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Chapter One

The crack of the bat filled the stadium as Lance Arnold turned the first pitch of the season into a home run. The crowd went wild as he rounded the bases and headed for home. Watching from the stands, Sara Carpenter and her friends raised their beer cups in a toast to their favorite minor league team.

The summer sun warmed Sara's bare arms and legs, and the scent of popcorn and hot dogs wafted under her nose. Sara could think of no better way to spend a Sunday afternoon.

"God, I love baseball," she said on a happy sigh.

"And ballplayers," her friend Libby added. "It wouldn't be summer without ballplayers."

"Yeah," Megan chimed in. "God bless the boys of summer."

They tapped the rims of their plastic cups and continued to cheer.

* * *

Three weeks later, the Sidewinders were thirteen-and-two and the fans were ecstatic.

"We keep playing like this," Ruby Baker said as Sara freshened the glass of iced tea in front of her, "and we'll be contenders for the championship."

Ruby's husband, Hank, managed the team. Though Ruby loved her restaurant, loved creating gourmet specialties to impress her patrons, her true passion was baseball. If Ruby had been born a man, she'd have made it to the show, no doubt. She knew everything there was to know about baseball and could

cover third base like a pro. Even at forty-seven.

"We still need a stronger pitching staff," Sara commented as she sank into the chair across from Ruby. They sat out on the front deck of the restaurant, with breathtaking views of the Catalina Mountains sprawled before them. "Always seems to be our downfall."

Ruby sipped her iced tea, then said, "Don't worry about that, sugar. I think we've got it covered."

Sara gave her a curious look, wondering what tidbit Hank had shared with his wife. The information had to be noteworthy because Ruby's hazel eyes were alight with excitement and mischief.

Sara grinned. There were lots of perks when it came to working for Ruby, including getting the inside scoop on the Sidewinders' lineup.

Sara had been a waitress at a local resort when Ruby Baker offered her the job as manager of her new restaurant. The statuesque blonde owned a small, intimate place—not quite as prestigious as the restaurant she'd recruited Sara from, but certainly popular. Sara preferred this job. The location was perfect and the menu changed regularly. But the main attraction was Ruby, a former Texas debutante with a gregarious nature. Smart, savvy and unpredictable, Ruby was larger than life. Sara thought of her not only as a close friend, but as a mentor.

They'd worked together for four years, and Sara could honestly say she'd still be flitting from town to town were it not for Ruby. Sara's wealthy parents were global jetsetters. They owned four homes, two apartments and a yacht, all located in various parts of the world, and spent only brief periods of time at each residence. Sara had never known permanence or stability until she'd met Ruby.

After years of being on the move because of Hank's career,

he and Ruby agreed to make Tucson their permanent home. Though Ruby was fun-loving and extravagant, she was wholly grounded. She was an inspiration to Sara.

In fact, it was Ruby who'd convinced Sara to buy a house in the Foothills. Sara had always wanted a place of her own. Turns out, the purchase was the best decision she'd ever made. She loved her pretty house, loved that she'd decorated every inch of it herself, rather than having hired a professional designer.

For the first time in her twenty-five years, Sara felt like she belonged somewhere.

"Hank says I should keep this news a secret—let it be a surprise and all," Ruby said. "But I don't know, sugar. I think I oughta let the cat out of the bag."

Sara regarded her friend for a moment. "Why would Hank want me to be surprised?"

As Sara posed the question, the distant rumbling of a motorcycle engine caught her attention. Sara slipped from her chair and crossed the deck. Curious, she stood at the railing and peered around the tall post, looking toward the winding road that led to Ruby's. Ruby stood beside her, a silly grin on her pretty face.

Sara's heart thumped in her chest. She gave Ruby an incredulous look before glancing back at the road, anticipation mounting. "*Tell me*," she urged.

Ruby rested a hand on Sara's slender shoulder. "Let's just say, it's gonna be one helluva season, sugar."

A few minutes later, a familiar Harley Davidson rounded the bend and headed up the hill toward the parking lot. Sara moved around the post and bounced down the stairs. She rushed across the lush green lawn, practically skipping, and reached the parking lot as bad boy Jesse Matthews pulled his motorcycle into a spot and cut the engine.

Sara's pulse raced and a wide smile she couldn't quite contain played on her lips. Dressed head-to-toe in black, his wavy light brown hair shimmering in the summer sun, catching the blonde highlights, Jesse stole her breath with ease.

And when he grinned at her in that sexy, devilish way, her insides melted.

"Hey, you," she said, feeling giddy and excited over Jesse's unexpected appearance.

He removed his sunglasses and let his dark green eyes ease over her, taking in her long tanned legs and arms. She'd worn her bouncy, honey blonde hair down today and was glad for it, knowing Jesse liked it loose about her shoulders.

"Hey, yourself," he said in his casual tone as he rested his forearms on the handlebars and admired her a moment longer in unabashed appreciation. He shook his head and let out a low whistle. "Damn, you just keep getting prettier and prettier, sweetheart."

