friends, just comp rith her and they never had him wishing the night together would never end.

lightly. "Ooh." Siobhan eased back, slowing her movements. "They're ca seen on tray of s'mores fixings to the fire."

Siobhan's Jack didn't know if he wanted to laugh at her enthusiasm over s'm led him cry at the loss of contact. Both of which gave him reason to think twic hing an what was happening with Siobhan Baron. The next thing he knew, h 70 sides stick in his hand with a fat marshmallow on the tip, dangling near the f y much

"I seriously love s'mores." Sitting beside him, she twirled her stick "The secret is to tan the marshmallow evenly around without letting it

He felt the corners of his mouth tilt up in another smile. "The S e rather method of s'mores building?"

n." Her "I'll have you know, I am the best s'mores maker in the entire ing her clan."

Eddie. "The best?" He lowered his tone.

"Sorry "Your friend Kyle is so dang impatient that he always lets it catch t burn." She continued turning the stick like a rotisserie chicken. "Anc e darted he's just as bad, but Mitch, he's the opposite. When he would do s'mo

's been marshmallows are usually lily white when he pulls them off. I would be surprised if the middles are still cold."

ago his "How long do you hold it to the fire?"

e a man "Depends on how you like it." She glanced at his marshmallow. "I made yours is perfect."

He pulled it away from the fire and stared at the thing. It had been many years since he'd done this that he'd forgotten not to touch marshmallow with his fingers. It had only taken a second of skin on skin to realize that using his hands was not the best of ideas.

"Here." She handed him her stick to hold, then placing a slab of chocolate on a graham cracker, she quickly sandwiched the two crackers around the marshmallow, pulling it off the stick. The white goo oozed out along with some chocolate. She held it to his lips. "Here you go."

He took a bite of the sticky concoction, he'd forgotten how much he loved s'mores. Even more, he loved watching her assemble her own s'mores. When a dribble of marshmallow lingered at the corner of her mouth, he almost had to sit on his hands to stop himself from reaching over and kissing it off. Or worse, kissing away the sweet dollop.

Whatever was he thinking? This is Kyle's little sister. In his mind, he'd begun doing some fast math. She'd mentioned finishing school, then working on her photography, odd jobs and career plans, and just like that, it hit him that Kyle Baron's little sister was actually at least a year or two older than Connie. And didn't that put a whole new perspective on his best friend's little sister?

She had a fire.



about burn." The way Jack was attacking the s'more, anyone would think he'd never done one before. The oddest part of it was, rather than be annoyed, Siobhan was loving watching the way his eyes danced with delight at every bite.

Baron "Had your fill?" Jack stabbed a stick with another marshmallow.

Swallowing the lick of embarrassment that had crept up at being stared at, she was pretty sure he was referring to the marshmallow, not him. *Maybe*. "Just getting started." She smiled back at him, mimicking his motions and shoving two marshmallows onto her stick.

res, the "A challenge?" he teased.

That grin was killing her. How had she never noticed growing up great smile the man had? And those eyes? How had her sister not four irresistible? A couple of times she thought she'd caught him staring 'I'd say with a spark of longing that had made her insides go warm and her mouth dry. Then, just as quickly, the look had slipped away and she told herself she'd been imagining things.

"You missed a dollop." Jack's hands reached out and the tip of his finger wiped away a dribble of marshmallow from the corner of her mouth. The momentary warmth of his fingertip had her insides melting faster than chocolate marshmallows. It took everything in her not to close her eyes and lean into his touch. What was going on here? Jack was like another big brother. The more than a few years older than her, she was sure her friends would say she'd lost her mind. Heck, only a few weeks ago she'd teased Mitch about how he was turning into an old man and now here she was simmering under the touch of her older brother's dearest friend. Maybe she *had* gone nuts?

A deep frown replaced Jack's sweet and sexy grin. "Is something wrong? Did you burn yourself?" His hand reached for her hand and she pulled it away.

The last thing she needed right now was for him to touch her. "I'm traveling, remembering I have an early appointment tomorrow."

"Oh." The worry disappeared from his face, but the twinkle in his eyes returned to his eyes. "It's been a long day, we should call it a night."

She shook her head. "I didn't mean we had to leave now. I was just thinking."

"No." He set up one last s'more and held it up. "I'll finish this s'more. John it's been a great party but I have to leave."

Now she was mad at herself. She didn't want tonight to end. She had not for the life of her remember the last time she'd had such a perfect evening. But he was probably right. Going home was the smart thing to do. The prudent thing to do. Disappear before Jack Preston got too close under her skin. Then again, when had anyone ever called her prudent?

Taking her dear sweet time to slowly nibble on her last marshmallow s'more, she popped the last morsel in her mouth before begrudgingly pushed to her feet when Jack stood and extended his hand to her.

The spark of electricity that zipped up her arm actually had her

what a around to see if anyone had seen what she felt. From the quick way that he had let go, she'd have sworn he'd felt it too. Or maybe that was just her wishful thinking again. Heaving out a sigh, she followed in his footsteps, watching the gothanking people as they passed, wishing the birthday boy a successful and happy year one last time before they climbed into his car.

"Thanks for tagging along." He hit the ignition switch and flashed a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm beat and it really helped help. The good reason to call it an early night."

"Are you sure you wanted to leave?" She really did feel awful about leaving him away from his friends.

"Positive. You've worn these old bones out."

And there it was in front of her. Jack Preston was indeed older than she thought. Not crazy old, like he could be her father or anything icky like that. He had grown up in two different decades and should have not been so common. And yet, she'd had such an easy time talking to him about everything and anything for the last couple of days.

Damn. Why did the nicest guy she'd met in forever have to be her brother's best friend?

The drive home had proven shorter than she would have liked. The car pulled into the Paradise Ridge driveway and came to a stop at the front. It probably would be considered childish if she pouted and refused to get out of the car. In the time she'd chastised herself for thinking like a kid, Jack had just...circled the hood and opened her door.

She noticed that unlike before, he didn't hold his hand out for her. He had felt the zap of electricity the way she had.

Arguing with herself, she made her way up the stairs, fidgeting in her hands with the keys. She yanked them out and spun around to thank Jack for a great day—day. Only to her surprise he wasn't just on the porch, he was directly in front of her. So close that as she spun, she bumped into him, forcing him to grasp her arms to steady her. "Sorry!"

"No. I shouldn't have been so close."

His gaze seemed to burn into her. And why was he still holding her? Her heartbeat kicked into double time and she found herself rolling forward on her feet. She could feel the heat of his gaze all the way to her soul. She was not by any means imagining.

"Siobhan." Her name on his lips came out low, sweet, and soft.

at Jack almost like a prayer. He leaned forward and her breath caught. He wanted just to kiss her. Inching up on her tippy toes, the anticipation had her heart racing, her footsteps, and her hopes soaring.

ful and Their faces were so close she could feel the warmth of his hands caressing her lips. Just another few inches and she'd be in heaven.

ed her a "Long day?" The front door swung open.

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pulling "Very." Jack turned to face her brother Mitch, taking a step in retreat at the same time. "I've got a longer one tomorrow, need to get going." Mitch turned to face her while taking yet another step back. "Thanks again for helping with Mom's gift, and for today."

But old Her head bobbed but the words "You're welcome" were stuck in her throat. Another few seconds and his taillights were disappearing into the distance.

"You coming in or planning on staying on the porch all night?" Mitch's tone was less than pleasant.

What she really wanted to do was run after the car and...and what the SUV litany of possibilities that ran through her mind had her shaking her head. Boy, was she in trouble.

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CHAPTER NINE

Despite not seeing her for a week, Jack couldn't get Siobhan out of his head. Even at work, bogged down with deadlines and demands, and every time he had a moment to himself, visions of Siobhan laughing and singing from the front seat of his car made him smile. Technically, the kid was now a woman. She was also his best friend's little sister. More than a few years younger than him, and no matter how smart and fun and fascinating he found her—she was still off limits according to the Bro Code.

Why couldn't she be related to perfect strangers? Or any other family on the planet would work. Just not the Barons. The most interesting woman he'd ever spent time with in years and thanks to genetics and a sense of honor, she was off-limits.

Staring at the freezer section of the grocery store, he contemplated the microwave meals held the most appeal. None of the boxes inspired him to eat. What he wanted was to call Siobhan and invite her for dinner. Which itself wasn't much of a problem. The wanting to keep her at home until breakfast was more of the sticking point. None of the four Baron brothers nor the litany of cousins, would take kindly to that idea. He'd come home from work too late and too tired to boil water, never mind actually cooking. Like old Mother Hubbard, his cupboards, or more precisely his refrigerator, were bare.

Who the heck ever came up with the Bro Code anyway? He snagged the first five boxes of frozen dinners he saw on the freezer shelf. At least he shouldn't a brother be thrilled that a friend they knew and trusted was interested—okay, more than interested—in their sister? Of course, knowing exactly how many oats he'd sown and with whom was probably not the best letter of recommendation. Shaking off thoughts of Siobhan, and her brother tearing him limb from limb if he laid a finger on her, he momentarily

his cart and dinners for the next few days. He was also out of toothpaste and would be one aisle over.

Smiling at the woman pushing a cart with a little kid happily gurgling in the seat, he wondered when had he started noticing women and their children. Another thing he could credit Siobhan for. The woman looked so good holding a baby. He could almost picture her surrounded by little girls who looked just like her and little boys who looked like him. This was insane. He had to get Siobhan out of his head. Somehow. Halfway up the aisle, his heart stuttered to a stop. Was he hallucinating now?

Nope. Turning into the aisle was the one and only Siobhan Barlow. He debated backing out of the aisle. How many people would he bump into in the escaping the woman he couldn't get out of his mind? Time apart hadn't grown a thing to dampen his attraction for her. If anything, it was getting worse. Maybe he should just leave the cart and order pizza for dinner. That was the only way to escape the aisle without her spotting him.

Did that make him a coward? What if she recognized him running away from her? What would she think? Blast. When had Siobhan become such a complication for him? Oh yeah, the minute she'd smiled at him. "Jack?"

The decision to stand his ground or run had been made for him.

"Hi. This is a surprise." Was his voice neutral enough? It sounded squeaky to him. Like he'd been caught with his hands in the cookie jar at dinner. "A good one, I hope?" The obvious delight, blended with a hint of mischief on her side, made his heart skip a beat.

"Absolutely." And he meant it; Bro Code or not, she'd just become the highlight of his day, even if only for a few minutes in the grocery aisle. "Isn't your part of town?"

"No, popped in for a bottle of Gatorade and a bag of chips. I'm showing some new photos. Something different for that gallery I told you about. I've finally got a chance to chat with Veronica, the owner. She seemed to like my work, but implied even with professional recognition, some diversity might be needed. I've been focusing on recognition, but figured I should probably work on something different, so I've abandoned wildlife for a day in the city."

"I'm guessing that doesn't include the toothpaste aisle of my supermarket."

te. That That smile sucker punched him. “Not quite.” Eyes sparkling with
 were driving him crazy. “Doing a little experimenting with th
gling inarchitecture.” She eyed his cart. “Frozen dinners and toothpaste. Inte
hildren.combination.”

orgeous “Stick around. I need shampoo too.”

rls who That had her laughing out loud and him wondering how awful wou
ane. Heto spend just a little more time with her.

his feet “You should try cooking. I doubt that frozen lasagna tastes muc
 than cardboard.”

ron. He “Cooking and I are not the best of friends. Mom tried to teach m
tramplepretty much went over like a lead balloon. Though I do grill a mean ste

it’s done “I love cooking. At my flat in Ireland, I experiment with all s
 worse.recipes, but not so much here in the States with Hazel at the ranch d
ould bethe cooking.”

 Her own flat in Ireland? Of course she could have her own apartm
; away?had his own condo. He had to remind himself, little sister or not, she
such alonger a kid but a grown woman—and that was the crux of his pr

 “What do you cook?”

 Wrinkling her nose in the direction of his cart, she waved a fing
 “For one thing, my lasagna would taste way better than that cardbo
ed a bityou have there.”

 “You make lasagna?”

teasing “Better than an Italian.” Her chin high and shoulders back, she bea
 at him. “Someday, I’ll make it for you. You’ll see.”

ome the “How about tonight?”

e. “This “Tonight?” Her eyes widened.

 “Unless you have other plans, we’ll pick up the ingredients and y
hootingcome to my place and do all the cooking you want.”

about. I Siobhan cocked her head. And for a moment he thought he’d reall
med tohis foot in it. Been too forward. Considered that perhaps his interes
on, likewas a one-way street. Relief flooded through him when that sam
re beenspread across her face. “Okay. Deal.”

finding “But I’ll be buying the ingredients.”

 “You don’t—”

y local She didn’t have to say a word, the narrowed glare she tossed
 direction silenced him faster than had she covered his mouth with a ga

humor “Thank you.”
e local “I’ll make two trays this way you’ll have some leftovers.”
resting Whatever she said after that was going in one ear and out the other
every item she grabbed from the shelf, the enthusiasm in her voice
Whether it was over spending time with him or having an opportunity
ld it be cook, he didn’t know and didn’t care. The bottom line was tonight
wouldn’t have to conjure her memory up in his mind, he was going to
h better every face-to-face minute. Tomorrow he’d worry about tomorrow. *At*
Barons. And if he was going to live to see the day after.

e but it
eak.”



sorts of
oing all The kitchen in Jack’s condo was to die for. Walls of white flat-front cabinets
filled the large space. If the amazing amount of cabinets wasn’t enough
ent. He impress her, she stirred her sauce and drank in the top-shelf appliances
was no couldn’t get over-the-counter space either. Oh, the fun she would
roblem. creating meals in this kitchen.

er at it. Seated at the massive granite-covered island, a glass of Zinfandel
ard box of him, Jack watched her every move as if he would need to pass a test
shortly. “How long does the lasagna take?”

med up “Normally, I would make the sauce from scratch, but that takes
hours. Since I’m pretty sure you don’t want dinner at midnight, I’m chilling
the noodles cook. In the meantime, I’m going to add some sausage to
little more flavor. Then it will just be a matter of putting the lasagna to
and another twenty minutes or so in the oven.”

ou can “We have all night.”
y stuck *For food*, she shouted silently, forcing herself not to read into
t in her statement. Jack was being nice. Probably craving a home-cooked
e smile Spending more time with her most likely had nothing to do with the
cooking show. “I bet you’re pretty hungry.”

“Actually, watching you, I’m famished.”
And didn’t that send her mind to inappropriate places. “For a man
doesn’t cook, you sure have a stocked state-of-the-art kitchen. I’ve never
so many baking pans in one place.”

in his He smiled back at her. “We aim to please.”
g.

Once again, her mind was ready and willing to let her imagination go wild. If she didn't get it under wraps, and fast, this was going to be a long night.

"Anything I can do to help?" He pushed away from the island and came to her. "You want to brown the sausage?" She waved a spoon at the sizzling frying pan. As much as she liked watching the way the corded muscle of his neck moved with every sip of wine, or how the fabric of his t-shirt stretched against his hard biceps every time he raised his glass to his lips, the prospect of the two of them standing side by side held a great deal more appeal.

