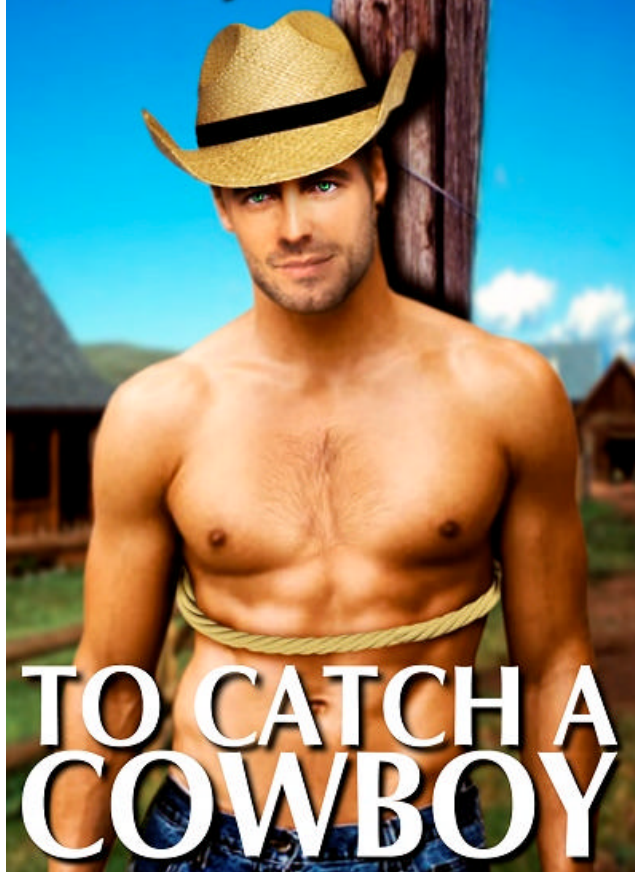


Natalie J. Damschroder



TO CATCH A
COWBOY

TO CATCH A COWBOY

...She turned and bent forward to wash her feet and worked her way up her legs. Ritt made a noise in his throat when she washed between them, her eyes closed, her hand moving exploratively. It felt good, though she didn't think she had any more in her. Not that it mattered. This was all for Ritt.

She rinsed, put away the soap, turned off the water, and spun, dropping to her knees and taking him into her mouth before he could react. He cursed, twisting so his shoulders were both against the wall, and bracing his feet on either side of her. Brooke wrapped her hand around his base, stroking in time to the movement of her mouth on his head. She pulled back, sucking hard, and he dug his fingers into her scalp.

"Jesus, Brooke." His hips pressed forward. She cupped his balls with her free hand and took him as deep as she could, then worked him fast and hard. Then soft and slow. Hard and slow. Fast and soft. She applied every variation she could until his scrotum tightened, then she went back to fast and hard, pumping him until he came, roaring his approval and tightening his hands on her enough to cause pain...

ALSO BY NATALIE J. DAMSCHRODER

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Elemental Passion
Institutional Sex
Kira's Best Friend
A Matter Of Choice
The Passion Of Tanner Black
Slow Build
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The TreeKeeper

TO CATCH A COWBOY

BY

NATALIE J. DAMSCHRODER

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TO CATCH A COWBOY
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To Andy, my little brother, with love

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She had always wanted a cowboy.

Brooke Adams was a feminist in every sense of word, but there was something about those rugged, macho men that had always prodded her pulse. The tight jeans, the boots, the hats that were always welded to their heads. The tanned, rugged, outdoors look that meant they could handle everything from a wild horse to a wild woman.

Unfortunately, there were few cowboys in Green Meadows, Massachusetts. The closest she'd been able to come was a baseball player in khakis and a Red Sox cap. That's why, when she saw him standing at the bar at her sister's house, she thought she was sleeping and had forgotten to inform her body.

He was authentic. The scuffed brown boots held the marks of spurs, and the worn jeans were frayed at the cuffs. His western-cut shirt was not shiny-new, and his hat, resting on the bar next to him, was the color of dust. The muscles in his wide back rippled as he downed the

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remainder of a domestic beer, and she could almost smell the horses. What in the world was an honest-to-god cowboy doing in the pristine home of her snooty sister?

Turn around, Brooke begged silently, eager to learn more. A lot could be discovered about a person by his eyes and hands. Immediately, the cowboy turned to shake hands with her brother-in-law, who had just stepped up to the polished oak bar. The man's face was vintage western, all rugged and craggy. His hands were huge, and she just bet they were callused. Brooke turned to look for her sister, wanting to learn more about this guy before she approached him.