Heat seeped through her veins, creating the most erotic sensations in every sensitive part of her body.

"And you're still a shameless flirt," she returned, hoping she really didn't sound as breathless as she thought she did.

So this is Hank's surprise. Excitement bubbled up inside her, but Sara tried to maintain some semblance of nonchalance. It wasn't easy. When Jesse Matthews came to town, they singed the sheets together. The mere thought sent a scintillating thrill shooting through her from head to toe, making her want to jump on the back of his bike and tell him to take them someplace private.

She bit back the urge. With Jesse, it was always best to keep a cool head. He was a free spirit, wild and untamable. Clingy women, she knew, were a huge turnoff for him, so she'd always demonstrated a reserved disposition where he was concerned. As

best as she could, at any rate.

Jesse Matthews was devastatingly handsome. Not to mention a hot commodity. He'd played major league ball for nearly ten years, but had spent the last six years of his career as a starting pitcher for the Arizona Diamondbacks. He had a bad boy reputation and the ladies loved him.

Whenever he did stints at the minor league level, needing rehab following elbow and shoulder surgeries, he hooked up with Sara. Their time together was usually fleeting, but never anything short of sizzling.

She'd heard he was on the Diamondbacks' disabled list following his third surgery. Hence his return to Tucson.

"Batten down the hatches," Ruby called out in her sassy tone as she sauntered across the lawn and joined Sara. "Look who's back in town."

"Ruby, you're looking hotter than ever," he greeted her with a playful wink.

"Ah, if you were twenty years older, kid..." she mused in a flirtatious tone.

"You still wouldn't give me the time of day."

Ruby laughed. "What can I say? I like my men bald, fat and well-seasoned."

"Hank's a lucky man," Jesse told her. He turned his attention back to Sara. "Been watching the team?"

"Of course. I was just telling Ruby we could use some pitching help."

"I'll do my best, sweetheart." He started the bike up again. "See you at The Dugout tonight?" It was the local hangout for ballplayers. Sara hadn't been there in two years, not since the last time Jesse played for the Sidewinders.

For a moment, she debated the sensibility of walking back into the part-time relationship she had with this man, but knew

her heart would overrule her head, as it always did when it came to Jesse Matthews. He was simply irresistible.

She didn't bother scolding herself over her lack of control when it came to Jesse. As heart-wrenching as it was when he left her, even a few weeks with him was worth the months of heartache that followed, when he returned to the majors.

"Yeah, I'll be there," she told him over the roar of the motorcycle. He winked at her, then backed the bike out of its spot and turned the metal monstrosity toward the road. Sara stared after him until he disappeared out of sight.

"Cat's officially outta the bag," Ruby mused. She draped an arm around Sara's shoulders as they walked back to the restaurant. "Told ya it's gonna be one hell of a season."

Chapter Two

The Dugout was packed. The better the team did, the bigger the turnout on a weekday night. Scantly clad women put their best assets on display in hopes of catching a ballplayer's eye—for the evening or for the whole season.

Sara worked her way through the tight crowd. She wore jeans and a pink lace tank top. Her blonde hair fell in loose curls around her shoulders. She didn't look like a woman on the prowl, but supposed she fell into the category—like the rest of these women—when Jesse was in town.

Though Sara had never chased ballplayers, she'd ended up with one anyway. She hadn't known Jesse was a professional pitcher when she'd met him, hadn't known a damn thing about baseball at all. But in addition to learning the game, she'd learned over the years that getting involved with a ballplayer was an emotionally taxing experience. Yet she continually opened her heart to Jesse.

She spotted him across the bar, holding court at a large table with some of his new teammates and a slew of women hoping to score with the great Jesse Matthews. Sara watched as his beautiful emerald green eyes scanned the club. When they landed on her, he grinned. Her stomach clenched and an erotic thrill shimmied through her.

Jesse extracted himself from the bevy of beauties vying for his attention. His gaze remained locked on Sara as he made his way toward her. Sara's pulse kicked up a notch at the heated look

in his eyes. Memories of long, hot summer nights flooded her mind.

She sighed dreamily, looking forward to more of those sweltering, steamy evenings.

Sara had been twenty-one and a virgin when she'd met Jesse. He'd done things to her she'd never imagined possible... And he'd sparked a dark desire deep inside her, one only he could satiate.

She felt the sharp rise and fall of her chest as her pulse raced. The way Jesse looked at her, as if he were recalling all those erotic nights together as well, or maybe conjuring up new scenarios, incited a riot of emotions inside her.

He reached for her hand, laced his fingers with hers and led her to the dance floor. He pulled her against him, pressing their bodies together as one arm snaked around her narrow waist. His other hand was still holding hers and he brought it to his sculpted chest, resting their entwined fingers against the hard ledge of his pectorals.