"Absolutely. Sausage in a frying pan is a lot like breakfast. I like breakfast."

She refused to let her mind wander to how many times he must have made breakfast for two. Instead, she reached forward and turned the burner off.

Jack pierced the sausage with a fork and tossed the links into the pot. He rolled and flipped each one with practiced ease. *Yep*. Lots of breakfast.

"Am I doing this right?" The warmth of his arm bumped against hers as she stirred the noodles in the massive pot beside the frying pan.

Of all people to have a single touch light her up from the inside, it did it have to be Jack? So many reasons this man was so off-limits. One of the reasons down her brothers was at the top of the list. "Hard to mess up sausage."

"Cooked enough to add to the sauce?" She bobbed her head. That came easier at the moment than making chit-chat while his arm was still pressed against hers.

Stabbing the first link with the fork, he dropped it into the pot. The second link refused to slide off the prongs. Jack used his finger to shove it forward. "Ow."

"Careful." She let go of her spoon, wiped her hands on a dishrag, and stuck his finger in his mouth and Siobhan almost swallowed her tongue. Her cheeks moved with the motions of sucking at the pained finger. Getting away from her runaway imagination, she reached for his hand. "Let me see."

"It's nothing."

"Those sausages are covered in hot grease. It can burn you more than you think."

Gently she turned the fingertip, looking for any sign of blistering. She didn't dare look up, but she was sure his gaze was burning a hole through her.

ion run “Let’s run it under cold water.”

a very “It’s fine.” He made no effort to retrieve his hand or move toward the sink.

stood. She could be stubborn. Hands on her hips, she didn’t budge until he was told and ran the red finger under cold water. The burn took its course, they resumed the cooking process. Somehow she made it through the pulled-casual touches as he helped her layer the casserole, and through the li-

spect of glances and heartfelt chuckles as he told stories of his escapades with his brother, including having the teachers catch them in a girl’s locker room innocently, according to him—during an outing to New York City public school. She’d almost peed her pants from laughing while the lasagna bubbled.

Looking around the well-appointed condo, for a single man, the place was on the huge. Her little flat in Dublin could fit in the living and dining room.

“Did you decorate this yourself?”

Jan. He “If I had, it would have nothing but sports posters and theater posters.

s. Jack chuckled. “Though I did set up my office on my own. The developer wanted to give me this rather stuffy man cave but I needed practical.”

“Do you work from home?”

ut, why “Sometimes. A lot of time I have to be in the office, but some days I get as much done from home, especially if I don’t have to was-

” commuting.”

“Are you still making people rich trading in the financial markets?”

g polite His brows shot up. “How did you know that?”

“Is it a secret?”

ot. The “Well, no.” He shrugged.

gently “I have excellent hearing, a near-perfect memory, and you and your brothers talked markets and investments as often as you talked sports and girls.”

e as his “Oh.” His gaze dropped to the silverware on the table and she was glad he actually blushed at her voicing out loud her knowledge of her brother and his escapades with the female of the species. “Yes, I’m still in finance.”

The buzzer on the oven sounded and she pulled the lasagna out. Jan carried it over to the trivet on the table. A few moments more and their dinner was served. Seated across the table from him, she couldn’t decide if she was disappointed or grateful for the distance.

igh her. Lifting her wine glass, she touched it to his. “To lasagna.”

His glass clinked against hers. “To chance encounters.”

ard the Yes, she thought. Thank heaven for the fates.

“This is amazing.” Jack gazed up at her as strings of mozzarella (he did from his fork. “Even Hazel’s lasagna can’t beat this. I can’t imagine t en careversion.”

t all the “I’ll have to make it for you some day when there’s more time.”

ngering “I’d like that.” His smile softened, his fork stilled and his ga ith her through her like a heated bolt of lightning.

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“This is amazing.” Jack gazed up at her as strings of mozzarella dangled from his fork. “Even Hazel’s lasagna can’t beat this. I can’t imagine the long version.”

“I’ll have to make it for you some day when there’s more time.”

“I’d like that.” His smile softened, his fork stilled and his gaze tore through her like a heated bolt of lightning.

“Thank you.” Breaking the hold his gaze had on her, she looked down at her fork, carefully stabbing at a morsel of dinner. “I noticed a park around the corner. I think I’ve got some nice contrast shots with the city photos – but the park struck me as having lots of possibilities for capturing something more. Tomorrow I was thinking of going there and taking a few photos.” She dared to meet his gaze again. “Care to join me?”

“I’d love to.”

The smile that took over her face matched the bright grin Jack flashed at her. She had no idea why she’d invited him. Until she’d opened her mouth, she hadn’t even remembered the park or thought of taking pictures. Now she needed every ounce of decorum she possessed not to jump to her feet and hug him, beyond delighted that he wanted to spend more time with her. Not eat her cooking, not help out the baby sister of the family, but just be with her. How cool was that?



CHAPTER TEN

“Squirrel!” Jack’s head snapped to the right, his arm pointing in that direction.

“You sound like that dog from the kid’s movie.” Siobhan didn’t hide her amusement at Jack’s antics.

Lifting his hands in the air, he flashed a toothy grin and shrugged. “I said you wanted squirrels.”

“I did.” On her belly, camera pointed in the direction Jack had pointed, Siobhan took a picture of a squirrel who’d become curious, holding a nut in his front claws, the little guy—or gal—inched closer and closer, stopping only yards away. She snapped away until the sound of the camera drove the squirrel to run to the nearest tree for safety. “That one was close.”

“I don’t know that I’ve ever seen such a curious squirrel.” Jack had the grass only a foot or so away from her. “If you feed them, I bet even they would dare to come closer.”

Siobhan shook her head. “That’s cheating. I like to get the ones who come closer on their own. Those have the most personality and will do interesting things. Sometimes.”

“If you say so.” Humor laced his words.

Only now did she realize that he’d remained frozen to allow her the perfect up shot before speaking. Considering she’d dragged him out here on a whim with no plans in mind, he was being a good sport about just hanging out as she searched out the more interesting photos of city wildlife.

Houston was a big place. Though she was familiar with the surrounding up-and-coming areas in general, this was the first time she’d stumbled upon this particular park. She rather liked it. Heavy with woods on one side and a somewhat forgotten playground on the other, in between the park space was a large swath of grass with enough space for kids to play soccer, adults

their dogs to play Frisbee or fetch, and plenty of room to spare.

On her elbows, Siobhan eased herself up, spotting a woman sitting on a mat with her legs crossed, her eyes closed. Rolled-up mats perched behind her in a pyramid.

“Ooh, look.”

Jack’s gaze narrowed as he looked off in the distance. Shaking his head, he turned to her. “More squirrels?”

“Yoga.”

“Yoga?”

“Yep.” She packed away her camera and then smiled up at him. “You should join them. It’ll be fun.”

“Fun?” He chuckled lightly. “For an old lady maybe.”

“Old lady?” She glared at him. “Yoga has excellent health benefits. You should try it. Lowers stress, builds core strength, keeps you limber.”

“I have plenty of core strength, am limber enough—when it counts. I like my stress, thank you.”

She felt heat rush up her cheeks at his little innuendo and literally threw her thoughts away. “Oh, come on. Give it a try.”

He shook his head. “Can’t. Didn’t bring any cash with me.”

“Hmm.” She watched the woman work the other attendees through a series of breathing exercises. “First class is often free. We should ask.”

He eyed the scene with skepticism, then shook his head again. “I can’t. I can make a fool of myself some other way.”

“Okay.” She plopped herself on the grass again, tugging at the collar of Jack’s shirt. “Let’s just follow the class from here.”

Jack’s gaze darted left then right, over to the woman now on all fours. “I don’t know.”

“Chicken?”

He rolled his eyes. “Five minutes. That’s all you get.”

“Deal.” She waited for him to sit beside her, then she crawled on all fours like the instructor across the lawn was doing.

“This is easy enough.” Jack smiled.

“She hasn’t really started yet.”

His brows inched up his forehead. “Could have fooled me.”

The woman’s one leg went up in the air behind her. “Now she’s starting.” Siobhan did the same, casting a sideways glance at Jack doing the same.

only a lot more wobbly than anyone else. The woman changed to the downward dog position. “And change.”

“This is silly.” Jack shifted sides, raising his other leg and almost toppling over. “Really silly.”

“You need to work on your balance.”

“My balance is just fine on two legs. If men were meant to be downward dogs, the good Lord would have given us four legs and no arms.”

On her hands, the instructor inched her hands closer to the middle mat, slowly raising her bum straight in the air.

“Now that’s easy. Silly, but easy.” Jack moved to the downward dog position in one move.

“Straighten your back. You’re not supposed to have your back arched in the downward dog.”

“Downward dog?” Tilting his head, he faced her. “Who the heck named it—and that?”

She shrugged and moved over to place her hand on his back. “I don’t know who named it, but you need to straighten your back. It’s that core strength thing.”

Her hand on his back, he groaned and then one hand slipped off and he fell under him. Next thing she knew, he was flat on the ground and she was sprawled over him. How he’d taken her out so easily, she had no idea. The whole endeavor went from bad to worse.

Nope. He’d managed to do okay with the warrior pose but when they shifted into the triangle, once again he toppled over, taking her with him. “Are you kidding? Wouldn’t it be easier to play Twister? At least then we’re supposed to be falling over.”

“Twister doesn’t relieve stress.”

“Neither does this.” His chuckle eased into a real laugh.

As soon as the instructor shifted to the half-moon pose, Siobha and she were in trouble. She’d started, trying to casually spy on him beside her. For a few seconds they both balanced perfectly, despite the giggles. “She got this.”

“What I have is a cramp in my leg.” He brought his leg down to the ground and turned to face her at the same moment she twisted to look at the instructor.

“Instead of finding the teacher, she found Jack up close and beside her. The shock of it had her tumbling over, knocking Jack off his legs and

ie otherlanded splat on top of her.

The two of them cracked up laughing until she realized his breath was warm against her, and his face was so close she could see the gray flecks in his deep blue eyes. She almost lost her breath and softly muttered, “So

“No. My fault.” He didn’t move, only inched himself up so she could breathe. Maybe. “Siobhan?”

“Mm hm?”

He didn’t say a word, just dipped a fraction closer until his lips were brushing hers.

Oh, damn. Her arms wrapped around him as she kissed him. Something in the back of her head said this was all wrong, but another part of her knew it was very right.

amed it



In his time Jack had kissed many women, but kissing Siobhan today was a bevy of feelings and emotions surging through him that he’d never felt before. A simple, sweet kiss before in his life. When he found himself close enough to feel the race of her heartbeat against his, and her face so close he could hear her breathe, at that moment, she wasn’t anyone’s sister, she was just a young woman, and she wasn’t off limits. Not even a hurricane could have stopped him from doing what he’d been avoiding for days.

Even now, back in the car and on the way home, his lips still tingled after the loss of her touch. It had taken every bit of common sense and willpower to pull back. For the life of him, he couldn’t tell if he was shocked, scared, pleased, or as overwhelmed by the kiss as he’d been. She’d barely blinked, simply stared at him. Never had he known a woman who looked so darn enticing, just lying on the grass, leveling her gaze at his.

When he’d come up for air, she hadn’t said a word or tried to scoot away. He hadn’t a clue what to do or say, the only words he could find were, “We should get going.” Still looking at him, she merely nodded and said, “He hadn’t dared reach for her to help her up for fear he’d wind up right where he’d started, on the ground, up close and personal, wanting something more than he should.”

It had taken a short while for either of them to find their voice.

walked to the car in total silence. He'd considered apologizing, but he didn't want to. If he could, he'd do it again. A lot. As soon as he'd turned the wheels in on, she seemed to snap back to herself. A bright smile took over her face. "Some song he hadn't recognized, and when she turned to him, grinning and bobbing in her seat again, his heart soared and he smiled back.

Just like that, they seemed to be on an even keel. What he didn't know was what to do next. Like it or not, she had four big brothers who he knew beyond any doubt were not going to cotton to his crushing on their sister.

Another song came on and she danced in her seat once again, singing so loud that the cars at the light beside her probably could hear her through the closed windows. Anyone else would have suggested they take a break before they caused a scene, but Siobhan, he merely wanted to roll down the windows and shout to the world—this is my girl.

My girl. Was that what he wanted? Because if it wasn't, he'd better get out of there—no, run—the other way. This was not someone to be toyed with, regardless of who her brothers were. Siobhan was the kind of woman who deserved a man ready and able to make a commitment. A word he'd never before considered. Could he be that man? What to do next, what to say, had been kicking around in his mind when the traffic ahead slowed.

"This is odd for a Saturday afternoon?"

"This is Houston. Traffic is a way of life."

"I know, but not like this. We're almost at a stop." She stopped dancing and sat up straighter in her seat, trying to see what was ahead.

"Probably construction. The city likes nothing better than tearing up the streets and making the drivers crazy."

"I hope that's it."

Barely inching along, he glanced in her direction. Focused on the road ahead, it almost seemed as if kissing her was an ordinary, everyday thing. What a great idea. Kiss Siobhan every day.

"Oh, no." Her gaze narrowed as the cars blended into a single line. "Avoid the debris on the side of the road leading up to the police cars and trucks ahead. It's an accident. This many first responders can't be here without a sign."

Two crumpled cars sat on the side of the road, one straight ahead with the front end missing, the other at an awkward angle with the trunk pretty much gone.

It didn't in the backseat. An ambulance's back door was wide open and he barely saw two EMTs in their white shirts working over a gurney. He automatically assumed they were helping a victim.

Jack and Siobhan "Someone's been hurt." Siobhan gnawed on her lower lip when the sound of a siren had them both looking up. Another ambulance was making its way through the bottleneck of cars. "Oh, no."

Jack knew He glanced around, looking for more victims when he noticed Siobhan bow her head. Her lips moved in silence. She was praying. Texas was buckling at the buckle of the bible belt. Finding someone who believed in the power of faith was nothing unusual, and yet, seeing her living her faith, concerned him. People she didn't know, struck him harder than any blow her brother had ever dealt.

Jack merged into the single lane, they drove past the frenzy of police and firemen as the first ambulance sped away, lights flashing and sirens blaring. He found himself raising his gaze to the sky and asking God to guide the hands of the rescuers and perform a miracle. How many years had it been since he remembered there even was a god?

Something inside Jack shifted at the sight of Siobhan praying. The car picked up speed and left the accident behind them. The seriousness of what was going on between them came front and center. He wasn't sure of the right thing to do right now, but he was sure of one thing, he would guard her heart with his own. He did not want to lose Siobhan in his life—if she would have him. He had to figure out what to do now.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Several photos from the park shoot the other day were strewn Siobhan's workroom. She was hoping to have enough to stop by an Veronica that she'd taken her advice about diversity to heart, but nothing struck her as just right on her computer screen. In hopes that something would pop, she'd gone ahead and printed the best. Studying them carefully she frowned—no such luck.

At least she didn't think so. Her normally critical eye and sharp intuition eluded her. The only thing she seemed to be able to fully focus on was a kiss. Jack Preston had kissed her. Not a *Kyle's kid sister* peck on the cheek, but a real, honest-to-goodness, toe curling, mouth on mouth kiss, and now how she tried to dive in to work the last few days, her mind kept returning to the surreal moment.