She found Marielle in the pasteled parlor, holding court with three of her "society" friends, discussing the fate of the school board now that the town's patriarch had stepped down. Brooke not-so-politely gripped her by her silk brocade-clad arm and half-dragged her into the living room. Marielle didn't even try to protest, knowing her uncouth sister so well.

"Mare, who is he? Where did he come from?" Brooke lifted her champagne glass in the direction of the bar where the cowboy still stood, leaning one forearm on the glass surface, his right boot propped on the brass kick rail. Realizing her champagne was growing warm, she downed the remainder in one gulp and ignored her sister's disapproving mutter. Her eyes never left the cowboy as she waited for Marielle's answer.

"His name is Ritt Duncan. He's a real charmer, although I must say I am a bit peeved that he wore those dusty relics on my ivory silk carpet." She waved one glittering hand toward his feet. "Ken met him while in Arizona on business. Told him to stop by if he was ever in town, and by some miracle he did come to town. Although I don't know why. Green Meadows is hardly a hotbed of excitement for a businessman."

"So he's not a real cowboy?" Brooke turned to her sister, who

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tittered gaily.

“Oh, my dear, he most certainly is a real cowboy. He grew up on a ranch, rodeoed for a while, then bought his own ‘spread,’ I believe it’s called, and now raises rodeo horses. I think he was actually in Springfield for some ceremony at the Basketball Hall of Fame. I guess his father was inducted posthumously. He leaves town tomorrow.”

Too soon, Brooke despaired. How would she convince this man she was the woman of his dreams if he left before she even had a chance? She quickly checked her auburn hair in a nearby mirror, smoothing a few loose strands back into the pile of curls on the crown. Her lipstick was holding up amazingly well, and her blue eyes sparkled with anticipation. She took a deep breath, snatched another glass of champagne off the tray of an idle waiter, and strode toward the bar, only to grumble as Ken led Ritt Duncan out of the room. With a big sigh, she plopped the champagne onto a small table and began to meander around the large house with the faint hope of running into the handsome devil. She paused outside the library, instantly alert when she heard Ken’s voice, then another, deeper one. She shamelessly eavesdropped. It was what she did best.

Brooke Adams was a private detective. Blessed with an analytical mind and a gifted power of observation, she was cursed with the luck of living in a tiny town with very little need of a P.I. beyond locating lost cats and loose horses. She was constantly on the verge of moving to New York or Washington, DC, but either her hatred of large, dirty, expensive cities or her love for her family kept her in this lazy town. She supplemented her highly sporadic income with freelance accounting and hoped someday she would find a way out.

That way had just presented itself.

Brooke slipped into the library and marched straight up to the cowboy, ignoring her brother-in-law’s sputter. She held out her hand and began speaking before she was halfway across the room.

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“Mr. Duncan, I’m sorry I’m late. Brooke Adams. I’m sure Ken has told you that he’s asked me for some advice on your little problem.” Brooke shook the bemused man’s hand solidly and sat in the other padded chair in front of the desk, trying desperately not to allow Ken to say the words he was struggling to squeeze in.

“You’re aware, of course, that I am a private detective, and I can go over my credentials if you wish. I also have a B.A. in accounting from Bryant College. Why don’t you give me more details about the embezzlement?” Brooke took a deep breath, well aware of the amazement on her brother-in-law’s face and the confused frown on the cowboy’s. She focused on Ritt’s golden eyes, hoping he would find his voice before Ken did, and kept her expression interested and composed, praying her scheme would work. If not, she was dead meat. Well, her dream was, anyway.

Finally, Ritt lowered himself back into his chair and began to speak. Kind of.

“Um, well, you see, we’ve lost—well, not really lost, it’s been stolen. I think. Ahr!” He sat back with a thud, sweeping his hand quickly through his hair and glancing around as if wanting the hat he wasn’t wearing. When he started over, his voice was composed and even, with a smooth, chocolaty sound that could easily put Brooke to sleep. Well, if she ever had the inclination to sleep around this man. Which she wouldn’t. Not for a long time.

With an effort, Brooke pulled her mind from the delicious visions it was happier viewing, and concentrated on Ritt’s problem.

“We’re missing about one hundred thousand dollars. It came up in a routine audit. My accountant is good, but not good enough to discover just how it was removed. I’ve contacted a larger firm, but they haven’t arrived yet. I mentioned it to your...” He raised his eyebrows at Brooke.

“Brother-in-law.”

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“Brother-in-law just in passing. He didn’t mention that he had told anyone.”