Sara let out a long breath and closed her eyes. She rested her head against a broad shoulder and let the bluesy tune the band belted out guide their movements. They swayed to the music, neither one speaking. Sara could hear his heart pounding steadily in his chest and the sound warmed her insides. His crisp, masculine scent heightened her arousal.

It had been two years since she'd been in Jesse's arms. It felt like yesterday. There was no awkwardness, no need to reacquaint themselves with each other.

Passion and desire lingered between them, effortlessly sparked.

By the third song, Jesse had moved his other hand down to her waist, then a bit lower. His erection pressed against her belly, his warm lips grazed her temple.

"I've missed you, sweetheart," he whispered.

"You've been busy."

"I think about you all the time," he told her. "More than just the nights when I call you."

Jesse liked to hear her voice late at night, when he was on the road with the team. He'd call to find out how she was doing, make sure everything was okay with her. He'd talk to her in soft, sexy tones, lulling her into a dreamy state. She'd nestle deep under the down comforter and crisp sheets on her bed and they'd talk about baseball, their childhoods, their dreams for the future. Inevitably, the conversation would turn more provocative. Jesse liked to whisper erotic words in her ear. He liked to recall things he'd done to her, fantasize about things he'd like to do to her. He'd ask her to touch herself, and she would. He'd listen to her come, coaxing her the entire way.

Heat tinged Sara's cheeks. She swallowed down a lump of desire, laced with a hint of embarrassment at her wanton behavior where Jesse was concerned.

"You keep me grounded," he told her in a soft voice. His warm breath ruffled strands of hair on her forehead.

Sara's heart swelled. Her fingers curled around the opening of his black shirt. She wanted to undo all the buttons, feel his warm skin and hard muscles against her bare flesh. She wanted to be alone with him.

As though he sensed her need, he eased his grip on her and guided her toward the door.

"Shouldn't you stay?" She gazed up at him, surprised they were leaving so soon. "Bond with your teammates and all that?"

Jesse grinned down at her. "We'll bond on the field, sweetheart. Right now, I'm only interested in being with you."

They left the club. She climbed onto the back of Jesse's bike and wrapped her arms around his waist. She'd pick up her car in

the morning. They raced through the deserted streets to her house, the warm evening breeze caressing her skin as tiny pinpricks of desire and anticipation speared the heart of her.

Chapter Three

Jesse followed her to the front door. While Sara dug her house key out of her jeans pocket, his arms encircled her small waist. His lips grazed her long, graceful neck. She smelled like heaven—so fresh and sweet.

Sara had been innocent, sexually, when he'd met her four years ago, but she was worldly and sophisticated in other ways. She'd traveled the world several times over and told the most fascinating stories. Jesse loved to lie in bed with her, after making love, and listen to the adventures she'd had in her young life.

Though they were six years apart in age, he found her more intriguing than any woman he'd ever met. And Jesse Matthews had had his fair share of women.

But Sara was the one who owned his heart.

Her fingers trembled as she tried to unlock the door and he placed his hand over hers to steady her. She laughed softly and it warmed his heart to know she was as anxious as he was.

It had been two very long years since he'd seen her. He missed her like crazy, but he'd been on the fast track to fame and fortune since he was twenty-one. He hadn't had the chance to slow down, to build anything more with her than what they had.

They stepped into the foyer and Jesse kicked the door shut behind them. He turned her in his arms, his mouth seeking hers. He kissed her much harder and deeper than he'd intended, his passion overruling his good sense. He wanted to take it slow

with her, explore her body, make her feel cherished. But his desire for her spiked the instant they were alone. Now it was all he could do not to ravage her here in the foyer.

The least he could do was get her to the bedroom.

His insatiable need for her was almost embarrassing. But when she wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him, pressing her body against his, he knew her desire mirrored his own. She let out a soft cry of protest when his mouth left hers.

Jesse scooped her up in his arms to carry her to the bedroom. A night of making love to Sara would clear his head. Get the sexual tension out of the way so he could concentrate on his rehab. His latest shoulder surgery had been the toughest one thus far. He was racing toward retirement way ahead of his time. At thirty-one, he should be in his prime, but his arm failed to see it that way.

"Jesse?"

Sara's soft voice penetrated his reverie. He returned to the moment, forcing out the intruding thoughts of his wayward career. He stood in the hallway, holding her in his arms.

"Forget the way to my bedroom?" she asked, her sweet tone laced with innocent playfulness.

Jesse grinned down at her. "No, sweetheart. I didn't forget." He traveled down the long hallway to the last door on the left. He entered her large room and placed her carefully on the bed. She didn't stay there.

Sara stood up and reached for the buttons on his shirt. "I want to feel your skin on mine, Jess," she said as her long, slender fingers unfastened the buttons.

She smoothed her hands over his chest and Jesse let out a low groan of need. He wanted to take it slow with her, to savor every second. But he doubted that would be possible with her this first time.

Sara pushed his shirt over his shoulders and off his arms. "I want to feel your weight on me," she whispered. "I want to feel you deep inside me."