Her lips still remembered the feel of his. She found herself resting her fingertips on her lips, the feel of his touch still lingered. If she closed her eyes, she could relive the moment over and over. And how stupid would she look? Wouldn't she have a fun time explaining that to her family if she walked in on her and noticed? Pleading the fifth wouldn't cut it. Maybe she could claim she was coming down with something. Heaven knows, that would certainly be a more acceptable explanation for her behavior than confessing that the mere thought of Jack made her feel warm over.

Of course that left her with a new conundrum. Why hadn't he called her? Was he embarrassed? Did he regret kissing her? She really hoped it was the latter, because she most definitely wanted him to do it again. Maybe she should call him? After all, this was the age of equality. A girl could kiss a boy. Except she didn't have a clue what to say; Can we roll around on the grass and kiss some more didn't seem quite right—though true.

"Those photos are lovely." Grams stood in Siobhan's doorway.

“Thanks.” Startled out of her ruminations over Jack, she returned attention to the photographs staring blankly at her. “I’m just not sure I have them enough to show them to Veronica at the gallery or even bother to display them at the State Fair.”

“They are good.” Her grandmother stepped into the room. “But you might be able to do something better.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Perhaps,” her grandmother smiled at the photos before turning her back, “you might consider something with more of a statement?”

That made Siobhan frown in thought. Statement? Her mind ran to darker, meaningful. At the park where she’d taken the photos of the squirrels, there’d been a playground. A bit run down, but still in use. Siobhan nodded, deciding at the moment to hurry out. “I’ve got another meeting, won’t be home too late. I need to take a few more shots and add them to my portfolio before my meeting tomorrow afternoon.”

Placing a hand on her shoulder, Lila Conroe Baron smiled at her. “That’s the Baron way. We’re never satisfied with mediocre.”

Tucked away at one end of the park, the forlorn playground stood in a matter of feet. Already she could picture the shots she wanted. Hopefully, these would be the trick. She set her camera bags on a nearby bench while she considered the light, the equipment, and what she hoped to achieve. A woman with a leash and a little girl in a stroller walked by the perimeter of the playground. The little girl stretched her arm over the side of the stroller, calling out to her mother to stop.

“Five minutes,” the woman told the little girl.

Siobhan watched as the child climbed onto the rocking hippo that had seen better days, then scurried over to one of those old-fashioned carousel horses. The kind that had been removed from most playgrounds in more modern neighborhoods. The little girl grabbed onto the handle and ran around it, spinning, giggling like, well, a happy little girl. Siobhan couldn’t resist. She snapped a photo, one after the other. She’d have to get a release from the woman if she intended to use these for professional purposes. As the mother notified her that she had one minute left, Siobhan ran up to her and handed her a business card. At the end of the minute, she had the woman’s name and phone number to contact in the event she did indeed choose one of the photos for the show. That is, if Veronica agreed.

ned her The playground empty again, Siobhan began clicking away at the
e I likechipped monkey bars, imagining the day when the equipment was sh
nteringnew and most likely crawling with neighborhood children. Over her s
she heard voices and glanced behind her. Two young men in jeans a
ou wantcaps were walking in her direction from the parking lot. A little old
playground was the first thing to cross her mind. The next thoug
reminded herself, whatever they were up to was none of her business.
to face Returning to her camera lens, one of the guys muttered a hello, a
barely dared to nod at them. A moment later they took seats on a
grittier,across from where she was. They could have chosen ten other benche
curiousdid they need to be by her? The hairs on the back of her neck risi
e. Yes.gathered her equipment and moved to the other side of the playgrou
idea. Ilight would be more challenging, but at least she'd put some c
n to thebetween herself and the two guys.

A few mediocre photos later, another muttered word she couldn
'It's themake out and she realized the men were seated across from her again
flustered her more than their presence was that they were perfectly
empty.between her and the exit route to her car.

ould do Using her lens to examine her exit routes without drawing sus
ered thesomething in her gut told her she really should have brought someo
dog onher. Letting her camera dangle around her neck, she pulled out her p
ground.call...who? Speed dialing the Governor, the call went straight to voi
for herThe men stood and moved one bench closer. She didn't like that c

Tapping hard at her keyboard, she called the one person she knew sh
trust as much as her own kin. Jack.

hat had Feeling like a heroine in a cheap horror flick who was too stupid
rouselsherself, she linked her arm through the camera bag strap, ready to v
upscalelike a weapon. On the other end, the phone rang once, twice, and she
makingaway from the men. No one else in view, her car so far out of the w
sist andpalms beginning to sweat. "Come on, Jack."

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That kiss. Jack wished he could stop thinking about Siobhan and tha
blowing kiss. If he somehow managed to push away the memory of h
lips felt against his, then other visions of Siobhan crept into his hea

ie paintway she smiled when she held a baby, the way her voice softened ;
iny andeyes sparkled when she talked on the phone to her mama, the w
houlderwillingly jumps in where needed, whether helping a mom with a str
ind ballsaying a silent prayer. All of it made his insides go soft and his heart
for thedance.

ght she Everything new he learned about her continued to highlight ju
special she was. Not that it mattered. Days had gone by and he hadn'
and sheher. Instead, he'd dunked himself in work. Those same Irish eyes tha
i benchhim crazy with light and laughter were probably spewing daggers
s. Whythought of him. Who kissed a girl then went silent? And his best
ng, shesister, no less. There was no excuse for crossing the line and kissi
nd. Thenever mind going silent afterward. He was behaving like a teenager.

listance What he needed to do was make time to talk to her brothers. There
be no going forward without declaring his intentions to them first. Of
't quitethat required he knew what his intentions were and right now, he coul
1. Whatmore confused if he really were still a teenager. Tonight. At the
plantedNormally, a public gathering was not the ideal place for this t
conversation, but the risk of one or all of her siblings killing him in
spicion,witnesses was greatly decreased.

ne with On his desk at his side, his phone buzzed, pulling him out of his th
hone toSiobhan's name came onto his screen, making him smile. Maybe she
cemail.mad at him after all. "Hello."

one bit. "Jack. I need your help."

e could The desperation in her voice grabbed him by the throat and propel
to the edge of his seat. "Always. What's wrong?"

to save "I'm back at the playground near the park not far from your place
wield itare some men here and they are making me nervous."

looked Phone to his ear, he'd already grabbed his keys and was halfway
ray, herfront door. "I know where you are. Put me on hold and call 911."

"But they haven't done anything, I mean, besides creep me out."

"Trust your instincts. Can you get to your car?"

"No, that's the problem. They keep shifting to stay in between me
parking lot."

t mind- "Hold tight. I'm getting into my car now. Be there in five minu
ow her sense of panic raced up Jack's spine. A simple visit to the park coul
ad. The turn into tonight's six o'clock news headline. He didn't like it one bit.

and her hang up.”

“I won’t.” Her voice sounded so small, so unlike the bright voice of the woman he’d gotten to know over the last week. “Jack?”

Silently, he cursed at the last red light between him and the park. “

“I’m scared.” She spoke so softly, he almost couldn’t hear her.

“I’m almost there. It will be fine.” It has to be. Suddenly, he knew what his intentions toward Siobhan were; everything he’d ever wanted drove commitment, home, hearth, and lots of children with her fiery red hair at the bright smile.

His heart slammed a rapid beat against his ribs. Blasted Houston. He needed to get to Siobhan—now.

The minutes ticked away as Jack kept her talking. Asking why she would be at the park? Had she gotten any good pictures? She answered each question, of course, he ignored the speed limit and took the turn into the parking lot. He didn’t know what he’d be wheels. Shoving the car in park, he had the door open and bolted toward the playground, desperately searching for her.

A sigh of relief struck when he spotted her on a bench, still talking to the two men in front of him, followed by a rush of adrenaline as the two men in question seemed to be closing in on her.

“Hey, honey. Sorry I’m late.” He waved his arm and eased his pace. It wasn’t a slow gallop.

She smiled his way. The fear in Siobhan’s eyes scraped his heart into pieces. He touched her arm and relief sprung into those beautiful eyes.

The two men froze in place and turned to look him up and down. If this was about to get messy, he had size on his side. And a few pounds.

Choosing to pretend he wasn’t here to rescue his damsel in distress, he reached for her hand and pulled her to her feet, planting another all-time

kiss on her lips. As much as he wanted to keep her pressed against him,

he needed to keep an eye on the reason he was here. To his relief, both men

took a few steps in retreat. Jack’s fingers skipped down her arm and grabbed her

hand, laced their fingers together, ready to make a run for it if needed. “I want to go home.” She kept her eyes leveled with his. “Can we stay here?”

“Absolutely. Stick with me.”

She nodded, and he surveyed their surroundings. The two guys had backed to the park periphery and away from them. “Thanks, Jack. I appreciate

you coming to the rescue for what was probably nothing.”

vacuous “Know that you can always count on me.” Taking another moment to watch the two men walking away toward a crop of trees, somehow, Jack said, “Yes?” no doubt those two were up to no good. He didn’t even want to consider what could have happened to Siobhan if he hadn’t been working from home.

exactly “Just what I needed.” She forced a stronger smile. “Another big breakthrough.”

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“Come with me?”

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He nodded. “Be my date?”

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“Whatever the lady wants.” As much as it went against his mother’s upbringing to not pick a date up at her door, having a bit of time to speak with her siblings would be a good thing. Or, if things went south, at least she wouldn’t have to witness her brothers committing murder.



CHAPTER TWELVE

The first stop after the park for Siobhan was the gallery. Overflowing with trendy cafes, boutiques, and new-age stores, the ever-growing arts scene in Houston was on her way home. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, fueled by her excitement over today's photos and tonight's prospects. She simply couldn't wait to show Veronica. Loaded with a stack of photos, and what was on her camera, she pushed the front door open.

The ding of the front door brought the gallery owner out from his office in the back. "Siobhan, so good to see you."

"Glad you were available to see me on short notice. I'm excited to show you a few pictures."

Siobhan laid out the ones she'd printed on a table in the office. The woman mulled over them, nodding and sighing and pressing her lips together. She looked up at Siobhan. "What else?"

Now she wished she'd waited to call Veronica until after she'd shown the photos from the park. Pulling out her camera, she scrolled through the photos and shot and handed it over to Veronica.

A little brighter with each swipe through what Siobhan had taken that day, a slow smile hovered on the woman's face. "I love these."

Siobhan let out a relieved sigh. "Thank you."

"I have a Belgian artist scheduled for a one-woman show in three weeks. She's had some trouble with her visas. We're going to have to cancel it. Veronica strolled around her desk and flipped through a calendar. He was still on the page, she lifted her gaze to meet Siobhan's. "Want her spot?"

"Excuse me?" Siobhan struggled for another coherent thought.

Veronica chuckled. "Don't look so surprised. These are good. Veronica. The stark contrast of Houston's neighborhoods was a brilliant idea. Between the two of us, we can determine the best of your portfolio. With a little

work, I think we can just about make the deadline for your own show you in?”

“Absolutely.” Her head bobbed so fast, she wouldn’t have been surprised if it snapped off her shoulders. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth and she couldn’t help but wonder if today could possibly get any better.

Next thing she knew, Siobhan was signing contracts, talking about prints, framing, deadlines, agreeing on a next meeting to finalize the purchase, and finally shaking hands before heading out the door and home. Siobhan would move heaven and earth to get the pictures done and could hardly wait to see Jack and tell him in person.

Jack. The man who hadn’t hesitated when she’d called for his decision, man who had kissed her as if his—or her—life depended on it. How could she become so important to her in such a short amount of time? She sighed and surveyed her closet for what to wear. The invitation hadn’t been completely clear. Whether she was to be his new just-for-show plus one the way it had been for so many years, or a real honest-to-goodness date, she had no idea.

What she did know was that more than anything she wanted the man who had kissed her. Surely that wasn’t a boring plus one kiss. After all, he had kissed her. Definitely, she wanted Jack to sit up and take notice that she was very much interested in more than friends. Reaching into her closet, she pulled out a green dress and a pair of green strappy sandals to finish off the outfit. This was the dress that garnered her the most printed compliments.

Her grandmother poked her head into her room. “Your grandmother and I are heading out early to help Mitch greet his guests. Since you don’t seem ready, shall I send the driver back to get you?”

And Jack would drive her home. That thought made her smile. “That would be fantastic, Grams. I should be ready by then.”

Her grandmother nodded, eyeing the dress Siobhan had laid out. “That’s a great choice. Always love how that dress matches your eyes.”

Her eyes? The door to her room latched shut behind her grandmother. “What?”

Siobhan studied the dress draped across the bed. A beautiful emerald sheath dress, with one side off the shoulder. The problem at hand, she wanted to accentuate her eyes, she wanted Jack to swallow his tongue. The second look in her closet, she’d been to plenty of black-tie events, the hard family requiring a floor-length gown, but none had been meant to a

ow. Areman's attention. A real man.

Shaking her head, she knew she needed help. And fast. Her cell i
rprisedSiobhan called the only person who knew Jack as well as her brothers
' mouthand conquer. Jack Preston had no idea what he was in for.

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Even though Jack had arrived early to snatch a few minutes with Siobhan and her brothers before she arrived, the crowds for the popular senator were surrounding Mitch. Neither Kyle nor Craig were in town for the event meant only Mitch and Chase were present. If he could win then convincing Kyle and Craig not to run him out of town on a rail would be easier. Except, maybe this hadn't been his brightest idea. The two brothers were currently at opposite ends of the ballroom and Jack had no idea how to corral them without tipping his hand.

Swirling the ginger ale in his glass, Jack blew out a soft sigh. Beer was his favored drink, but if his plan was to convince the Baron men that ginger ale was a good choice for sweet Siobhan, somehow ginger ale seemed more appropriate. Though a little liquid courage before telling her brother his intentions held a great deal of appeal at the moment. The key to the conversation was to be clear and aboveboard with everyone.

Glancing at his watch, anticipation of Siobhan's arrival battle anxiety over his upcoming conversation with the Baron men. Spreading a break in the circle of supporters surrounding Mitch, Jack swallowed a drop of soda, set the glass on the bar and strode over to Mitch. Mitch's serious nature would make him the hardest sell. It made sense to start with Mitch. If Jack could get Mitch on board, the rest of the brothers would hopefully fall into step like a trail of dominoes.

“Hey, Jack.” Mitch gave his friend a casual slap on the arm, too friendly for a handshake, not the right setting for a man hug. “Always good to see your friendly face at these events.”

“From what I can see, you've got more than enough friendly faces.” Mitch shook his head. “Don't let the smiles fool you. Everyone here wants something from me.”

The darkness in his eyes and the weight of his tone had Jack guessing his plan.

“If you’ve got some hidden legislation on the back of your mind in hand, telling you now. Not interested.”

“What?” Wrapped up in his own thoughts, he failed to connect the conversation.

“Sorry.” Mitch shook his head. “It gets old, everyone wanting something. Every time I turn around. You look serious. Is something wrong?”