“He discussed it with me before the party.” Brooke left it at that, silently begging Ken not to blow her cover. He said nothing, glaring holes through her. Well, who said he had to approve, too?

“Mr. Duncan,” Brooke paused, expecting him to indicate that she should use his first name, but he kept his gaze steady and his lips closed, not even a hint of a smile on them. *Okay, I’ve got to make it good.*

“I assume you’ve questioned your employees?”

“Of course. I have one part-time bookkeeper. I used to do all of the books myself, but things got busy at the ranch and I had to hire someone to do the paperwork. She handles the basics.” He shook his head. “I don’t think she could have removed a hundred grand from my books without leaving some trace.”

“Mr. Duncan,” she gentled her voice. “Most thefts of this type are performed by employees. How long has she been working for you?”

“Two years.” He bit off the words.

“And when was the money discovered missing?”

“Last week.” Ritt’s eyebrows were getting closer to his nose, and Brooke quickly moved on.

“Any idle mention recently of financial problems? Does she have any other employment?” Ritt shook his head, and Brooke paused, running out of obvious questions. She needed to come up with something new, and fast. He was clearly losing interest and patience.

“Is there anyone else with access to the books? A ranch hand with any financial knowledge, perhaps someone who could have gotten close to your bookkeeper? Conned her or pressured her into giving him money that she didn’t have?” She held her breath as Ritt leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, squinting as if looking deep into the recesses of his memory.

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“Well, there is a new hand I hired on a temporary basis. Max’s had me a bit nervous. He works okay, but there’s something shifty about him, and I tried to keep an eye on him. I noticed he took Beth out to lunch a couple of weeks ago. Could be he got into the books. I don’t know his background.”

“Mr. Duncan, he could be a professional con.” Brooke took a deep breath and the chance of her life. “If it gets out that you’ve hired a team of professional auditors, or even that you’ve discovered the missing cash, he could take off, and you’d never catch him or get your money back.”

“What are you suggesting?” Ken spoke up for the first time, and Brooke was glad to see the twinkle in his eyes as he leaned back in his chair. He was always more tolerant of her than Marielle was.

“I’m suggesting a secret investigation.” Brooke turned her eyes from Ken after a silent thanks, and looked directly at Ritt. “I’m suggesting that someone unobtrusive be brought in to look over the books and try to find how it was taken. Once we discover that, we can pressure Beth, and Max, if necessary, into talking before we bring in the police. I can leave with you tomorrow—”

“Wait a minute,” Ritt leaned back once again, resting an elbow on the armrest, crossing his legs, and pointing a lazy finger at Brooke.

Uh-oh. I’m in for a big grilling.

“First of all, what makes you think you can find it?” His tone chilled Brooke right to her toes, but she pushed on.

“That’s an understandable concern. As I told you, I have a degree in accounting.” She held up a hand as he began to cut in. “What I didn’t mention is that I won the college’s annual auditing contest. The professors together devised a highly complicated conglomerate and, with some fancy shuffling, fake journal entries, etc., ‘hid’ two point three million dollars. No one found it but me.

“Directly out of college, I worked for what was then one of the Big

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Six. As a staff accountant on three separate audits, I found a key piece of information that led to either discovery of wrongdoing or a rather large error that affected profit/loss statements and tax refunds.

"I have a highly analytical mind and a suspicious nature. I was bored in accounting and became a P.I. I don't think, however, that I will be bored on your ranch." At the end of her terse speech, Brooke had tried a bit of humor and what Red-Sox-cap had called "her starlight smile." Neither worked.

Ritt waited patiently for Brooke to stop and take a breath, then looked to Ken as if to confirm what she had said. Brooke held in her annoyance, but felt her lips tighten anyway. She didn't lie, dammit! Well, not much. Not about the important things. She waited irritably for Ken to expose her, but he only nodded seriously and reached for his drink, and Ritt turned back to her with a half-smile on his full, firm, delicious-looking lips.

"And how do you plan to insinuate yourself into my household without anyone knowing what you're doing?" He rested his cheek against his hand, fingers spread across his upper lip and chin, and raised his eyebrows. He obviously wasn't prepared for her answer. She was.

"I'll be your lover, of course."

Ken barely managed to keep Scotch from exiting his nose as he spluttered and choked. Brooke didn't move a muscle, and, to his credit, neither did Ritt. Brooke waited several heartbeats, feeling as if she had turned to stone; then Ritt suddenly burst to life. He stood and held out a hand to Brooke, who slid her business card into it before shaking it.