She reached for the small silver buckle at his waist. Her fingers trembled again as she fumbled with the buckle, trying to unfasten the thing.

"Sara." Jesse's hands closed over hers.

She yanked them away and let out a frustrated sigh. She walked away from him and paced the large expanse of floor alongside her queen-size bed. She pushed her hands through her hair and swore under her breath.

Jesse's heart constricted, knowing the demons she fought. She wanted him. Desperately. And hated herself for it, because she knew he'd leave as soon as they took him off the disabled list. And maybe they wouldn't see each other for another two years. Who knew?

He watched her as she came to stand in the stream of moonlight pouring through the partially opened drapes. Her chest rose and fell sharply, her breathing was labored. Tears pooled in her large amber-colored eyes.

"Sara," he began.

She raised a hand in the air to stop him. "Don't say anything, Jess. Please." She reached for the hem of her tank top and pulled the material over her head. She shimmied out of her tight jeans after toeing off her sandals. She stood before him in nothing more than a lacy pink bra and matching panties.

Jesse's erection, which he'd had since the minute he'd pulled her into his arms at The Dugout, strained behind the fly of his jeans.

"Make love to me, Jess," she said in a soft voice. She closed her eyes, pulled in a deep breath then let it out slowly. She opened her eyes and stared at him, her gaze unwavering. "Do all

those things you tell me you want to do to me when you call at two in the morning from one of those hotels you can't recall the name of."

Jesse closed the distance between them. Did those late-night calls make it worse for her? Did it torture her all the more when he told her how much he needed her, how much he wished she were there beside him?

He never invited her to join him on the road because she'd once told him how happy she was to finally have a home, after an entire lifetime of traveling from place to place. She'd put her gypsy days behind her; he had not.

She reached for his belt buckle again, this time with steadier hands. She unfastened it and his jeans, then worked the material over his hips to the floor. She removed his boots. His briefs followed. She was on her knees in front of him and Jesse let out a low growl when her tongue teased the head of his cock.

"Oh, God," he groaned. Her lips closed over him and she drew him deep inside her mouth, causing a violent shudder to ripple through him.

Jesse's hands plunged into the silky strands of her hair as she sucked him hard. Jesse groaned as he surged toward release. How many nights—for how many years—had he dreamed of her on her knees before him, taking him deeper and deeper into her mouth? When other women left him unsatisfied, in need of something beyond his grasp, he envisioned Sara, pleasuring him, making him complete the way only she could.

"Sara," he said in a strained tone as he gently eased her away from him. He was too close to exploding in her mouth to let her continue. He wrapped his fingers around her upper arms and hauled her to her feet. He wanted her naked and beneath him. Or on top of him. Hell, it didn't matter, as long as he could bury himself deep inside her, feel her all around him.

He peeled back the lacy cups of her bra and bent his head to her plump breasts. His tongue flicked across a hard nipple as his thumb skimmed the other one, further tightening the taut peaks. Sara's fingertips pressed hard into his biceps. Her head fell back and she let out a soft moan as his hands and mouth worked her nipples. His teeth grazed the puckered buds. He pushed her breasts together and trailed his tongue over the mounds of flesh until she panted loudly, her fingers tightening around his arms.

Soon, she'd forget the reservations she had. The first time was always the most difficult between them because no matter how desperately they wanted each other, they each had their issues to work through. When they released the pain of separation, let go of their inhibitions, they made love with absolute abandon, pleasuring each other, themselves.

Jesse's hand moved from her breast to her ribcage, over her flat stomach. His fingers slipped beneath the lacy material of her thong panties. She arched toward him as he skimmed the smooth flesh at the heart of her, parted her slick folds and pushed a finger deep inside her.

Sara cried out, her grip on him tightening. "Jess," she moaned, low and throaty, causing Jesse's need to please her to intensify. He pushed another finger inside her tight canal. His tongue and teeth and lips continued to tease her hard nipples as his fingers pumped in and out of her. He wrapped an arm around her to steady her. She trembled and writhed in his embrace. She lifted a long, shapely leg and twined it with one of his, giving him better access. Within seconds, she cried out his name as she came.

Jesse didn't want to stop, but her clothes were a hindrance.

He withdrew his fingers from her, quickly divested her of her lingerie. Then he eased her down onto the bed. He moved between her parted legs. His lips grazed her inner thigh.

"I want to make you come again, Sara," he whispered in a strained tone, the need to experience every gift she had to offer overwhelming him. "You're so wet and you smell so sweet."

He knew she wouldn't protest. The first time he'd made her come with his mouth and tongue had shocked her. But she'd never stopped him from doing it again, had sometimes begged him to make love to her this way.

He opened her with his thumbs and ran his tongue along her slick folds, making her buck and writhe beneath him. He held her in place as his mouth pleased her, his teeth grazing the swollen nub, his tongue flicking over it, until she came again.