“No. Not wrong.” This was where he had to find the right words. “I want to talk to you about something, in private.”

“There you are.” A balding man with a belly that looked ready to burst out of the cummerbund, slapped Mitch on the back and sloshed a bit of bourbon over the rim of his drinking glass. The night was starting early. “I heard you could be still sitting on that legislation we discussed at the last event.”

“Well—” Mitch forced a smile, but Busting Cummerbund cut him off. “I’ll do you a favor and save you the trouble of repeating yourself. Wentworth and some of your other supporters are as anxious as I am for an update. Let’s join them at the table.”

Before Jack could react, Mitch was whisked away to a table cleared in the room. At this rate, he had no choice but to seek out Chase. Smiling at the other bar in the ballroom with his wife at his side, the other brother seemed to be in a better mood. Taking in a fortified breath, Jack strode across the ballroom as casually as he could without breaking into a run.

Chase leaned against the bar as if marking Jack’s progress across the room. “Hey, buddy.” Not up for re-election, Chase didn’t hesitate that one-armed bro hug that men did. “Ready for a refill?”

“Ginger ale for me.”

Chase’s eyes rounded like a cartoon caricature. “Say again?”

“Ginger ale.”

“Not feeling well?” Chase teased.

Did everyone expect Jack to always drink? He might have to rethink his image if he survived tonight. “I’m doing fine. Thanks.”

Chase studied Jack. “Markets good? Do we need to juggle our investments?”

“No.” He shook his head. Jack didn’t want to do small talk. “Markets good, but what I really want is to chat a minute about Siobhan.”

“Oh. I see Paige. I’ll let you two knights in shining armor have at it. The one who’d been chatting with another woman at the bar, gave her husband a good talking to.”

nd, I'm Jack, a peck on the cheek and crossed the room to where Paige and I
come in.

dots of "She's right." Chase lifted his chin in his departing wife's direction
owe you a thanks for rescuing Siobhan today."

nothing. "Glad I was available."

"You think there was something to those guys?"

s. "I do "I think the world is filled with bad people and, yeah, they may have
a couple of them."

just out Chase frowned and Jack knew exactly how the guy felt. It had taken
f liquid while to stop stewing over what could have gone wrong had he not
you're when he did.

"Like I said, thanks."

off. "Nothing to thank me for. I care about her too." What Jack needed
myself, didn't have, was time to soften Chase up, ease him into the conversation
for an about the little sister that wasn't so little anymore. Not that Jack blamed
of them for being protective of her, Siobhan wasn't his sister and he
t across exact same way. "Which brings me around to something we need to
g at the before Siobhan arrives."

emed to Nodding, Chase reached for the ginger ale the bartender had served
oss the handed it over to Jack. "I'm all ears. But if you want me to reel in on
sister, you're jack out of luck—no pun intended. That kid has a mind
oss the adrenaline tolerance that's all Baron and hard to control."

to offer "She's definitely all Baron, but there's no baby or kid in her
anymore."

That had Chase frowning again. Whether the guy was doing math
head or preparing to argue, Jack had no idea, because his eyeballs started
popped in conjunction with the low whistles of a few men at the bar.
the..."

think his A guy Jack didn't recognize elbowed Chase. "Looks like your little
isn't so little anymore."

some "Watch it," Chase and Jack chorused.

That made the line between Chase's brows deepen.

kets are Jack sighed. Knowing the second he turned around and saw Siobhan
he felt would be painted all over his face for Chase and anyone else
it." CJ, attention to see, this wasn't going to be easy.

id, then "Crap." Chase rolled his eyes. "Why do they have to grow up? T

Eve hadn't, that woman is going to break some hearts tonight. Right after I put a few of them in the nose first."

in. "Well, and if he guessed right, Jack's nose would be the first to make contact with Chase's fist."

A matching deep-set frown between his brows, Mitch appeared before his brother. "When the hell did Siobhan start dressing like a vixen?"

"First of all, no one uses the word vixen anymore; secondly, I believe I've been called growing up." Chase's gaze narrowed. "And I don't like it one bit."

en Jack "Which brings me back to what I wanted to discuss with you two arrived interjected.

"Not now." Chase pushed away from the bar. "I need to run interference."

"Right behind you." Mitch straightened his tie and Jack dared not look away.

conversation Holy... All the breath in his lungs left him. Donning a strapless royal blue dress that showed more assets than he liked, Siobhan closed the curtains and felt the heat between them. From the way just about every male eye in the room followed her way, he wasn't the only one to notice her...assets. A thin strand of

hung around a long kissable neck and rested just above a hint of exposed cleavage. Enough flesh to taunt a man's imagination and tease his senses. Her baby-tight swath of fabric draped about a narrow waist showcased an hourglass figure. With each step across the crowded ballroom, the clinging fabric swished back and forth, a single slit just above the knee exposing her. Not shapely legs. Legs that were doing as much to fuel his imagination as the rest of her.

h in his "Hi." Siobhan came to a stop in front of him, and completely ignoring her brothers, laid one hand on his forearm and leaned in for the tiniest of

"What on the lips. Not his cheek as she might have done only a few short years ago, but smack on the lips."

le sister "Hi," he managed to mutter back, just in time to see Eve half-smiling behind her, and not one but two Baron brothers staring daggers at him.

No matter how he sliced it, he was in so much trouble.

an, how
paying

hat kid,

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“Hi,” he managed to mutter back, just in time to see Eve half a step behind her smiling, and not one but two Baron brothers staring daggers at him.

No matter how he sliced it, he was in so much trouble.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Siobhan had no idea which was more entertaining, the shock on Jack as she did her best to strut across the ballroom, or that just-sucked-lemon look on Mitch and Chase's faces. When Eve swore on her chocolate martini that this was the dress that would knock Jack off his feet, Siobhan had her doubts. She really liked the red dress with the drop waist, but the gold dress with the sweetheart neckline. All Eve did was shake her head and point to the deep royal blue option over and over.

She could still hear Eve repeating, "Jack's a leg man. The peek of the side slit will drive him crazy. The cleavage won't hurt, he is a man, but it's the leg he only gets a hint of that will drive him nuts."

Time would tell if Eve was right.

"Isn't there a shawl or wrap that goes with that dress?" Chase didn't know where to look. Every time his gaze dropped to her neckline and shoulders, it immediately shot back up to her face.

It took everything in her not to laugh.

"If it had one, she'd be wearing it." Eve actually rolled her eyes at her brothers.

Mitch glared at their sister. "Whose side are you on?"

"I don't take sides." Eve reached for her brother, the senator's arm. "Come on. I like this song. Let's dance before all the rich women in the room claim you."

"But..." Keeping his eyes on Siobhan, he was practically digging his heels in as Eve dragged him onto the floor.

"There you are." Paige appeared beside her brother. "I love this song. Let's dance."

Chase whipped his head left at Paige then back to Siobhan, scowling at Jack. "Later."

“This song will be over later.” Sticking her arm straight out, she snatched Chase’s hand. “Come on, big brother. Make your sister happy.”

Still scowling, he shifted his gaze from Siobhan to Jack as Paige carried him into the middle of the floor beside Mitch and Eve. Bless her big heart, Paige understood what Siobhan was going through and how hard it was to force her brothers to view her as a woman fully grown and not the little girl of the family.

“Shall we?” Jack held his elbow out to her.

She couldn’t stop the smile from taking over her face. “I’d love to.” Together, they slowly strolled across the wooden floor to the center-on-a-dance area. As if they’d been dancing together their entire lives, he wrapped his arms around her waist and the other hand enfolded hers in his. On his feet, back and in seconds they were gliding around the room like Fred and Ginger. Another minute and doing something equivalent to a fancy two-step, he twirled her in place before pulling her back into his arms. She couldn’t help but chuckle and smile up at him.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted Mitch, his lips pressed together, shooting daggers at Jack. Another twirl around the floor and Jack had maneuvered his way over to them. Just like her other brother, he silently scolded Jack with his piercing scowl. Not wanting to laugh or cry, she didn’t at her brothers, she buried her head in Jack’s shoulder, muffling her laughter.

“Are you trying to get me killed?” Jack teased.

Without moving away, she shook her head against him. “I can hear your heartbeat.”

She also felt him swallow and suck in a deep breath. Instantly, his heartbeat slowed. “That’s probably a good thing, because I’m pretty sure I stopped when you walked into the room.”

Barely inching back, she lifted her face to see his eyes. “Really?”

Chuckling slightly, he nodded. “Most definitely. You, Siobhan, and Eve are a knockout. And if you haven’t noticed, you’re driving me crazy.”

“I think I like that.” Smothering a smile, she leaned against him again.

To her surprise, at no point did Jack make an effort to stop dancing. The music went through a few ballads before switching to a couple of old-timey tunes. Mitch had indeed been pulled away by one wealthy patron before another. Chase, on the other hand, had approached them more than once, clearly intending to cut in before Paige or Eve stepped in and steer

, Paige away to dance.

y.” “The waitstaff is serving dinner.”

dragged Jack glanced across the room to where their table was. “We sisters probably go sit.”

was to “Would it be out of place for me to say, I don’t want to let you go?

baby of His head dipped and he very gently kissed her temple. “Ditto.”

“So what do we do?”

” “I had hoped to talk to your brothers before you arrived. Since that happen, I can’t promise there won’t be a scene when we go sit.”

r of the Taking a minute to scope out where her two siblings were, she is hand Mitch deeply engrossed in conversation with some old coot. Chase has one step a seat at the table, not beside their grandparents, but a seat away so that Ginger and Jack would not be able to sit side by side.

p, Jack “I suppose we should face the music.” Even though sitting at that r’t help with her annoyed brothers was the last thing she wanted to do.

” “That would be the adult thing to do.” His eyes sparkled with amusement tightly and without his saying a word, she knew exactly what he was thinking

l Chase “Or,” she smiled up at him, “we could sneak out.”

, Chase “If we’re going to do this...” He paused to gingerly kiss the top of her head before continuing. “We’re going to have to face them sooner or later.

ughter. “This?” She hadn’t meant for her voice to sound so small and insecure.

” “Us.” His words came out low and husky and her toes almost curled under her shoes.

The single word put a smile on her face. “I like the sound of that.”

itly his “Then we face the music?”

sure it Her gaze drifted to the table where Mitch had joined their grandparents and other siblings and slowly shook her head. “I vote for escape.”

” “Whatever the lady wants.” The twinkle in his eyes dimmed momentarily, as behind a heavy curtain of emotions she couldn’t quite read before the of his lips tipped north into a lazy smile. “They’re going to be mad as hell at us.”

ng. The “Yes.” She took a step in retreat, already bemoaning the loss of her leg faster against her, but didn’t let go of the one hand that had been holding her in after they’d danced. Looking around him, she grinned broadly. “Isn’t that a little bit of an honor, shame?”

ed him



The only thing Jack wanted to do while standing at the curb waiting for the valet to bring his car around, was pull Siobhan into his arms and kiss her. Neither could take another breath. That, of course, would not be his best yet. For now, holding her hand tightly in his was going to have to do.

Except for the few moments after the valet brought the car around, Jack had to leave Siobhan in the passenger seat of his classic corvette, not let go of her hand. For whatever reason, he needed that connection. A bigger problem for him, though, would be leaving her at the front door. This was insane. He'd been infatuated before. Even considered himself a time or two. Though most would consider his obsession with his grade English teacher more puppy love than in love. However, the truth he'd never in his life wanted to be with a woman every second of the day and he had no clue how to handle the flood of emotions swirling around his chest, squeezing his pounding heart.

They'd made it the entire drive to the ranch with only a moment of comfortable silence, usually when Siobhan raised the volume on the radio of her dancing in her seat and belting out one tune or other. They'd carefully managed to avoid any mention of Mitch or Chase's reaction, or the future would happen when they spoke to Kyle and Craig. Instead, they chattered easily about everything and anything, including the upcoming show. Veronica was totally contagious. Only for a moment when she mentioned wishing her mother could be here for the upcoming event did the excitement dim, quickly returning as she described Veronica's positive reactions to photos. To his surprise, the delight at her happiness was the biggest highlight he'd ever experienced. Suddenly, he was completely sure of his intentions with Siobhan, intentions he would share with her overly protective brother. Hell, other than anything in this world, he wanted to make Siobhan his wife. The only thing that seemed to scare him was the thought that she might not want the same thing. He'd have to proceed with caution. The last thing he wanted was to scare her away with professions of undying love and devotion. Man, he just wanted to sound like a love-struck teenager.

"Careful!" Siobhan screeched at the same second he spotted a car without headlights speeding past them on the narrow dirt road leading

ranch. "What the heck is the matter with those people?"

"I'm going to guess someone drank their dinner."

for the er until
Sitting upright in the passenger seat, Siobhan shook her head. "Should I call 911?"

est idea
"No point. They were driving so fast, by the time an officer is dispatched they'll be long gone."

nd and he had
She sank back into the seat. "You're right. I know that, but it irks me to let them get away."

on. The on. The
And there was another thing he'd grown to love about Siobhan, her sense of fair play.

in love
Turning into the driveway, he debated what excuse he could come up with to stay a little longer. He had no idea if Chase or Mitch were back to the ranch. All the members of the family, except Siobhan, had their own homes in Texas, but until recently when they started marrying, most of them spent more time at the ranch than their own places. Under the circumstances, he debated exactly how he felt, and the future he wanted, staying to chat with Governor if no one else might be a smart idea. Then again, if they started talking on the radio, the end of the benefit, the middle of the night might not be the best time for a carefully civil discussion of any kind.

of what
At a stop in front of the massive family home, Jack trotted around the hood to open the car door for Siobhan.

w. The ng with
"Thank you." She pushed to her feet and gave him a sweet but teasing kiss on the lips. "Come in for a night cap or coffee?"

ntioned
"Coffee." He smiled, following her up the front steps.

itement
Staring at the door, she nudged the door open. "That's odd. I could have sworn I pulled it shut behind me when I left."

gh he'd
"Maybe one of the household staff left it open?"

ons for
She shook her head. "No, they all left for their night off before me."

s. More he only
"Wait." Odds were she simply had not pulled the door shut all the way, but he didn't want her walking into a burglary in progress. "I'll go back and check. Let you know if it's okay."

ted was
The frown already at home on her forehead deepened before she spoke, but she didn't nod.

Carefully scanning the foyer, he listened for any sounds of movement. He gestured for her to remain at the front door. Sticking his head into the parlor first, nothing seemed out of place. Next he looked at the dining room.

All the large sterling silver pieces appeared in place. Any burglar would know that the candelabras on the table alone were probably worth five figures. The knots in his stomach eased and he reentered the room. "I think it's okay."

Relief washed away Siobhan's concern. "Good, because I don't know how to get into the gun safe."

Jack rolled his eyes at her. If there'd been burglars in the house, there would have been no time to go hunting for a gun in a safe.

"Coffee?" She stood in front of him.

Narrowing his gaze, he looked across the hall to the Governor's study. "Did you leave the lights on in the study?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Someone did."

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“Someone did.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I liked it better when you said everything was okay.” The look of concern on Siobhan’s face brought out every protective instinct Jack had.