"Well, Brooke, I'll give you a week. If you can find it, I'll pay all of your expenses plus your regular rate. Only for the hours you actually work, of course. If you don't find it, I'll pay for your time, but your flight back is on you. I'll pick you up at six tomorrow morning. Be ready." He placed the hat on his head, adjusted it, tipped the front of it

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to her, and waved to Ken. Then her cowboy stepped out the door before Brooke could say a word.

"Ken, don't lecture me," Brooke warned after a moment of mutually stunned silence.

"I wasn't going to. I was wondering, however, if you really plan to be his lover." His voice was laced with amusement, and his lips twitched as he played with the edge of his blotter. Brooke sighed.

"I certainly hope so."

* * *

The flight to Montana—where else?—was quiet. Brooke had planned to ask questions about the bookkeeper and the hired hand, but immediately after takeoff Ritt tipped his hat over his eyes and fell into a deep sleep. Or at least pretended to. The perfect man didn't even snore. Which was more than Brooke could say for herself.

She spent the first leg of the flight making lists for her investigation. For however much it was a ploy, Brooke took her work seriously. She and Ritt Duncan may never hit it off, but she intended to find the embezzler and get his money back.

They changed planes in Chicago, then drove a Jeep Cherokee from Billings to the ranch, three hours away. Brooke had read a lot about Montana, so the wide sky and spectacular scenery didn't amaze her, although she enjoyed watching it. It kept her awake, since Ritt hadn't said two words to her since Chicago. She was beginning to get discouraged.

Then they got to the ranch.

"Reenie, this is Brooke Adams. George can get her bags from the Jeep and put them in my room. I'll be in the den." Ritt's words were directed to a plump older woman who met them at the door. Reenie's gray eyes were huge as she watched him walk away. Then she shook herself and turned back to Brooke.

"Where are my manners! Ms. Adams, welcome to the Bar D.

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Dinner will be ready in about half an hour, if you'd like to freshen up." Her smile brightened her worn face. The woman was exactly what Brooke would expect in a ranch cook/housekeeper—stern face hiding a kind heart, gray hair and dress, white apron. Brooke smiled at her.

"Actually, I'd like some company, if I can help you in the kitchen. It was a quiet trip."

Reenie threw her head back and laughed. "His nibs is a moody man, he is. Never speaks until it can't be helped. You'll get used to it." She turned and led the way through large rooms furnished with heavy wood furniture to the country kitchen in the back of the house. She set Brooke to work chopping salad veggies at the pine table while she pattered at the stove.

"Me, I talk too much. George—my husband, he's the ranch foreman—says I'm nosy. I don't deny it. So, I've got to ask, how did Ritt end up bringing you here? I mean, he's never mentioned you, and I have never, in the twenty years I've been here, known him to bring a woman home."

Brooke silently cheered. It could be a good sign, or it could mean nothing. Maybe he felt the same connection she did.

Or maybe he was gay. She turned her attention back to the carrots and answered Reenie as truthfully as possible.

"Actually, I kind of invited myself. We met in Massachusetts, through my brother-in-law. Ritt fascinated me. I can only guess I had the same effect on him."

"Missy, if his glower when he came through that door was any indication, he is plumb bamboozled by you."

Brooke grinned. "Thanks, Reenie. I hope so."

Dinner was another quiet hour. After a few attempts at conversation, Brooke concentrated on the thick beef stew. Ritt ignored her almost completely, but Brooke was almost too aware of the man. He seemed huge, even in the spacious dining room. His chestnut hair

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gleamed under the chandelier, ruffled as if he'd run his hands through it after removing his hat. His long fingers held the silver spoon as gently as if it were glass. His foot bumped Brooke's more than once, sending a tingle of awareness up her leg. She chided herself on her obsession. It didn't help.

She went to bed early, after unpacking into a couple of drawers Ritt had emptied in the dresser. She curled up under a handmade quilt on the mahogany four-poster bed. She wondered if Ritt had been born in this bed, then remembered that his father had been a pro basketball player, not a rancher. Her cowboy notions were definitely stereotyped.

Brooke lay awake for hours, waiting for Ritt to come to bed, waiting for the inevitable confrontation about her declaration that she'd be his lover. He never came. She fell asleep alone, listening to the silence she'd never heard, even in tiny Green Meadows.

* * *

When she awoke the next morning her head hurt. The silence of the night before had become a cacophony of bellowing cattle, neighing horses, and shouting men. Brooke squinted at the clock and groaned when she realized it said five-thirty. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten up before seven o'clock, but obviously a ranch was geared to a different timetable. She'd never go back to sleep now.