The words she muttered and the moans that escaped her glossy, parted lips drove him wild. Jesse could stand it no more. He had to make love to her. *Now*.

"Are you ready for me, Sara?"

"Oh, yes," she whispered, her voice laced with desire. "Please, Jess."

His hands moved over her thighs, then hooked under her knees. He spread her legs wide and pushed the head of his cock against her opening. She propped herself up on her elbows, her eyes locking with his. Her rear end rested on the edge of the mattress. He lifted her off the bed slightly as he pushed into her, easy, careful, so as not to hurt her because she was so damn tight.

His jaw clenched as he moved inside her with slow, measured strokes. She squeezed him tighter each time he almost withdrew from her then eased back into her warm depths.

She lay back against the mattress, and her hands cupped her full breasts. "Jess," she whispered, her voice tinged with need and desire. "You don't have to be so gentle with me."

Jesse groaned. "Sweetheart, don't tempt me. I'm holding on by a very thin thread here."

He'd dreamed of this moment so often he could hardly believe it was finally upon him. Being inside Sara was as wonderful as hearing the *whoosh* of the bat when his fastballs whizzed past a player and landed soundly in a catcher's mitt.

"Jess," she urged in a breathless tone. "Just let go. *Please*."

Jesse swallowed hard, tamping down his primal urges, his natural desire to possess her in the most heated, carnal ways.

"Baby, you've got to stop talking," he said as his cock pulsed and throbbed inside her, begging for the same frenzied pace she sought.

He watched as her hands squeezed her breasts. Then her fingers toyed with the nipples and she let out a low moan. Watching her was more than Jesse could take. She had an amazing body, but it was seeing this sweet, innocent woman do such erotic, uninhibited things that drove him out of his mind.

Without even meaning to, he increased the pace, pushed deeper and deeper inside her. Soon, she was panting and whimpering as he hammered into her, fucking her harder and faster because that's what she begged him to do.

Her moans made him half crazy, the way she met him thrust for thrust pushed him closer and closer to the edge.

"Sara," he groaned. His tone was a warning that he couldn't hold on much longer. It felt too damn good to be inside her. She squeezed him tighter and he growled. "Goddamn it. Don't."

"Yes," she whispered on a sharp breath. "Come with me."

Jesse felt beads of sweat trickle down his temple as he held back. He didn't want this exquisite feeling to end. *Ever*.

"Jess," she panted. "Oh, God. Please, Jess. Just a little harder. A little faster." A moment later, she was moaning loudly, chanting erotic words that completely did him in.

Then she clenched him so tightly he lost his breath. Her body trembled all around him and she cried out. Her orgasm,

long and powerful, sparked his. As her inner walls held him in a tight grip, Jesse let out an unchecked cry of sheer pleasure. He came hard, burying himself to the hilt, his body shuddering from head to toe.

* * *

Jesse withdrew from her so slowly, it created another ripple of pleasure inside Sara. When he dropped onto the mattress beside her and let out a long, contented sigh, she grinned at him. They repositioned themselves, snuggling close on the bed. Jesse wrapped his arms around her and she rested her head on the hard wall of his chest.

"Seems we still have great sexual chemistry," she mused.

"The best." He kissed the top of her head. "Goddamn, you make me crazy, sweetheart."

Her stomach fluttered. "Ditto."

His arms tightened around her and she closed her eyes. She listened to the strong, quick beat of his heart until sleep began to descend upon her. Before she drifted off, Jesse dropped another kiss on her forehead and whispered words in the dark she'd longed to hear since she'd met him four years ago.

"I love you, Sara."

Chapter Four

Sara shoved the door to the kitchen open with such force it smacked against the wall with a thud that resounded throughout the entire restaurant. Ruby looked up from the plates of Cornish game hens she was garnishing, and frowned.

"You're scaring my hens," she quipped.

"They're dead." Sara crossed to the tall metal counter and eyed the other plates Ruby had prepared. "Casey!" she called out in a curt tone.

The perky new waitress came out of the storage room, a jar of olives in hand. "Yeah?"

"These filet mignons are for table three. They've been sitting under the heat lamps for five minutes. Are you going to serve them or not?"

Casey, looking duly chastised and a bit flustered, left the olives in the storage room and rushed across the kitchen. She snatched up the plates. "Sorry. Got sidetracked. Won't happen again." She scurried out of the room.

Sara sighed miserably. "Could I have been a bigger bitch?"

Ruby shrugged. "I was about to get on her myself. We'll have to talk later about whether or not she's going to work out."

Sara lifted the plates of game hens and said, "Tell me where these go and I'll take them out."

"Let Megan do it," Ruby said as the other waitress entered the kitchen. Sara handed over the plates. When Megan left the kitchen, Ruby said, "Wanna tell me what's buggin' ya, sugar?"

Sara crossed her arms over her chest. "You won't believe me if I tell you."

"Well, your foul mood is freaking out the staff—and me. So you may as well spill. Maybe I can help."