With her plastered against his back, he slowly entered the study. In his peripheral eye, everything looked in place. Watching where he stepped, he circled the desk. A couple of drawers were slightly open. He couldn’t imagine the former Marine patriarch not being precise about everything, including the desk drawers.

“Hmm.” Siobhan stepped around him to the wall of books. “Someone knocked this over.”

She leaned over and Jack grabbed her arm. “Don’t touch that. It’s a delicate case.”

“So someone was here?” Her voice didn’t quite crack, but came close. She was putting up a brave front.

“Maybe. And maybe you should call the Governor and give him a heads up.”

“And then call the police.” Those nerves of steel he knew her to have were resurfacing.

He shook his head. “Better see what your grandfather wants to do first.”

With a nod of her head, Siobhan pulled her cell out of the glittering case, her purse still dangling from her arm and called the Governor.

Jack eyed the room carefully, looking for any additional signs of an intruder, or a really bad housemaid.

“Okay.” Siobhan tossed her phone onto the desk. “Grams and the Governor are already on their way home. The chicken was dry and the TV got too loud.”

Her delivery of why the Barons were on their way home actually made Jack chuckle despite the potential severity of the situation. “I suggest you

in the other room.”

“Sounds good. You make yourself at home, I’m going to run upstairs to change into something more comfortable, then I’ll make that pot of coffee I offered you.”

Following her toward the stairway, he nodded. “Tell you what, don’t you go change and I’ll put on the coffee?”

She leaned forward and quickly kissed his cheek. “A man of many talents.”

All he could think was how many more of his talents he wished he could show her. He hadn’t been in the kitchen more than a minute when a curdling scream reached his ears. *Siobhan*. Damn it. Dropping the pot in the sink, he bolted down the hall and up the stairs. He should have checked the whole house before assuming all was well.

Barreling down the second-floor hall, he took the turn into her bedroom without slowing down, grabbing onto the doorway for balance. In the middle of the bedroom Siobhan stood, her hands on her mouth, surrounded by shelves of... everything.

As neat as the Governor’s office looked, Siobhan’s room did not. Just in drawers in her dressers and vanity were wide open, contents dumped on the floor. Even the bedsheets and spread had been pulled back and dangled close to the foot of the bed. Night table drawers were open, books had been thrown away from one wall of shelves. A tripod and some other equipment he recognized from the wedding were thrown on top of a pile of sweaters.

“Why?” she muttered softly, before spinning around and almost falling into his arms.

Cradling her as tightly as he dared, he whispered over her head, “I know, but you’re all right. That’s what matters.”

She bobbed her head against his shoulder. “I don’t want to think about what would have happened if I’d been home alone.”

Neither did he. The thought had him pulling her tighter against his chest.

Standing here in the middle of this bedroom carnage wasn’t helping his nerves, but before he could suggest waiting for the Governor downstairs, his gaze lifted to meet his and all sanity slid away. It didn’t matter that the Barons had been burglarized or that Siobhan’s room was targeted. Beauty made pink, plump lips called to him. Leaning in, he kissed her the way he’d waited to all night.

“Siobhan?” The Governor’s voice carried up the stairs, following multiple sets of footsteps.

He knew he should back away, stop, catch his breath, but he needed one more second. And then a lifetime.

“What the hell?” the Governor’s voice boomed.

Who separated first, him or her, he wasn’t sure, but he took another step in retreat, loosening his hold of Siobhan, but not fully letting go.

The next thing he knew, before he or Siobhan could say a word, a voice bellowed through the small room. “Son of a ...”

A hard grip pulled him into a spin about two seconds before a very angry fist slammed into his jaw.

He



“Chase!” The single name ripped from her throat louder than the screech of the door. “What the hell are you doing?”

Fists clenched at his side, Chase’s gaze darted to the unmade bed back to Jack. “You have one helluva a nerve coming into our home—”

“Stop,” the Governor ordered. “Have you taken a good look at the room?”

“It’s a mess.” Chase continued to glare at Jack.

“Chase.” Grams’ hand settled gently on her grandson’s arm. “You’re upset that someone has violated her room.”

“From where I stand, more than her room has been violated.” Chase seemed to be daring Jack to give him a reason for taking another swing.

To her surprise, Jack simply stood there, almost bracing himself for the next punch.

“Chase,” the Governor repeated, “call the police. Obviously, we’ve been burglarized.”

Like a glass of cold water to the face, the Governor’s words had Chase looking around the room more slowly, and then his eyes settled on Siobhan, still in the beautiful but snug evening gown. Sucking in a deep breath, he slowly blowing it out, he nodded. “I’ll call the police.” Pausing at the doorway, he waved a finger at Jack. “I may have overreacted, but I’m not wrong. We need to talk.”

Jack bobbed his chin.

ved by “If there’s anything that hasn’t been thrown on the floor,” Grams s
the mess, “you might want to go ahead, change clothes, and
led just downstairs.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Getting out of this sausage stuffing dress sounded
but she didn’t want to leave Jack’s side. Not knowing what else to do
er stepshe reached out and grabbed hold of his hand.

The stern expression on his face slipped away. His gaze lowered
Chase’s hers and he managed a weak smile. “I’ll wait for you in the hall.”

ry firm,



“You owe him an apology.” If there was one thing that James Ernes
was good at, it was judging character. He could not have had a suc
military and political career without it. “He was consoling and caring f
ream atsister.”

“He was kissing her,” Chase practically spat.

ed and “That too.” His beloved Lila smiled at their grandson.

’ “She’s our baby sister.”

at the Lila handed Chase a short glass of bourbon she’d poured for him
may be your youngest sister, but there’s nothing baby about her.”

Accepting the glass, Chase sighed. “She’s too young.”

ir sister “For what?” Lila asked.

When it came to matters of the heart, James had learned a very lo
Chaseago to let his wife take the lead.

3. “Everything.” Chase took a slow sip of his drink.

for the Lila shook her head. “She’s a legal adult well past twenty-one.”

“He’s too old for her.”

ve been That made the Governor chuckle. He too was a decade older t
wife, but he kept his mouth shut.

l Chase The sound of muffled laughter from his grandfather gave Chase
iobhan,Both James and Lila could easily tell the moment their grandson had d
ath andmath in his head and made the connection. “That’s different.”

in the “Why?” Lila didn’t mince words.

I’m not Chase stared into his drink as if the ice cubes held a secret code
shaking his head. “It just is.”

“Is there something wrong with Jack?” Lila continued.

scanned “Of course not.” For the first time in the conversation, Chase
looked repentant.

“So he’s a good man?”

Reluctantly, Chase nodded.

“Hard worker?”

Another nod.

“A good friend?”

“You know he is.” Chase draped his hand behind his neck. “I
Siobhan. I don’t want her to be another notch on his bedpost. She’s
kid.”

“I believe,” James spoke up, “your grandmother has reminded you
not a kid.”

“Fine.” Tension returned to Chase’s shoulders. “I don’t want my
sister to be another notch on his bedpost.”

“While I agree with you,” Lila reached over to scratch behind the
Honey who had come to sit beside her, “I apparently have more faith
sister *and* your friend than you do.”

“Anyone who goes after my sister isn’t the friend I thought he was.”
“All right.” Lila continued to scratch the dog’s ears. “What was the
of that young man who followed our Siobhan around like a puppy?”

“Dwayne,” James replied.

“What about him?” Lila leveled her gaze with Chase’s. “Would
better for your sister?”

“That pimply-faced kid wouldn’t know what to do with an electric
it bit him on the as...butt.”

Lila smiled. “Very well. Maybe that fellow she dated her senior
college. The one who wanted her to join him in the mountains of
America to work with the indigenous tribes.”

“She *was* smitten with him,” James added.

“That would fade fast after her first case of Montezuma’s revenge.”

“I believe that’s Mexico.” James tried not to laugh at his grandpa’s
struggles to justify his actions—and misguided opinions.

Chase set his empty glass on the table beside him. “Whatever.”

For a short moment, Lila and James exchanged glances.

It was clear to him that his wife felt she’d made her point. Waiting
few moments before speaking again, “Perhaps you should ask you

almost what she thinks of Jack.”

“I know what she thinks. She was kissing him.”

Lila bobbed her head. “Very well. Then perhaps the one you need to is Jack. Without your fists. After all, he’s the only one who knows intentions.”

His hands clasped in front of him, James leaned forward on his admit, at first the idea of a man of Jack’s reputation with your younger t’s just did not sit well with me.”

a good “See.” Chase sat back in the seat and dropped his ankle over his knee

“But.” James held up a finger. “Someone,” he gazed pointedly at Lila, she’s smiling across the room, “reminded me of my youthful reputation as a man before I fell in love with your grandmother. And frankly, I don’t think a grown-younger man would be man enough for someone with a spirit like your sister’s.”

Chase’s jaw tightened and James could almost hear his teeth grin in your he pondered his grandfather’s words.

At the same time Siobhan and Jack’s footsteps could be heard down the stairs, the doorbell rang.

“That must be the police.” Lila looked to her husband.

“I’ll get the door.” James pushed to his feet and passed Siobhan at the foot of the stairs. Opening the door to the officers, he paid the attention to what Chase was doing. From where he stood in front of the while the officers carefully stepped inside, he could see Chase come to c bill if beside his friend. At least that was a start.

Another few awkward moments later and his hands behind his back year of his gaze focused on the study door, Chase leaned into his friend Southmuttered, “If you screw with her, it’ll be the last thing you ever do.”

The Governor almost laughed at the not so veiled threat. One got down and three more to convince. Somehow dealing with raw anger seemed easier. He just hoped his lovely wife was right about all this—Anderson’s

; a long
r sister

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“I know what she thinks. She was kissing him.”

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His hands clasped in front of him, James leaned forward on his seat. “I admit, at first the idea of a man of Jack’s reputation with your youngest sister did not sit well with me.”

“See.” Chase sat back in the seat and dropped his ankle over his knee.

“But.” James held up a finger. “Someone,” he gazed pointedly at his wife smiling across the room, “reminded me of my youthful reputation as a ladies’ man before I fell in love with your grandmother. And frankly, I don’t think a younger man would be man enough for someone with a spirit like your sister’s.”

Chase’s jaw tightened and James could almost hear his teeth grinding as he pondered his grandfather’s words.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The last several days had been a bit like walking on eggs around her brothers. Between the news of the break-in and Chase's altercation with Jack, one of the other three had shown up at the ranch. The police had made a habit of checking for fingerprints wherever there were signs of an intruder's end, all the prints belonged to either family or household staff, but they were sure the front door had been jimmed open. The officers had suggested not leaving the dogs kennel when the house was empty, though her grandmother didn't seem to like that idea.

By the next day, the family had opted to improve security and challenge any intrusion off as just one of those things. Unfortunately, that meant more to focus on her and Jack. At every given opportunity, she'd done her best to convince the three that she knew exactly what she was doing and that she was as good as any of them. She had no idea what any or all of them had to say to Jack in private, but for now Jack's efforts seemed to have gone a long way to appease her brothers. Whatever challenges the three Baron men would come up with later on in their relationship—she actually smiled to hear the word *relationship*; she was in a relationship with Jack Preston—for now there was a tentative truce. If nothing else, no one threatened to punish her when he picked her up this morning to meet with Veronica at the ranch. Unlike previous days, neither Mitch nor Craig, the only two brothers who had shown up this morning, even looked like they wanted to slug him. That was definitely progress.

Since she had no idea how long this final decision session with Veronica would take, Jack had left her at the door and gone to run a few errands on his own. Now, her photos were spread out over a large table so both she and Veronica could eye them together.

"The composition is amazing on these two." Her fingers tapping

the photographs, Veronica looked pointedly at Siobhan. “Did you release?”

Siobhan shook her head. “No. I was focusing on the tattered play equipment. I didn’t realize there were people in the background.”

The gallery owner blew out a soft sigh. “Too bad there are people.”

Siobhan pressed her lips tightly together to hide her disappointment. The photos were two of her favorites. Had these prints been for commercial and not an artist’s showing, she would have simply cropped out the

When she was in the groove, when a subject had her complete interest, she didn’t notice anything else.

“This one would be my next favorite.” Veronica gestured at the print of the little girl laughing on the carousel. “Do you have a release for this?”

Waving her hand in a so-so gesture, she reluctantly nodded. “At the time, I didn’t have one handy, but I have the mother’s contact info and she’s agreed to sign.”

“Now we’re making progress. I’d like to have it in hand, but if the mother does sign, I’m sure this shot will be very popular. I might even want to feature it as the centerpiece of the display.”

Even though Veronica seemed very pleased to use that photograph as the best foundation of the exhibit, as each acceptable photograph was set to one side, Siobhan’s gaze kept returning to the discarded two. One in particular she was especially proud of. How had she not noticed people in the distance? The way backs had been to the camera she could have ignored it, but one of the girls might have been looking straight at her.

Next in the stack of prints were the ones she’d taken that day with her friend, Bridget. Siobhan held her breath as Veronica shifted around the gallery, finally bobbing her head, tapping her finger on the lone flower bloom among the boulders. “Now this one makes so much sense in contrast with the more gritty city photos.” She added it to the other shots that had made the final cut.

So far, so good. Despite Veronica’s satisfaction with most of the prints, a startling chill nipped at Siobhan. Rubbing her arms to chase the feelings of hisshe lifted her gaze and looked out the front window. Ever since the beginning and things hadn’t felt completely right. The whole situation had made her jumpy and she didn’t like it.

“These.” The gallery owner waved her arm and grinned, a beam of

you get in her eyes as though she'd been the one to take the photos and not Siobhan looked over the prints the woman had picked and sort of groundclicked. "I see a theme."

"Exactly." Now Veronica was truly grinning like the Cheshire Cat. The rumble of an engine drew her attention away from Veronica's prints. A sleek sports car pulled up in front of the gallery. The mere visual use, Jack made her almost giddy.

Veronica glanced up at the car now parked in front. "I notice Preston dropped you off earlier."

Siobhan couldn't hide her smile. "Yes." "Haven't seen as much of him in the papers lately. He seems to be keeping a lower profile."

Not knowing what else to say, she simply shrugged. "I remember once after one of your brother Kyle's races, the two of them had been photographed all night—and morning—in different bars, and with a passel of beautiful women at their sides."

Her brother and Jack partying around the world was nothing new. Two had been close friends for as long as she could remember. Both were richer than Croesus and romance book cover handsome. Paparazzi followed them around like puppy dogs.

"So he's finally settling down?" Veronica asked.

"I guess." What else could she say?

"You seem smitten."

Heat rushed to her cheeks, but she couldn't drag her eyes away from him as he climbed out of the car, circled the hood, and the moment they met, waved at her through the front window. His grin as large as hers.

"Apparently, the feeling is mutual."

She spun around to see the knowing grin on the gallery owner's face. Sure, Siobhan's cheeks were burning warm. Blasted Irish skin, betraying her when she blushed.

Veronica shrugged. "Jack's quite the catch. If you decide you don't want to go away, there's a line of women willing to step into your shoes."

"Nope." There was no way she was letting this one get away. No matter how much her brothers puffed out their chests and snarled at him.