She sighed and flopped onto her back, swinging her legs over the side of the bed and trying to summon the motivation to rise. Finally, with another heavy sigh, she heaved her body to a standing position. And froze, one hand gratefully clutching the bedpost.

Ritt lay sleeping across the room, nestled into a large overstuffed chair, his feet on the matching ottoman. Another handmade quilt covered him from his neck to his stockinged feet. Brooke's heart, which had resumed its normal pattern, lurched again. He looked a lot nicer in sleep, not quite so formidable. And despite the awkwardness of the chair, he looked comfortable. Brooke wished she could use this

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time to leisurely examine him. As if she hadn't done it while he was awake. But he was completely covered by the quilt. She quietly gathered her things and tiptoed to the bathroom to shower. When she returned, he was gone.

* * *

Brooke spent the next couple of days holed up in the den. Ritt had shown her the books and a basic rundown of the software program, then disappeared, presumably to check fences and move cattle. She saw him for breakfast and dinner, and once in a while asleep in the chair. Her senses were so in tune to him that whenever he was within shouting distance, she could have found him with her eyes closed. Her body hummed through every meal, and she was amazed that Ritt was able to keep the conversation to mundane topics. Despite his apparent reluctance to turn their relationship into a personal one, Brooke was slowly getting to know the man. And she liked what she was discovering.

Whenever she thought she'd go stir-crazy staring at numbers, she ventured out to explore. She'd become good friends with Reenie, who not-so-subtly prodded Ritt to spend more time with his "house guest." Seeing the quiet respect Ritt paid to the woman, Brooke was glad to have her on her side.

Quiet respect was in abundance on the Bar D. All the men seemed to look up to Ritt, and he never patronized them, only ran the ranch with an authority that was ingrained, not put on. Brooke had met George-the-foreman and some of the hands, and had even joined in a poker game in the bunkhouse one Saturday night. She'd won, too, gaining some of that respect for herself. Now, wherever she went, men tipped their hats and called greetings. When she stopped in the barn or at the corrals, she was given a lesson on whatever was happening at the time. And besides discovering that she liked Ritt Duncan as a person, she discovered something else. She loved ranching.

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Along with Brooke's fascination with cowboys, she'd always adored horses. But in crowded New England, the only horses she'd been able to get near were old, tired rental nags or flashy, haughty show animals. The horses on the Bar D were not only gorgeously strong and regal, they were obviously there to do a job, just like everyone else. And the respect that permeated the ranch extended even more to the animals. They often stood between danger and a cowhand's life, and no one ever forgot it.

The dust, the hot sun, the huge, glowing sky, the purple mountains in the distance—it all quickly entered Brooke's blood and flowed there, never to be removed.

Despite her frequent forays out of the house, it only took Brooke until the end of the third day to figure out how the embezzlement had occurred. It shouldn't have been hard for Ritt's regular accountant, in her opinion. The idiot could have saved Ritt the expense of hiring an audit team.

Instead of a lump sum of one hundred thousand dollars not entered as a payment, or entered as a bogus expense, a multitude of tiny adjustments over time had added up to a lot of money. A misplaced decimal here, a transposed number there—small errors that were difficult to spot. Brooke doubted the changes had occurred over real time. It was more likely that someone had doctored the books all at once and hoped it would go unnoticed until they were able to escape. The accountant could have been expected to chalk the errors he found in random sampling to carelessness on the bookkeeper's part. Fortunately for Ritt, the man was careful to balance the financial statements to the last penny. Which made his inability to figure out what had happened all the more puzzling.

After dinner that night Brooke asked Ritt to spend some time with her. She was careful to sound like a neglected girlfriend rather than a business acquaintance, which she was feeling like anyway. Maybe

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Brooke would be able to impress Ritt with something other than her brain tonight.

They went into Ritt's office and shut the door. Brooke slid behind the desk, inhaling deeply of Ritt's musky scent as he dragged a chair next to her and leaned close to watch over her shoulder.

"I found it," she told him, her hand trembling the tiniest bit as she called up the pertinent files.

"Already?" Despite the word, there was no surprise in Ritt's voice. Maybe he wouldn't be so easy to impress after all.

"It wasn't difficult." She showed him some examples of how the theft had been hidden. "Your regular man should have been able to figure it out, with a little random sampling, comparing invoices and check stubs against the ledger." She couldn't keep the scorn out of her tone, and she felt Ritt stiffen in response.

"Ralph's firm has been my accountant for fifteen years. I trust him implicitly." He leaned away from her. Brooke turned to face him.

"Ritt, he could have charged you his regular hourly rate and been done in two days. This fancy firm he wanted you to hire would charge three times as much, send in a team of five people, and spend three weeks here. What kind of friend is that?" Her voice rose at the end.