Sara contemplated this a moment, then shrugged. "I doubt it, but if you really want to know, Jesse said the 'L' word last night."

"Whoa!" Ruby's eyes grew wide with obvious excitement. She smacked her hands together and grinned wildly. "I knew it! Damn, he sure took his time gettin' around to it, but I knew eventually that boy would come to his senses."

Sara stared at her friend in disbelief. "*What* are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on, sugar," Ruby said as she returned to the stove to stir the glaze she was preparing for the duck table six had ordered. "That boy's just crazy about you. We all know it."

"Ruby," Sara said, trying to be reasonable. "This isn't right. He's got no right to say something like that to me. Especially after we made love. That's like the worst possible moment to say those words for the first time."

"Why?"

"Because he was obviously feeling euphoric from the sex and it deluded his mind for a moment. He's probably kicking himself in the ass for saying it. And look at me? I've become a complete wreck overnight because I'm analyzing the whole thing to death." She paced the vast kitchen. "Seriously, Ruby. I want to just ignore what he said, pretend it didn't happen. Then again, I want nothing more than to...to..."

"Believe he meant it?" Ruby gave her a level look.

"Yeah," Sara said, feeling miserable all over again. "But that would make me a delusional fool."

Ruby shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. How do you know for

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sure, sugar?"

"What, like I'm suppose to ask Jesse if he meant it? Or wait another four years for him to say it?" She reached for a stack of warm plates and laid them out on Ruby's workstation so she could set out the duck.

"I know about ballplayers, sugar. Hank was one when we first got together. It isn't easy loving one, I'll tell ya that much. But damn if it isn't worth it in the end," Ruby beamed. "There's no other man for me, sugar. I wasn't willing to settle for anyone else, no matter how hard it was in the beginning." She opened the oven and went back to work.

Sara considered her words for a moment, then posed a final question. "What do I do?"

Ruby turned to face Sara. Her smile was radiant when she said, "Follow your heart, sugar."

Chapter Five

The Sidewinders finished their latest home-stand on a Friday night. Sara sat with Ruby in the stands, watching Jesse throw pitch after pitch that held the velocity of his younger years. But in between batters, he rubbed his shoulder, winced in pain. Sara knew his rehab wouldn't be as easy or as quick as it had been in the past. Jesse would be playing for the Sidewinders for another month at this rate, maybe for the rest of the season.

The prospect of him staying on a bit longer did not ease her troubled mind. He'd leave eventually. He always did.

She tried not to focus on the inevitable. She remembered being able to ignore the reality of the situation in the past, but it was much more difficult this time around. Maybe it was because of the words he'd uttered that first night they'd made love. Maybe it was because she was older and happy with the stability in her life. When Jesse came to town, he turned her world upside down and left her heartbroken when he moved on.

Sara wasn't so sure she possessed the wherewithal this time around to pick up the pieces after he left.

She rode on the back of his bike after the game, grateful for the nearness of him when she wrapped her arms around him, yet loathing the pain she already felt over losing him.

When they reached her house, she didn't know if she should let him in or not. Maybe she ought to end it now. Not wait until the season ended and he returned to his hometown of Kenosha, Wisconsin, where he spent some of the off-season. The

remainder of his time, she knew, was spent tooling around the country on his motorcycle.

But at the door, Jesse had his arms around her. He took her house key from her and they entered the foyer. There was no turning back after that because Jesse's mouth was on hers and his fingers were working the buttons on her cotton shirt. He tossed the blouse aside. He bent down and ran his hands up her thighs then under her skirt. His large hands cupped her bare cheeks and he groaned low and deep.

Sara couldn't toss him out now. She wanted him too much. *Needed* him too much, truth be told.

He kissed her passionately, then whispered in her ear. "God, I want you, Sara. Every minute that passes, I want you even more."

"Make love to me, Jess," she said on sharp breath. "Do things to me I'll never forget." *Things I'll never let any other man do to me.*

He backed her against the sofa, kissed her again. Then he turned her around. Sara bent over the back of the sofa as Jesse flipped her flared skirt up to her waist. He removed her thong panties, then his clothing. Soon he was entering her and Sara forgot all about her convictions and impending heartache. She forgot everything except how amazing Jesse made her feel, how wonderful and erotic it was to have him deep inside her.

He held her waist as he pumped in and out of her, taking her to places only he could. Sensibility escaped her. She lived the fantasy they both wove, neither of them acting as though their time together was measured and fleeting.

When he came inside her, Sara reveled in his groans of pleasure, knowing in her heart they completed each other, even if it was only temporary.

Jesse called her every night from the road. Oddly, the thrill of traveling to away games had diminished. He played his heart out, no doubt about it, but he missed seeing Sara in the stands, felt a palpable void knowing she wasn't out there watching him or waiting for him after the game. At night, he felt lonely in his hotel room as he sipped scotch to help ease the pain he felt in his shoulder and paced the floor, missing her like crazy.