Preston was hers and she had no intention of letting him go.

"Hey." Jack paused at the door, waved at Veronica then waited.

Siobhan to signal if they were finished or not.

That was another thing she loved about Jack, unlike her over-protective brothers, he always respected her space, and right now, her career. She knew he would not interrupt her work.

"I guess we're all set." Veronica gestured to the stack of keepers. "You've got the dates, and you're in charge of framing them."

"Everything will be ready." It might be a push, but she'd get it done. Jack showing would be perfect.

The meeting clearly finished, Jack approached the two.

"Nice to see you again, Jack." Veronica extended her arm.

Shaking the proffered hand, he seamlessly slid his other arm around Siobhan's waist sending delighted tingles up her spine. She loved the almost territorial gesture. "Always love coming to events here. I'm looking forward to Siobhan's show."

"So am I." Veronica nodded. "I'm expecting a lot of buzz, but bring your friends. And tell them to bring their checkbooks." She laughed.

Checkbooks. Wow. Not till this moment had it actually struck Siobhan that this was about more than exposure, this show could make her money. A lot of it.

Everyone said their goodbyes, and still arm in arm, she and Jack walked the short distance to the car. Another chilled breeze passed over her skin. She paused, looking around.

"You okay?" Holding the car door open for her, Jack's smile slipped. "You ever get the feeling you're being watched?"

His gaze raked up and down the street. Seeing the same empty sidewalk she had, his smile returned. "Sometimes, but it's usually my mother's daggers at me for forgetting something she'd drummed into me in my childhood.

That made Siobhan laugh. She knew exactly the kind of look he'd give. Always. Not that she'd ever seen his mother scolding him with her eyes, but his mother and grandmother had done so on more than one occasion.

Taking another second to scan the street, she heaved a contented sigh. Life was good, if only she could get over the jumpy feeling.

It didn't matter
to her, Jack



In the short time he'd been spending with Siobhan, he'd come to trust her.

instincts as much as his own. He slid into the car and studied her. “\n bearingyou ask?”

e knew She frowned and then shrugged. “I don’t know, just a funny fe
can’t seem to shake. I guess that stupid break-in and no real answers fi
prints.police has left me a little unnerved.”

It was his turn to frown. He looked up and down the street again, l
ie. Thisnothing suspicious. “I know this has to be hard on you and your fam
you have a lot of people who care about you and are there to keep you
He squeezed her hand. “That includes me.”

Her head bobbed and the sweetest smile made his heart happy. He
aroundback and started the car. “Next stop, the ranch.”

e gentle Normally the first thing she’d do in his car was mess with the rad
lookingshe’d be bouncing around, or talking at him a mile a minute about sor
that had her all excited. All week the show had been top on the list
ring allwalked to the gallery from his car a short while ago, he could see th
joy on her face as she spoke with Veronica.

Siobhan Now, in a matter of minutes, all the fire in her soul seemed t
oney. A slipped away. “What’s wrong?”

She shrugged and leaned her head back against the seat. “I just w
crossedbrothers could see I’m not a baby any more.”

and she At least she wasn’t upset with anything he’d done or said. “Giv
time. They’ll come around.”

ed. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“That they’ll come around?” What had he missed?

lewalks Chuckling, a hint of light reappeared in her eyes. “Giving them
staringhave visions of getting their blessing to date you on my fiftieth birthda
youth.” Now, he was the one to laugh. “Maybe not that much time.” \n
meant.thinking, he reached over and covered her hand with his. He’d been
ier ownthis all week, and today, it occurred to him that he’d never dated a wo
his entire life whose hand he craved to hold. Never had he felt the
:d sigh.feel connected, even if only by the touch of fingertips.

“Okay. Now you’ve got a funny look on your face. Is it one
brothers? Because so help me, if they’re giving you more grief aga
knock their lights out.”

ust her “Whoa, Champ. Your brothers have been very civil.”

“I’m not looking for civil. I’m looking for normal.”

Why do So was he. Chase was slowly coming around, Mitch was hard to
Craig seemed to be on the fence, but Kyle was a tough nut to crack. Feeling
of them had sowed many a oat in their years of friendship and he couldn't
from the begin to imagine what Kyle must think. Heaven knew if Jack had a kid
dating the old Kyle Baron, Jack would be anything but happy.

but saw By the time they'd parked in front of the ranch house and made their
ily, but inside, the house was buzzing with activity. Jack had known most
a safe." Baron cousins since childhood. After all, Kyle was his oldest and
friend. But what Jack hadn't expected was the warm welcome from
smiled the cousins.

Leah Baron had dragged Siobhan away to look at who knew what
io, then Devlin had cornered him about a new real estate project he had on the
nothing As Dev was called away by his sister Claire, he paused and slapped
. As he the back. "For the record, I think you and Siobhan are good for each other
e sheer Before Jack could form a thought, Devlin had walked away, leaving
standing alone in the foyer.

to have "Don't look so confused." Smiling at him, Eve, his former plus one
Siobhan's older sister, shook her head and sidled up beside him.
ish my doesn't speak for the whole family."

"Then you're okay with Siobhan and me, too?"

re them "Whose blue dress do you think she wore last weekend?"

He couldn't help but smile at Eve. "Thank you."

"Don't let my stubborn brothers bother you. We're working on the
be fine."

time. I "I'm taking things really slowly, but when it comes to Siobhan, I
y." be a little short on patience." Kyle and Mitch were holding strong.
Without unwillingness to bend, proving the hardest to convince of his intention
a doing Eve leaned back, eyed him carefully, and bobbed her head. "I
oman in thought I'd see the day anyone would domesticate Jack Preston, the
need to eligible bachelor in Houston. I'd better work on Kyle a little harder."

"Mitch too, please." Pandering for any help in his efforts to convince
of my Baron men that he wasn't toying with their sister's affections wasn't his
ain, I'll him.

With a quick peck on his cheek, and a sweet smile that reminded
Siobhan, she took a step in retreat. "But just to be clear, if you break h
—"

to read. “It’ll be the last thing I ever do. I’m getting that message loud and
The two Her grin widened and she patted his arm. “As long as we understand
only other.”

and sister Looking around, he found himself searching for Siobhan. Eve was
The Jack Preston standing in the foyer was not the same guy who had
been wayhard with Kyle and company. Somehow, he had to prove that to Siobhan
and the brothers. And the way he felt, sooner would be better than later.

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“It’ll be the last thing I ever do. I’m getting that message loud and clear.”

Her grin widened and she patted his arm. “As long as we understand each other.”

Looking around, he found himself searching for Siobhan. Eve was right. The Jack Preston standing in the foyer was not the same guy who had partied hard with Kyle and company. Somehow, he had to prove that to Siobhan’s brothers. And the way he felt, sooner would be better than later.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The day of the gallery show had finally arrived. Siobhan had barely slept the night before. The chosen prints were all framed and delivered to the gallery days ago. Under the wire, but delivered. Veronica wouldn't let her display and curiosity was driving Siobhan crazy.

"Maybe a stiff brandy will help," the Governor teased, but deep down she suspected he was actually serious.

"I'll be fine."

"What you're going to do is burst a blood vessel if you don't relax," her grandmother patted her arm and slung her purse over her shoulder. "Are you sure you don't want us to give you a ride?"

"Jack should be here any second."

A smile tugged at the older woman's mouth. "I am truly happy you and Jack are growing so close, but it's a shame to have made him come all the way here when he lives not far from the gallery."

Of course her grandmother was right, and Siobhan had insisted she catch a ride with any number of people, but Jack was adamant that he would pick her up and escort her himself.

"And speaking of your escort," Grams grinned at the Governor. "You're in good hands now."

"Governor, Mrs. Baron." Jack came to a stop at the open front door. Casual greetings were exchanged and her grandparents climbed into the car. Jack's gaze drifted over her shoulder. "Anyone else home?"

"Just us."

A smile as wide as the Rio Grande took over his face and lit up his eyes. "In that case."

Before she could catch her breath, he'd scooped her into his arms and kissed her. It was done more for her raw nerves in a single kiss than all the pacing around the gallery.

breathing had done in the last two days.

Slowly easing back, Jack blew out a deep sigh and without letting her hands, took another step in retreat. “You ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“You’re going to knock it out of the ball park. You’ll see.”

She really hoped he was right. As Grams used to say, she was nervous than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rockers. “I don’t know I’m so on edge. I keep reminding myself the prints are good, but I can feel like a fraud, getting by on the family name.”

“Nonsense. You’re incredibly gifted and after today, all of Houston know it.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears.” She slid into a lightweight shirt and followed Jack to the car.

The ride to the gallery was made in near silence. Only the tight grip of Jack’s hand on hers kept her from crawling out of her skin. At least her nerves had shifted from concern to anticipation.

Jack pulled into the parking at the rear of the gallery and together they walked around to the front door.

“There’s the woman of the hour.” Eve and Paige were helping set up the bar with champagne and wines from the Baron Vineyard.

Veronica looked down at her watch and shook her head. “You’re supposed to be here for another thirty minutes.” Moving forward, the gallery owner took Siobhan by the hand and gently spun her around. “Why do you couldn’t go take a short walk while we finish up here.”

The words had gone in one ear and fallen out of the other. She could stop staring at her photos hanging on the wall under specialty lighting. “I guess so.”

“Oh, boy is right.” Veronica shook her head and redirected Siobhan to the door. “Jack, I think the waitstaff and Siobhan’s sisters could use a little help unloading the wine.”

Paige leaned in and spoke up at him. “The winery van broke down so we’re running a bit late. The extra hands wouldn’t hurt.”

“I can pitch in.” Siobhan shoved the sleeves of her blouse up over her elbow.

“Nope.” Veronica shook her head. “You go take some nice photos of the neighborhood for your next showing.”

“But—”

“No buts.” Veronica turned her around in place and then gave her a shove toward the door. “Go.”

At least Veronica was right about one thing—not that she knew taking photos was the best way to calm Siobhan’s frazzled nerves.

Using a small telephoto lens, she’d zoomed in through the front window and taken pictures of her pictures. Even from out here, they didn’t help. For a short second, she felt like such a fraud. Redirecting the lens, she’d snapped photos of Jack carrying crates of wine. Did they know how to wear a tailored shirt or what?

Through the open doorway, she spotted her brother Chase staring at her pictures. She could barely hear what was being said, but she saw him come stand behind him and heard his soft voice say, “Your sense of style is amazing.”

Chase’s head bobbed. “Yeah, I think I’m starting to get it.” Chase turned to Jack and extended his hand. “I’m really sorry about how I behaved.”

“No need. Had I been in your shoes I would have reacted the same way, maybe worse.”

For a second Siobhan forgot about the photos she was taking, about the sandwich board on the sidewalk, her name—Siobhan Baron, Photographer—on the sign, her photos on the walls inside, and the show that was starting in only another hour or so. All she could think about was how she loved the two men now laughing inside at who knew what.

Her gaze frozen on the unfolding scene inside, the camera rested on her chest. The weight of it something she’d become accustomed to. It was an extension of who she was.

Plenty of people had been walking along the sidewalk, but all had been clear of her as she’d been snapping away. Except one man who bumped her, almost knocking her off her feet. Instinctively, her fingers tightened on the camera seconds before the strap pressed hard against the back of her neck.

Her gaze dropped to the camera and the beefy fingers folded around her sides, yanking it away from her. Spinning around and practically slamming into another man in her vain effort to escape Beefy Fingers, her mouth open about to yell at the inconsiderate oaf when her gaze landed on the second man’s face.

“You sure this is it?”

“I’m not sure of anything. It’s a camera and she’s using it so this h
it.”

Again her mouth opened, only this time a strong arm pulled h
against a wall of human flesh as another hand slammed over her mou
window muffled moan barely coming through.

“Keep your mouth shut and you won’t get hurt.”

Through his tight grip, she somehow managed to nod. A whole d
at mankind of panic seized her. This was the face she’d photographed. W
heck were these guys, and more frighteningly, what did they want with

at one
w Jack
ister is



“Rather bold tie for you, isn’t it?” Chase tipped his head at Jack as
would dull the bright colored tie.

“Siobhan talked me into it.”

Lips pressed tightly together, Chase nodded as he stared at the t
looked up at Jack. “You’re really serious about all this, aren’t you?”

He bobbed his head and resisted the urge to respond with the ol
back as a heart attack.

Chase blew out a small sigh and gave a curt nod. “Okay. Maybe I
Then he turned and walked away without another word, leaving Jack
after his back.

Had anyone asked Jack even an hour ago if he thought the Baron t
would be coming around to accepting him with Siobhan, he woul
thought no way. When he descended on the ranch after the break in, K
actually told Jack to back off and stay away. Only the Gov
intervention that night had convinced Kyle to not break both of Jack
Then there was Mitch. The sensible one, who had the audacity to a
what would it cost to make him go away. That particular little conve
had him so dumfounded, he didn’t think the Governor’s or Eve’s
would be enough to bring Mitch back to reality, and yet, somehow,
brothers had been less volatile the last week. Yes, they’d been surp
civil. No sneers, no muttering, no more bribes, but no one seemed
ease with the idea of him dating their baby sister. Until now.

“Oh my God!” Paige’s voice shouted from the back of the gallery

temporary bar.

Every head in the room turned, following the direction of her first collective gasp could be heard as each person registered what they were hardwatching. Two men hovered around Siobhan, one tugging at her camera. Her other walking away backwards from the gallery with Siobhan clamped in his arms, his hand over her mouth. It took a second, but he'd recognized the man as one of the two men in the park that day. Damn it! He should have been more careful.

Acid churned in Jack's stomach and rose to the back of his mouth. He turned and raced across the gallery, Chase on his heels.

Paige already had her phone open and her voice, several notes higher than usual, was shouting at the person on the other end, "My sister is being kidnapped!"

Kidnapped. Already out of the line of sight from inside the gallery, Jack's heart nearly stopped at the thought of what those two hoodlums might do to her. He had to get to her in time. Bolting out the door, he could hear footsteps stomping after him.

Sheer panic, mixed with something he couldn't quite put his finger on, danced in Siobhan's eyes.

"Let her go!" he shouted as loud as he could, hoping to startle them into letting go, or like they'd done in the park, walking away. Only then, staring at the ground, he hoped the police Paige had called arrived in time to catch them.

"All we want is the camera and no one will get hurt," the man with the filthy hands all over Siobhan spat at him.

"Fine. Let her go."

Now Chase stood beside him, his fists clenched at his side.

Jack had to wonder if these men even knew Siobhan was a B&B's legs. If they'd been the same ones to break into the house, they had to. Either way, Jack needed to stop them.

Neither of the two men seemed to notice the red sports car that had pulled up and parked a few feet away from them. Jack had never been happier than he was now, Kyle in his entire life. Now if only Kyle figured out what was happening before the men realized they were outnumbered.

"What the hell?" Kyle stormed up, creating a scene. So much for the element of surprise.