"Are you suggesting kickbacks?" Ritt's eyes darkened to topaz and he was unnaturally still. Brooke backpedaled a bit. She didn't want him mad at her.

"I'm not really suggesting anything, Ritt." She kept her voice soft. "I just wanted to point it out to you. I'm sorry."

"So who do you think did it?"

Brooke knew he wasn't going to like this part, either. "Beth is the logical person. Wait, Ritt," she rushed on, seeing his eyebrows start to descend. "I like her a lot. I chatted with her when she came to work yesterday. But I think she'd be easily influenced. I think you need to talk to her."

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Ritt was silent for a few moments, staring at the computer screen. Finally, he nodded. "Okay, I'll talk to her. Your part of this is done."

Brooke felt a rush of fear up her spine. She wasn't ready to leave! In three short days, she thought she'd found the man she would love for the rest of her life, and the location and lifestyle that could take her away from her beloved New England. All were a part of her soul. And now, way before she was ready, Ritt was sending her away.

"Ritt—" she began.

"Brooke." His name on his lips for the first time since they'd arrived in Montana made her brain stop working. The dark chocolate of his voice shaping the word melted her bones. If he could do this with just a word, an expression of love would kill her!

"Brooke," he said again, swiveling her chair to face him completely and bracing his hands on the arms, trapping her. "I know this was an excuse to get here. Now I want to know why." As smooth and deep as it was, his voice was also dangerous. Brooke swallowed and hoped her voice wouldn't shake.

"I needed time." She thanked heaven her words had been steady.

"Time for what?" Ritt didn't move.

"For us."

"Damn it, Brooke! I'm the reticent one around here!" Ritt shook the chair and flung himself backward against his, burying both hands in his golden hair. "I've been wracking my brain trying to figure out what you want from me. Hell if I can. So now you're going to tell me."

Brooke smiled. She thought she'd been so obvious. "Ritt, all I want from you is you." He glared at her, unconvinced. She continued. "I don't want your money, or your ranch, or even your body. Well," she chuckled, "not *just* your body." His eyebrows were still centimeters from his nose, so she elaborated.

"Ritt, ever since I saw you at my sister's house, I knew you were The One. Exactly what I've wanted all my life. And after being here on

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the ranch, meeting these people, living this life, even partially, even for just a few days, I want it all.”

“All what?” he growled. “You mean the whole kit and kaboodle? Marriage, generations of kids growing up on this land, all that?”

She leaned forward and rested her hands on his knees, thrilling to the clenching of his muscles. “I mean marriage to *you*, I mean *our* kids growing up on this land. I mean riding the range next to my husband, and riding him in bed. I want *you*, Ritt. Completely.”

“This is nuts.” Ritt stood and began pacing the Oriental carpet on the hardwood floor. “You’ve known me for three days. I can’t believe you flew halfway across the country with a complete stranger because you decided you’re going to marry him.”

“I didn’t decide it then. I decided it now. I’ve been impulsive all my life, Ritt, and I have not once regretted my decisions. I came out here because I needed to learn if you were the man I thought you were, and to give you time to get to know me. Which you still haven’t done,” she muttered, frowning. She watched him pacing, saw the anger on his face, and her heart dropped to her shoes. “Maybe I should leave before you break my heart. Since you don’t seem to want me.”

Brooke was pulled to a standing position so fast it felt like several major organs were left behind. Ritt’s lips on hers were glorious, as firm and delicious as she’d expected, but more so. He took her mouth like a man denied what he craved for a long, long time. Brooke clutched his shoulders and pressed closer to him, letting wave after wave of desire flood her.

Ritt tore his lips from hers and moved to her neck, his lips and teeth and tongue sending electric currents that puckered her nipples and left her throbbing at her center. She realized she was now sitting on the desk, and when Ritt’s hand found her breast she arched back, moaning.

Ritt whispered harshly in her ear. “I’ve been watching you with my men, with Reenie. You act like you belong here, and damned if it

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doesn't feel like you do."

Brooke reveled in his words at the same time as she feared his tone.

"I've been sleeping on that damned chair, watching you stretching like a cat in my bed, and I've had a gigantic hard-on for two days as a result." He pressed himself between her thighs, and she whimpered. "How's that for not wanting you?"