He'd told Sara he loved her and she'd said nothing. She hadn't responded the night he'd said the words, nor had she mentioned it the entire time they'd been together.

So she didn't love him in return?

Jesse frowned. He was sure she did. He never would have said it if he didn't believe it would mean something to her. But instead of his words drawing them closer, they seemed to have created a barrier between them. Sara still gave her body freely to him, but her heart seemed to be off limits. She was distant emotionally.

When he returned to Tucson after several weeks on the road, he was ready to press her, to find out her true feelings. Jesse felt connected to her in so many ways, and he didn't want to lose her. He *couldn't* lose her. But in order to keep her, he had to determine what sort of future they could have together.

His first night back in town, they had dinner with Ruby and Hank then went back to Sara's house. They made love in her bed, and he held her close to him, finding a small degree of the peace he sought.

"How's your shoulder?" she asked.

Jesse sighed. He'd be cleared from the disabled list soon, but that didn't mean his arm felt any better. "I can live with the pain," he told her honestly.

But did he want to? The question that formed in his mind took him by surprise. Playing baseball was all he'd ever wanted

to do. He'd gone to college on a full-ride scholarship and landed a job as a starting pitcher before he'd even graduated. He'd never imagined doing anything else with his life. But his subconscious mind dwelled on his ability to fully recover. The older he got, the more complicated the surgeries and the longer the rehab, with less than stellar results.

Jesse had all the money he'd ever need from playing and various endorsements. Money wasn't an issue. Filling his time with something other than baseball was. He was thirty-one. Too damn young to be retired, in his opinion. But as the days passed and his shoulder and arm still cramped up and went numb after a few innings, he knew it was just a matter of time before he had to face reality and make a decision about his future.

Jesse's fingers grazed her warm, bare skin. He breathed deep, inhaling the sweet scent of her. "You plan to stay here, don't you?"

"Yes," she said without hesitating a moment. "I love my house."

Jesse sighed. "I want you to be happy, Sara. I really do."

She worked her way out of his embrace and sat up. She looked down at him and asked, "Do you like it here, Jess? With me?"

Jesse felt a peculiar tightening in his chest. He sensed his answer to this question was important. But she had yet to put herself out on the emotional limb as he'd done. Still...he wanted to be honest with her no matter what the cost.

"Yeah, sweetheart, I do."

Her eyes remained locked with his for several intense moments and Jesse willed her to tell him how she felt about him. If he told her again that he loved her, he feared her response would be forced, like he'd pushed her to return the sentiment because he'd put it out there yet again. He wanted her to say it on

her own, to just come right out and say she loved him...

"Sara," he prompted, then groaned in frustration. He *wouldn't* force her to say the words.

He saw her work down a lump in her throat, watched as her chest rose and fell with the increased beat of her heart. She opened her mouth, and Jesse's own heart slammed against his chest.

Say it! For God's sake, Sara! Tell me you love me!

She moved away from him, scooted off the bed. She disappeared into the bathroom, leaving Jesse bewildered and frustrated.

Chapter Six

Sara left Ruby at the beer cart and walked over to the south practice field where Jesse was pitching. She watched him strike out three batters before he took a break. He stood on his side of the backstop and gave her a grim look. She could tell his shoulder still hurt, and it broke her heart that he was struggling with his rehab. No doubt he'd expected to be back with the Diamondbacks a couple of weeks ago.

"You're still sitting them down with your curveball," she said in an encouraging tone.

Jesse rolled his shoulder. "Fastball's gone to hell, though."

"It'll come back," she said. She was no expert on the subject but wanted to be supportive. Maybe they weren't destined for happily ever after together, but Jesse was a good man and she wanted him to continue to do what he loved the most—play baseball.

"Listen," he said as he dropped his mitt on the ground. He curled his fingers around the metal fencing and fixed her with a serious look. "There's something we need to talk about, Sara."

Her heart sank. He was going to tell her it was over between them. He was going back to the show.

"What's up?" she asked, trying to keep her voice even, devoid of emotion.

Jesse, so handsome and talented and fascinating, was about to dump her.

"The thing is, Sara," he began in a tentative voice.

Sara already felt the tears threaten her eyes.

"I love you."

Sara gasped. Jesse rushed on.

"And I think you love me, too."

She stared at him, shocked and speechless.

"I need you to tell me you love me, Sara."

In the distance, she heard Hank's voice. "Hey, Matthews!"

Jesse's dark green eyes locked with hers. "Tell me, Sara. Please."

"The doc has cleared you," Hank continued.

"Sara," Jesse said in an insistent tone, holding her gaze. "Tell me you love me."

Conflicting emotions roiled inside Sara. Her stomach fluttered but her heart constricted almost painfully.

"Sara."

"You're off the DL, son," Hank said. Sara caught sight of him out of the corner of her eye as he crossed the practice field and headed toward them.

"Say it, Sara," Jesse urged.

"The Diamondbacks are ready for you, kid. You're going back to the show." Hank had nearly descended upon them.