The guy who now held Siobhan's camera spun around and sw

Kyle. He clearly hadn't expected to literally run into a man who nger. A professional athlete in excellent shape with reflexes to match. Swing y weremissing a second time, the guy almost toppled over.

era, the That wild look of a trapped animal blossomed in the eyes of the n l tightlyhanging onto Siobhan for dear life.

ognized Chase doubled around Jack, and jumped into the fray in an effort ld haveKyle subdue the guy still hanging onto Siobhan's camera. They looke couple of young monkeys hanging onto their mother's backs. This v h as hegood.

"Let her go." Jack waved at the two still backing away. Now he cc octavesEve had circled around, probably from the back of the gallery, and sister iswine bottle in her hand. What the hell was she going to do... offer drink?

, Jack's "Not on your life. We want those photos. Now."

it do to "You can have whatever you want if you'll let the lady go." He c otstepsinch a little closer.

To Jack's right, Paige was off the phone and easing her way cl ger on,him. From the way she kept one hand on her purse, he knew that cou mean one thing—she was carrying. He blew out a slow deep brea he menwhat he needed, stray bullets flying and Siobhan in the middle of it.

is time, So focused on Siobhan and the crazy man still dragging her awa hadn't noticed where Craig had come from, but the three brothers l with hisidiot with the camera on the ground, his hands behind his back, m with someone's tie, and Kyle practically sitting on the guy.

When he noticed from the corner of his eye that Paige had barely at her younger sister, he wanted to shout at Paige not to draw and to aron. Ifhandle it, but there'd been no time. All of a sudden, he saw both Siobl way heEve barely nod and blink back at her. In seconds, Siobhan lifted her kn a three-inch spike heel, something very uncharacteristic for his girl l pulledcrashing down on the idiot's arch. As she'd probably hoped, the shoc r to seeor the pain, had him releasing his hold on her. At the same mome openingbrought the bottle of wine crashing down on his head.

The guy from the photo fell to the ground, writhing in pain, un for thewhat aching body part to grab onto.

"Want me to kick him for you?" Eve asked her little sister.

vung at Glaring at the man on the floor, Siobhan shook her head. "Nah

was probably break him.”

ing and “You little bi—” Rubbing the back of his head, the man stopped speaking mid sentence.

ian still Jack spotted the same thing the guy had, Paige stood over him, he short barrel handgun pointed directly at the stupid man.

to help “Temper, temper.” Paige’s words dripped with sarcasm. “What would like your mother say if she could hear you now?”

was not With the sound of sirens growing closer, all the man could do was and give up the fight.

ould see All Jack could do was hurry to Siobhan’s side. “You okay?”

held a Nodding at him, she practically fell into his arms. “I think I’m fine

r him a “Thank God.” He pulled her tighter against him, and lowering his head, he whispered, “I love you, Siobhan Baron, and I do not—ever—want you.”

lared to Her head pulled away from him, and her chin lifted up until they met. “Ditto.”

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uld only

th. Just



Siobhan had never been so scared in her entire life. Risk was a common denominator in the Baron family. She’d raced sailboats, driven fast cars, even swam with sharks, but this guy’s hands wrapped around her neck was a whole different level of fear. As relieved as she was to see Jack racing the gallery to come to her aid, not till she spotted both Eve and Paige realize, they could do this.

nodded “Do you remember seeing this man before?” the officer asked, distracting her out of her own thoughts.

let him “I think he’s the same guy from the park.” She’d already told the officer the same thing. She didn’t mind answering questions, she just knew they weren’t all the same ones.

ian and “I think he’s the same guy from the park.” She’d already told the officer the same thing. She didn’t mind answering questions, she just knew they weren’t all the same ones.

ee, and His thumb drawing calming swirls on her hand, Jack paused to recognize the other guy. They were both from the park that day.”

l, came Scribbling in a little notebook, the officer nodded before glancing at them. “The guy your brothers tackled, accidentally admitted that they were the ones who broke into your house looking for the camera.”

ck of it, “Why do they want my camera?” she asked softly.

nt, Eve

sure of

, you’d

“Don’t know.” The officer shrugged. “He realized what he’d said speaking lawyered up before we could get any more answers, but we’ll get bottom of this.”

“Thank you, officer.” Jack extended his hand to the policeman. “Keep us updated.”

The cop nodded.

“Do you think there’s any more danger?” Siobhan hated asking a question, but she wasn’t going to feel safe again until she knew everyone involved was safely and permanently locked behind bars.

“I can’t say at this time, but I suggest you remain vigilant and contact your family. The detective assigned to this will let you know what’s happening.”

“Thank you.” She hoped she’d have answers sooner than later.

The policeman stepped aside and Jack turned to face her. “You okay?”

“Much to my surprise, yes.”

The first smile she’d seen all day bloomed. “You wield a mean heel.”

That made her smile. “I do, don’t I?”

“You’re amazing.” He squeezed her hand.

“Back at you.” Right now, she didn’t care who was watching. She grabbed onto the brassy tie she’d talked him into buying and pulled him closer. “You, Jack Preston, are my hero.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“This is silly.”

Jack had spent the better part of the last week putting together a surprise for Siobhan. The last thing he wanted was for her to guess he was ready. “I was afraid if I wrapped a bandana or something across my eyes, folks driving by would think I’d kidnapped you.”

“Well, you did. Sort of.” She giggled. “But don’t you think those drivers will be a little suspicious seeing me wearing a sleep mask?”

He shook his head before he remembered she couldn’t see him. “They’ll probably think you want a nap and don’t want the sun in your eyes.”

“Maybe, but don’t be surprised if flashing lights come flying up at you any time now.”

That was the last thing he needed. They were already running a bit behind schedule.

“How much longer before I can take this thing off and open my eyes?”
Jack chuckled. “Be patient.”

“For the record, patience is overrated.” Before she could present her argument, her cell phone sounded and crossing her arms, she shifted her weight on him even though she couldn’t see him. “Do I get to answer my phone?”

Extending his arm, he uncurled his fingers. “Hand it to me.”

This time she huffed before pulling the phone out of her pocket and handing it to him. He tapped answer and speaker phone. “Hello.”

“Hey, Siobhan.” Veronica’s tone was more upbeat than usual. “How’s the what I just sold?”

The corners of Siobhan’s mouth shifted from a slight pout to a small smile. “Urban or nature shots?”

“Actually, both.”

“Both?” The way her forehead creased, he didn’t have to see her

know they had to have popped open wide.

“We just sold the entire central display. The buyer wanted the collection for one wall of his study and a handful of your national photos for his actual office. Are you sitting down?”

Siobhan nodded. “Yes.”

“Sweetie, the total sales amount came to forty-five thousand.”

Without saying a word, her hand landed palm open on her forehead. “Forty...”

“...five thousand,” Veronica finished for her. “Five thousand each for the smaller prints and ten for the one with the little girl laughing.”

“Wow, just wow.”

Veronica laughed heartily. “You’d better find something else to sell your collection. I told them they can’t pick the photos up until the exhibit is over, and I was less than thrilled but had no choice.”

That little tidbit of information subdued the unease that had crept in.

Veronica mentioned the sale. The last thing Jack needed was a collection to dwindle before he got everyone back to the gallery face.”

“I can’t believe it.” Siobhan took in a calming breath.

“I don’t do shows as favors. I don’t care who my friends are or who your grandfather is, I told you that you had a great eye. I hope you’ll continue to let me show your best pieces as they come in.”

“Absolutely.”

“Hate to interrupt, but we’re here.” Jack pulled into a space and turned the engine.

“Have to run, Veronica. Thanks so much for calling.”

While she said her goodbyes and hung up, Jack ran around to open the door.

“Now can I take this silly eye mask off?”

As much as he’d rather she kept it on till the last minute so she had less time to figure out his surprise, he doubted that would go over well with the observing public. “Yes.”

Whipping the thing off with more gusto than he would have expected, he stared up at the building in front of them. “The airport?”

“Just a quick stop.” He grabbed hold of her hand and squeezed.

“The airport? You kept me in the dark—literally—for the airport?”

He squeezed her hand. "Trust me."

Leveling her gaze with his, the look in her eyes softened. "You'll parksdo."

And knowing the truth of her words made his heart hammer even in his chest. So many moving parts had to happen for this little surj work. He'd considered buying tickets for anywhere to get them into s chest.but then he decided that there were too many ways that choice could b so instead, he'd made sure they arrived late enough that they woul for thestanding at the baggage claim waiting.

"The airport," she muttered again as they crossed the pavement t building and parking lot.

The second they walked through the doors, heads turned, they alw he manwhen Siobhan was at his side. Last night they'd been to a party at the club. The moment they'd crossed the threshold all the guys in th n whenfocused on Siobhan. He knew exactly what they were thinking. Every for thethem probably wished she were there with them, but she wasn't. S ry thiswith him. As every eye followed her, in his heart he kept thinking she's *my* girl.

Working from a photograph he'd found online, it didn't take him ho yourecognize who they'd come to meet at the airport. It took Siobhan a t inue tolonger to connect the dots. When the woman turned fully to face th flashed a bright smile, Siobhan flew into open arms and squealed, "Mu

cut the



Siobhan couldn't believe her eyes. "I thought you couldn't get awa the car work?"

"That's what I thought." Maura Baron shrugged. "But app someone," her gaze shot over Siobhan's shoulder to where Jack stood 'd have watching, "convinced my boss that Samantha could fill in for me fo all with weeks and the business wouldn't crumble."

"Well, I'm very glad of that." Looking over her shoulder, she blew ted, she silent kiss.

"And you," her mother sidestepped her daughter and walked up t "are my miracle worker."

One shoulder hefted up in a casual shrug. "It wasn't that hard."

Her mum shook her head. “I know full well all the strings you had know I to get that old goat to let someone else handle the viscount’s w reception.”

harder “I may have mentioned something about securing a prominent w prise too two for his venue in the near future.”

curity, “Prominent?” Her mum laughed and looked at Siobhan. “He actu ackfire, a prince to call my boss and book the venue for his wedding next ye dn’t behis admin, or secretary, but the prince himself.”

Siobhan looked from Jack to her mother. “Which prince?”

etween “I don’t know, or care, one of those nine hundred little princi scattered around Europe, but Mr. Borner was over the moon and mc rays didhappy to let me come see your show.”

country Was there no end to how sweet Jack could be? Siobhan wanted s e placeto kiss his socks off, but this was neither the time nor the place.

one of “Which are your bags?” Jack asked.

he was Her mother pointed to two large wheeled suitcases at her side.

, nope, hardly wait to see the show in person. I knew it would be a smashing s

And I bet it has all been so much fun too.”

long to “It’s been an amazing ride.” She still didn’t believe all this was hap fractionso fast.

em and Jack sighed. “I could have done without the idiots trying to steal y im!” your camera.”

“Wait.” Her mum came to a stop. “What do you mean steal you?”

“Well. The key word is *try*.” Siobhan hadn’t seen the need to mother about the two guys from the park, and until now hadn’t seen a y from tell Jack that she hadn’t shared that little tidbit about the exhibit’s c day. “I didn’t realize at the time, but the park not far from Jack’s plac arently, bit of a seedy reputation.”

quietly Her mother’s brows rose a little higher but she wasn’t moving.

r a few “Maybe,” Jack gestured toward the doors, “we should explain thi car.”

Jack a Without a word, her mother nodded and began walking. “Start exp now.”

o Jack, His hands full with her mother’s bags, Jack gave her an encouragir

“As I mentioned, unbeknownst to me, the park is known to the lo being a gang hangout and a base for drug deals.”

l to pull “Oh, no.” Her mum gasped.

wedding “Yeah. Apparently, I not only photographed a drug deal going without realizing it, I also got a photo of one of the ringleaders, if that weddingthey’re called. Needless to say, they wanted my camera back badly.”

ally gotmother asked. “Does this have something to do with the break in at the ranch

ar. Not Siobhan nodded. “Yep. Turns out they’d been following me for They’d first spooked me the day I took the photos. They had stayed (me—”

palities “Too close,” Jack interrupted.

re than “Agreed. Too close to me in hopes of simply grabbing the camera me noticing, but then Jack showed up and they abandoned that idea. I o badlythey struck the ranch house once it was empty, but didn’t know t cameras were not in my room but my workshop. The fact that we’re wasn’t enough to scare them off.”

“I can “But,” Jack interjected, “everyone is now safely behind bars a success.trial.”

“Is bail a risk?”

opening Jack shook his head. “Let’s just say there are a few good reasons go up against the Baron family.”

ou and “Good.” Her mother looped an arm around her waist. “Hopefully be old and gray before they get out of jail.”

“That’s the plan.” Jack smiled at them, then opening the hatch of h tell herwith the fob, tossed the two suitcases into the back as if they were need to more than a pair of pillows. “Next stop the gallery.”

opening In the car, settled and buckled in, Siobhan thought about what her e has a had said about Jack pulling strings. “Exactly how did you get a involved in getting Mum here?”

Backing out of the parking space, Jack shrugged. “I met a lot of im s in thepeople hanging out with your brother on the racing circuit. As it so hap I also made this particular prince a great deal of money. Calling in blainingwasn’t very difficult. Your mother’s stellar reputation made it even e convince the bride and groom that there was no better place for ig nod. reception.”

cals for This man was seriously thoughtful and down right amazing. R over the console, she squeezed Jack’s hand and mouthed, ‘I love you.’

With a wide smile on his face, he mouthed back, 'love you
Siobhan's heart did a now familiar two-step. Could life get any sweet
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With a wide smile on his face, he mouthed back, 'love you more.' Siobhan's heart did a now familiar two-step. Could life get any sweeter than this?



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – EPILOGUE

If there was one thing Lila Baron loved, it was a party. Mitch’s grand could write the book on being the perfect hostess. Whether it was a themed birthday bash, a nineteen fifties sock hop graduation party, Gatsby-themed engagement soiree, Lila Baron would guarantee a party guests would never forget. Siobhan’s engagement party was exactly that.

“You look very pensive.” His sister Paige handed him a glass of wine. “Care to share?”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing salacious involved. Just thinking how much she loves a good party and how pretty much everyone in Houston comes to an invitation to one of her events.” And when his grandmother put on a party, it was always the event of the year.

“Oh, that she does.” Paige took a sip from her wine glass. “I can’t believe she talked Siobhan into this big shindig.”

“The kid seems so happy, I think Grams could have talked her into having her engagement party in a cave with nothing but vampire bats in attendance.”

“We’ve been over this, she’s not a kid. Not anymore.”

Deep down he knew that, but he suspected even when she was collecting social security, he’d still be calling her kid. Though it took years for him to stop growling at Jack. Once he finally saw past the fury and anger—his own look—a good look—he saw what his grandmother and sisters had been telling him. That same head over heels look that had been in his grandmother’s eyes at finding the right woman, was shining brightly for all to see in Siobhan’s eyes. And Siobhan’s too.

Even now. They were halfway across the outdoor tent and the electricity between them was so strong Mitch was pretty sure if anyone bumped them, they’d get burned.

“They do look wonderful, don’t they?” Paige took another sip of wine.

“Reminds me a little of you and Abbie.”

Is that what he and his late wife looked like? If Jack Prestor and Siobhan even half as much as he had loved Abbie, then they’d be the best two people in the world.