"It's a start." She grinned up at him, ready when he took his revenge in another devastating kiss. She was lost in sensation, not realizing he was opening her shirt until she felt his hands against her breasts. She gasped and fell back, and he caught her with one arm, lowering her to the desk, her head pillowed on a ledger. He followed her down and gently bit first one nipple, then the other. Brooke wanted desperately to touch his skin, but couldn't make her hands obey her commands to unbutton his shirt. She could only try to stifle her cries as his mouth blazed fire across her chest, down her belly, to her jeans, which were removed so smoothly she might have imagined the struggle to squeeze into them that morning.

"Ritt, please," she begged as he touched her through her moist silk panties, gently grinding the heel of his hand against her, sending shock waves through her entire body. "You're torturing me."

"Turnabout is fair play, love." He didn't make her beg again, but stripped off her underwear and unbuttoned the fly of his jeans, wrapping her legs around his waist to anchor her there while he sheathed himself with a condom out of nowhere. Brooke thought fleetingly of stallions just before he thrust into her, pushing her closer to the edge and banishing all reason from her mind. She was simply a mass of nerve endings, tingling from head to toe as his hands swept over her repeatedly, stroking here, squeezing there, sending her into paroxysms of pleasure. Then he began to move his hips.

Brooke had never before experienced a climax so quickly, so earth-shatteringly. Her body arched, then froze, her mouth open in a silent

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scream of pleasure so intense she couldn't voice it. Slowly it faded, bringing her floating back to earth, where she became aware of Ritt still driving into her, calling her name, then shuddering as he came. A sensation of love replaced desire and sexual fulfillment. Could she really love this man, already?

Yes, she thought as he half-collapsed onto her, burying his face in her neck. She stroked his hair and held him tightly, smiling at the knowledge that if anyone could fall in love in three days, it was Brooke Adams.

Ritt seemed disinclined to move anytime soon, but Brooke's body was starting to tell her what kinds of office supplies Ritt kept on his desk. She nudged him a little.

"Ritt."

"Umm."

"Ritt, please." Brooke wiggled, trying to get him to move, and winced. "I love you, and I love your body on mine, but the stapler doesn't feel the same about me."

Ritt pulled himself up and swept her into his lap as he collapsed into the desk chair. He pushed her head down into the curve of his shoulder and gently stroked her arm.

"Better?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she whispered back, inhaling his scent, reveling in being so close to him.

"Good, now stop spoiling things." His hands traced lightly over her skin, raising goose bumps that he smoothed with his palms. Brooke hummed and snuggled deeper against him.

"You came awfully quickly."

He spoke so low she could barely distinguish the words, a rumble under her ear.

"It was a definite record." She figured they should get dressed before someone found them, but she couldn't move. Her body felt

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heavy, her eyelids heavier.

“Couldn’t have been that good, then.” He shifted her so she was lying back against his arm, her knees over the side of the chair. Before Brooke could assure him it was great, his touch had gone from soothing to seducing. He stroked the tips of his fingers up the side of her breast, across the tops of both, and down the front of the other, flicking her nipple as they passed. Her body tensed slightly, a mini-convulsion, and her languor disappeared. He retraced his path, this time going down over her right nipple, then up over her left. She arched so that her head tipped backward and her breast lifted into his palm. He squeezed. She gasped. He pinched, and she cried out, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

“That’s it. Shhhhhh.” Ritt bent over her, brushed her hand away, and touched his mouth to her lips. It was like a kiss, but not, because both their mouths remained open and their breath mingled. “Anyone could find us. I didn’t lock the door. So you’d better be quiet.” He dipped his tongue into her mouth, then withdrew it at the same time he dropped his hand between her legs. She spread her thighs, then lifted her left knee and braced her foot against the arm of the chair.

Ritt nuzzled her ear and sucked her neck, but rested his hand on her thigh, his thumb touching her curls but not moving. Brooke tried to move her hips toward his hand, but he tightened his grip, holding her down. That made her arch more, thrusting her breasts higher. He groaned, and his cock stretched under her right cheek. She couldn’t help smiling.

“That’s pretty good recovery time, cowboy.”

“Yeah, lucky for us.” He latched his mouth over her right nipple and sucked, hard. Brooke stifled a cry, and realized that at least with this man, she was vocally responsive. They might need to soundproof the bedroom. And this office.

Ritt slid two fingers slightly into her, coating them, and then stroked

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the moisture over her clit. It felt so good she moaned, quietly, then pressed her face into his neck to try to stifle the sound. He circled his fingers, slowly first, collecting more moisture and stroking faster, then rubbing hard as her breathing quickened and she lifted up against him, the orgasm building gradually. Then he stopped, dragged his fingers down slowly over her clit and into her. He drove them deep inside, pressing upward against her G spot, wiggling and making her crazy because it was a deeper sensation, a richer pleasure, but more elusive. She wouldn't come this way.