"Say it, Sara," Jesse hissed.

Sara's mind reeled. Her eyes shifted to Hank. He held a slip of paper in his hand, waving it like a flag. She looked back at Jesse, saw the honesty and vulnerability in his intense gaze.

Tears pooled in Sara's eyes. What would it mean, she wondered, if she told him she loved him too? Would it change anything between them? *Could it?*

"Sara, please," he implored in a compelling voice.

And in that instant, she knew it didn't matter if he stayed or left. She loved him. Nothing could change that. She loved him and she wanted him to know it.

The Boys of Summer

"I do love you, Jesse" she whispered, just moments before Hank reached them.

Jesse let out the breath he'd been holding.

"Son, are you listening to me?" Hank said. "You've done your time, boy. Pack your bags."

Jesse gave Sara a long, hard look. "I've loved you for four years. I'll love you for the rest of our lives." He turned to Hank and said, "Call them back, coach. Tell them I'm not going."

Hank's mouth gaped open for a moment. He glanced from Jesse to Sara then back again. As if realization suddenly dawned on him, he said to Jesse, "You sure you know what're doing, son?"

"You bet I do, coach." He smiled at Sara.

Chapter Seven

"Where are you taking me?" Sara asked for the third time since Jesse had picked her up. They drove in her car through the Foothills till they reached a huge estate. They pulled into a dirt parking lot and got out of the car.

Jesse grabbed her hand and led her toward a trio of practice fields. Kids in uniforms played on all three fields.

"This is a summer league for high school and college kids," Jesse explained in an excited voice. "They're from all over the Southwest. It's an organized set up. There are teams like this all over the country. They practice mostly, improving their game before they head off to college or try for a shot at pro ball. Occasionally, the teams play each other, mostly the ones that are close by. Sometimes they travel a bit further, but only a few times a summer."

They took seats in the stands with several other observers.

"That kid there," Jesse said as he pointed out the pitcher, "is the next Randy Johnson. He's nineteen years old and throws an eighty-five-mile-an-hour fastball."

Sara gasped. "Seriously?"

Jesse grinned at her. "Yeah. He just needs to learn some control, work on his technique. Which is my new job."

Her eyes widened. "*What?*"

Jesse draped an arm around her shoulder. "I'm going coach these up-and-coming boys of summer," he told her. He turned his attention back to the action on the field. The batter struck out on

three straight fastballs. "Damn, that kid is good."

Sara wasn't grasping his words. "What do you mean, you're going to coach these kids?"

Jesse sighed. "Sweetheart, I'm not going back to the majors. I'm going to need more surgery on my shoulder if I keep playing at that level. By the time I'm fifty, I'm not going to be able to lift my arm. I'm done, Sara. I went further in pro ball than I ever dreamed possible. I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had, and I've got memories that will last a lifetime. But I've got to be realistic about my future. Playing ball isn't in the cards."

He watched the kids on the field a few moments more before continuing on. "I don't have to completely give up my passion, though. I've got a lot to offer these guys. They're great ballplayers, and I can help them be better, prepare them to play professionally."

"I don't doubt that at all," she said. "It's just...I mean..." She shook her head, let out a puff of air that ruffled her long bangs. "You're staying? In Tucson?"

He grinned at her. "That's where my team is." He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "And my heart."

Tears welled in Sara's eyes. "Jess," she whispered, then clamped down on her lower lip because it began to quiver.

Jesse moved off the bottom bleacher they sat on and dropped to one knee before her. He extracted a stunning diamond ring from the front pocket of his jeans and held it out to her.

"Sara Carpenter," he said, his eyes glowing with love, "will you marry me, sweetheart?"

The action on the field stopped. The chatter in the stands ceased. Even Sara's heart seemed to skip a few beats in her surprised state. But as soon as Jesse grinned at her in that lazy, sexy way of his, it beat in double time.

"Don't embarrass me in front of my kids, sweetheart," he quipped. "Say yes so they don't spend the next season laughing at me."

Sara couldn't help but laugh herself. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she swiped at them, feeling silly for crying in front of so many people.

"Of course I'll marry you, Jesse Matthews. What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

He slid the ring on her finger and then pulled her into his arms. "I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you, too," she told him. "Lord, how I love you!" she beamed brightly.

And the crowd went wild...



Like most writers, **Ava McKnight** has a head full of characters dying to get out! Some are adventurous sorts who need an action-packed story, some are more sensual and demand a sexy, seductive story. Regardless of the genre, Ava weaves a little adventure, intrigue and passion into her characters' lives.

Ava lives in Arizona with her husband and their two puppies. Her favorite time to write is during lightening storms, which paint the sky purple and pink and illuminate the desert landscape surrounding her. (Okay, she lives on a golf course, but there are cacti and natural desert elements in the area!)

Ava has a number of works in progress, in various genres. She also writes as Calista Fox. Visit the author at www.calistafox.com.