“Except he’s a better dancer than you are.” Paige bumped him with her hip.

That snapped him out of his melancholy and brought a smile to his face and the deep-rooted sense of competition that ran through every one of his veins soared. “I’ll have you know I’m an excellent dancer.” To prove his point, he grabbed his sister by the hand and spun her into a dance move without spilling a drop of the wine in her glass.

“Okay,” Paige chuckled, “maybe you are better.”

Paige turned her attention back to the newly engaged couple.

“Did I really look at Abbie that way?”

His sister nodded. “You did. I remember the first time you brought her to the ranch for Sunday supper. Every time she opened her mouth, you looked at her as if she was about to spew forth holy scripture. I knew then she was the one and only for you.”

And wasn’t that the problem? He truly believed in the love of a lifetime, but he’d already had his. There’d be no second chances for him.

“All of you look at the women you love that way. I’d like to think you look at me like that.”

“He does.” Mitch had noticed the connection between Paige and Jack early on. If he hadn’t been so angry at the idea of Jack taking advantage of his youngest sister, he probably would have seen the love there sooner.

“Oh, man.” Paige waved a finger at her sister. “I didn’t think you’d ever be dipped anymore. Look at them. They haven’t taken their eyes off each other and more importantly, he didn’t drop her.”

“He wouldn’t dare.”

Paige chuckled again. The music had stopped and the couple of hours ago had shifted from the dance floor to making the rounds, thanking the guests for coming. Their grandmother had trained them all well. Even as the couple maneuvered through the crowd, they continued to hold hands and every so often would stop to stare up at each other. If he didn’t know Mitch would swear those two were about to self combust. Something about this wedding was going to happen sooner rather than later.

When they reached the table where Jack's mother and father were, Jack loved her. He leaned over to give his mother a huge hug. Arms open wide, Mrs. Luckiest gave Siobhan an equally big hug. While the two women chatted contentedly,

Jack wandered away and returned with fresh drinks for his parents. His conversation between mother and future daughter-in-law continued.

Jack walked away again, returning with a dish overflowing with dessert. He set it in front of his mother. The woman beamed at him, and Jack's face bloomed as he leaned over to kiss his mother on the cheek again.

Over his shoulder, Paige took a quick sip of her drink, "they say you can see how a man will treat his wife by the way he treats his mother. I'd say Siobhan has it made in the shade."

Mitch simply nodded. He really shouldn't have given Jack such a hard time. If his kid sister ever found out that Mitch actually tried to pay Jack to leave her alone, she'd probably hang him from the nearest tree by his neck.

"Here they come." Paige elbowed her brother. "Don't want them to look at us—we've been staring."

"They have to know everyone has been watching them. They're our guests of honor, after all."

Still holding hands, Jack and Siobhan joined them at the family table.

"I never realized how much work is involved in being the reason for a Daniel party." Somehow, Jack managed to pull the chair out for his bride without letting go of her hand.

Siobhan smiled up at her fiancé. "Maybe we should elope and avoid the whole thing. I mean, this little bash is big enough of a party, not sure I need to do this all over again."

As far as Mitch knew, every woman under the sun dreamed of a Cinderella wedding. Not his baby sister.

"I think Grams would have a heart attack." Paige shrugged. "She'll love the weddings."

"I know." Siobhan sighed and Jack seamlessly let go of her hands. He draped his arm across her shoulders, delicately caressing her with his fingers. She happily drew another smile from him.

Once again, he had to ask himself, how had he and his brothers managed to be so much better than the other Baron brothers could have kept their heads up their butts and ruined everything for Siobhan. Once upon a time he'd been a great judge of character.

seated, he seemed incapable of properly reading situations. What had happened to Preston?

"You still with us?" Paige cleared her throat.

"Sorry. Mind wandered."

"Mm." His sister's mouth twisted to one side. "Is it Abbie?"

He shook his head. With every passing day, the memory of Abbie's smile faded just a little bit more. "Just thinking how glad I am that we didn't do this up for the lovebirds."

"I'm just glad Chase stopped punching the poor guy in the face."

Mitch chuckled. "At least Jack doesn't have a glass jaw."

"Thankfully," Paige agreed with a smile.

When Jack and Siobhan thought the rest of the table was too engrossed in conversation to notice, the two stole a kiss. Mitch could feel the heat of their lips. Oh, how he missed that magic, but he knew his chance at happily ever after. Now it was Siobhan's turn, and if there was one thing he was convinced of, whether they eloped or had a blowout wedding, this marriage would last forever.



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CHAPTER EXCERPT

“There you go.” Mitchell Baron blew out a long deep breath and for the first time in hours, a smile graced his features.

Claire stretched her back, leaning left then right. “It’s never fun when the first thing you see is only one hoof.”

“That’s probably what Mama was thinking.” Watching the heifer latch onto its mother was the perfect end to a long night.

“I bet she was happy to have you with her.” The oldest girl in Everett’s clan, Claire was only eleven months younger than her brother Devlin, and thankfully for the Paradise Ridge Ranch, one of the best veterinarians in the area. “Glad you called me in. Hate it when I get the call a mom has suffered for way too long. Hate it even more when we lose the calf and or the calf because I didn’t get a call at all.”

“When she passed three hours of labor I knew something was wrong. The last calf came in just over two. The way she kept looking at me, I just knew.”

“That is a gift I wish more of my ranchers had. Turning the calf out was easy, but it’s better than letting nature take its course and losing her. You did good calling me before the calf presented.”

“I suppose it helps knowing you’re family and won’t tell me to go home for waking you up at three o’clock in the morning with a hunch.”

She chuckled before her expression turned serious. “I don’t even want to ask what you were doing awake all night in the barn. That’s not you. Always too smart for her own good, Claire raised a single brow at him and shook her head and stretching her back one more time. “On the bright side, being up at this hour means that I’ll be rewarded with Hazel’s breakfast.”

“Thank heaven for Hazel.” His hand on the shoulder of his cousin Mitch led Claire toward the house. The barn had always been a place of refuge for him. As a kid when his brothers, whom he loved dearly,

over-the-top rowdy mode, later when the stress of exams threatened t him, or when the senior politicians' stubbornness drove him crazy...t he lost Abbie.

More than three years had gone by since his wife died, and yet, t was still so strong and real that some days it almost stole his breath aw that wasn't what had kept him running home from Washington mo more. Tonight it was another text from Susan that had him seeking with the animals in the barn.

The moment he and his cousin crossed the threshold into the hear he first family ranch, the smell of fresh baked cinnamon rolls mixed with a bacon frying, assaulted his senses. He had no idea why bacon sme hen the much better when Hazel made it, but it did.

"Thought y'all would be hungry." Spatula in hand, Hazel turned t hy calf at the two of them. "Table's set in the dining room. Coffee is ho grandfather has already eaten and is off to some committee meeting. Y Uncle on your own until the rest of the family wakes."

brother Claire snatched a piece of bacon from a plate on the counter, and helluva smacked her hand. "None of that till the eggs are done. Off to the fter the room."

ie mom Crunching on the stolen morsel, Claire giggled like a schoolgirl.

He loved that laugh. She sounded just like his sister Eve. Her laugh ff. Her make him smile as well. It was Eve who more than anyone in the far knew." helped keep him somewhat together when Abbie died.

f is not His phone beeped and he pulled it from his pocket and swipe You did quickly putting it back. A few seconds later it beeped again. Once n pulled it out and swiped at it.

to hell "Aren't you even going to see who it's from?"

"I know who it's from."

want to Claire's eyebrows rose up and down on her forehead a few tin ar job." woman?"

before "Yes." He let out a slow sigh. "But not the way you're thinking."

ht side, "Oh, okay." It was clear from her tone she didn't believe him.

it." "Susan is only a colleague."

s back, "Susan?" Now Claire was smiling at him.

lace of He had no idea how she could chew and grin at the same time. "W were in the same committee. She and I were the only two on the same side."

o crush “Were?”

o when “Are. We are on the same side, but sometimes fighting the political makes swimming upstream in a river of sharks feel like an easy achievement.”

ay. But “Oh, doesn’t that sound like fun. I guess it helps having an ally.”

ore and Ally. That was one word for Susan. “It did.”

solace “Did?”

“I think Washington politics is wearing thin on me.”

t of the The humor in Claire’s eyes dimmed. “Sorry. I know how much you hint of to love it.”

alled so “That’s what I keep telling myself.”

His phone beeped again and this time he looked at it.

o smile *THOUGHT YOU WERE STAYING TILL THE END OF SESSION. ARE YOU COMING t. Your FOR THE VOTE?*

’all are Quickly running his fingers over the keyboard, he typed a simple YES. Of course he was going back. Didn’t he always? He might spend Hazel weekend he could in Texas, but he had never missed a meeting, a debating vote before, and he wasn’t going to start now. No matter what, Claire chased him away.



1 would

ily had

Gwyneth Van Klein focused carefully on the small wooden box in her hand at it. On her twenty-first birthday, she’d taken refuge in her father’s library, more, he the boring family gathering her mother had orchestrated. The supposed intended to celebrate her crossing into legal adulthood. The idea was funny, as if her mother would ever let her be an adult. Deep down she understood that even then.

ies. “A Having noticed a book off kilter with the others on the shelf, so her mother would never have stood for, Gwyneth pulled the offending out of the line. Hidden behind the row of tomes, she’d uncovered her little stash. Tools and materials for fine carving. They were hidden in a box he’d no doubt etched himself. A beautiful piece of art. She would have expected something so whimsical from the head of Klein Electronics. The discovery had the corners of her mouth tilting up in her first smile. e’re on day. Knowing that her mother would never approve of such a mundane

common hobby actually made her a little happy. The idea that someone from her family had the nerve to stand up, even in hiding, to her mother had been the safest birthday gift.

When she'd discreetly informed her father of her discovery the next day, she'd been eager for him to show her how to use the tools. For the first time in her life, she'd had something to look forward to that her mother couldn't somehow remove from her world, or worse, destroy. The unexpected joy had been finding a connection with one of her parents. For the next few months, as her father shared with her how to gently maneuver the tipped tool to create what she hoped would some day be beautiful work with her craftsmanship, she'd actually enjoyed herself, and her father's company was even more surprising, she truly felt that her father enjoyed passing his beloved hobby onto her. Not her brothers, her.

That brief time of true contentment in her life came to a crashing end when alone in his office, her father suffered a massive coronary. By the time his secretary grew curious about the lack of communication from her father, it had been too late to save him.

That had been over a decade ago and the only contentment in her life remained the pride at finishing another work. Nora, one of the housekeeper staff, had been her comrade in arms. Nora would help her purchase supplies without her mother's knowledge, and then arrange for the sale of the completed project in a local artist's gallery. The little money she received was just enough to keep her busy. And sane.

Setting down the sharp tool, she reached into her dressing table drawer and sneaking a snack from her sacred stash of cookies and treats. Another almost for which she counted on Nora. After all, snack foods loaded with sugar, she'd artificial preservatives served, according to Prudence Van Klein, on purpose: to destroy the refined appearance and slim figure of weak and indulgent females. Not that anyone would notice anything about Gwyneth's figure under the frumpy wardrobe her mother sparingly purchased for her. The only things missing from the mid-century schoolmarm look were the laced up sensible shoes. Though in some ways, her sensible shoes weren't a far cry from the shoes she remembered her grandmother wearing. "Miss," her name sounded, followed by a light rap on her door. "Your mother is expecting you downstairs. Right away. She's rather eager."

e in the The mere mention of being summoned by her mother for sor
een her 'eager' had her hand slipping. The tiny notch would be almost imperc
to the average person, but not to her. As with so many other things in l
ext day, she tossed the scarred carving into the trash. "Tell Mother I shall b
rst timemomentarily."

ouldn't Standing a moment in front of the mirror, not because she had any
rewardadmire, but because every hair and stitch needed to be perfectly i
ext fewbefore she descended the stairs, she reluctantly surveyed her appearan
sharp-sleeves were past her elbow, a true accomplishment to have convin
orks ofmother that long sleeves were unnecessary in the miserable Texas he
ny. Butthem of her dress, not a skirt, and not slacks, a dress, was exactly six
ing hisbelow the knee and perfectly straight. Of course, she wore hose even
no one else her age, and in their right mind, would do so on swelterin
ing endEarly in her childhood her naturally curly hair had been deemed an
he timemess by her mother. Always tamed into braids longer than appropri
boss, itany child, now every strand of hair was neatly plastered along her sc
twisted into a perfectly rounded bun at the back of her head. All wou
her lifewith her mother's approval. Just not a man's. At least not one in h
keepingmind.

ase the "There you are." As she reached the doorway, her mother looked u
e of theher game of solitaire. The old-fashioned way, of course, with a deck o
eceived"I sent Nora for you almost five minutes ago."

"Yes, Mother. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

drawer. "Never mind." Still looking at the cards in front of her, the older
er thingwaved at Gwyneth to sit. "I have wonderful news."

gars and Somehow, she felt the need to brace herself.

ly one "The Barons are hosting the Cattleman's pre-ball gala at their ho
-willedyear."

about Gwyneth nodded. The Barons were as far up the social register as t
rchasedKleins, though it was the Conroe pedigree that her mother admired,
ok weremuch the common bloodline the Governor had brought to the genetic p
pumps "The guest list is, of course, limited to the right people."

ring. Which meant her brothers would be on the list. Klein Electroni
It wasonly one of many corporations that continued to fill the family coff
: seemsguarantee invitations to the most exclusive parties.

Her mother looked up from her cards. "The gala will be three weel

nothing Friday next.”

ceptible Gwyneth refrained from groaning. Anyone would think her mother had fallen off a time travel machine. Who in today’s world said Friday next? Her mother returned to turning cards. “Your brothers have previous commitments and cannot escort me. I’ve decided you and I shall accept the invitation.”

in place *Accept? Her and her mother?* Gwyneth’s palms began to sweat. She squeezed her lungs. She didn’t do well at large parties. Or small ones. Her mother always stared at her, or more so the way her mother would make her feel. Then all the whispers would start, usually starting with *poor Gwyneth*. She hated every minute of it. She didn’t want people’s polite smiles with their thoughtful eyes. She wanted to stay in her room and work on her art until she was too old to know that life had passed her by.

unruly “In the meantime,” her mother continued, once again looking down at her cards, “Mrs. Baron is having an afternoon tea this coming Saturday. We will be attending.”

What? A gala and a tea? What had come over her mother? And why was Prudence Van Klein dragging her awkward and ill-fitting daughter along? Something was definitely up, and heaven help her, whatever she did, Gwyneth was sure of one thing, none of it could possibly end well for her.

[Read more of Just One Chance available on Amazon](#)



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MEET CHRIS

me this

Author of over fifty contemporary novels, including the award-winning Aloha Series, Chris Keniston lives in North Texas with her husband, two adult children, and two canine children. Though she loves her dog equally, she admits being especially attached to her German Shepherd, Mica. After all, even dogs deserve a happily ever after.

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ers and More on Chris and her books can be found at www.chriskeniston.com.

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it was, Please, if you enjoyed reading Just One Shot, consider helping other
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