Then he used his thumb. He pulled his two inside fingers out and thrust them back in, pressing his thumb hard against her clit so that every muscle in her body tensed, making the climb, reaching for that ecstasy...

"Wait."

Brooke whimpered again.

Ritt kissed her, then pulled his hand away. "Sorry," he whispered. "But I can't take it. You're driving me mad." He helped her turn and straddle him on the hard wooden chair. She was so worked up, she didn't care. She started to impale herself on him, wild with need.

"Wait," he repeated, and, frustrated, she bit him on the shoulder. He chuckled and reached to the floor for his jeans. "I almost forgot."

"I'll forgive you." She snatched the foil packet from his hands, ripped it open with her teeth so hard that the rubber flew out and landed—luckily—on his chest, then fumbled it onto his rock-hard cock before returning to the move she'd been about to make.

"Wow, you're tight," Ritt groaned, grabbing her hips and helping her lift herself up and sink down, taking him deep.

Brooke tightened her arms over his shoulders and quickened the pace. The orgasm he'd brought so close a moment ago roared back, exploding over her before she could warn him.

But when she looked down his eyes were fierce on her face, which

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was still frozen in her pleasure. His own features tightened, his eyes narrowed, and he thrust upward into her, hard, before gathering her to his chest and giving a long, meaningful exhalation.

A short while later they dressed and sneaked up the front stairs to the bedroom. Ritt had a massive *en suite* bathroom with a double-wide shower, and Brooke led him to it. She hoped, if he'd had a massive hard-on for two days, that he wasn't quite depleted.

She started the hot water, then stripped Ritt and pushed him toward the spray.

"There's nothing like sleeping with a clean man," she said, "on clean sheets. I'll be back in a sec." She pulled a set of sheets out of the linen closet and quickly changed the bed, then tossed her dirty clothes in the basket in the corner and joined him in the shower.

"I'm finished," he told her, rinsing the last of the soap down the drain.

"It's okay. Stay with me." She caught his wrist and leaned up to kiss him, pressing her body against his. "I'll be quick."

"Sure." He leaned one shoulder against the end of the enclosure, his arms folded, and smiled at her. "I think I can spare a minute to watch you."

Brooke smiled back. He was following her script perfectly. If he wasn't sure about letting her stay, this should seal the deal.

She tipped her head back under the water, closing her eyes and opening her mouth to breathe as it poured down her body. She kept her movements slow and hopefully seductive.

"Can I have some shampoo, please?" She squeezed her eyes tighter against the water dripping into them and held out her cupped palm. She heard the pop of the shampoo bottle and felt the cool liquid on her skin. "Thank you." She took her time lathering and rinsing her hair, arching her back to lift her breasts. Once that was done, she wiped the water from her face and lathered the soap between her hands. She washed and

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rinsed her face, then her neck and shoulders, the parts of her back that she could reach, her abdomen, and finally her breasts. She noticed, with satisfaction, that though Ritt hadn't moved, he was getting hard again.

She turned and bent forward to wash her feet and worked her way up her legs. Ritt made a noise in his throat when she washed between them, her eyes closed, her hand moving exploratively. It felt good, though she didn't think she had any more in her. Not that it mattered. This was all for Ritt.

She rinsed, put away the soap, turned off the water, and spun, dropping to her knees and taking him into her mouth before he could react. He cursed, twisting so his shoulders were both against the wall, and bracing his feet on either side of her. Brooke wrapped her hand around his base, stroking in time to the movement of her mouth on his head. She pulled back, sucking hard, and he dug his fingers into her scalp.

"Jesus, Brooke." His hips pressed forward. She cupped his balls with her free hand and took him as deep as she could, then worked him fast and hard. Then soft and slow. Hard and slow. Fast and soft. She applied every variation she could until his scrotum tightened, then she went back to fast and hard, pumping him until he came, roaring his approval and tightening his hands on her enough to cause pain.

She sat back on her heels and grinned up at him. "Good?"

"Not bad." But his eyes looked glazed, and his thighs quivered. He bent and lifted her to her feet. "Thank you. That was incredible."

"Any time."

"Your turn."

"No, Ritt, I'm done." But he ignored her. He pulled her from the stall and dried them off, then scooped her up and carried her to his bed.

"Ritt, my hair is wet. I'll soak the pillows."

"No, you won't." He set her down sideways on the bed so that her legs hung off. Then he knelt, braced her feet against his shoulders, and

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met her eyes. “Your turn.”

Then his tongue touched her, and she melted.

He didn’t play with the rest of her body to build her pleasure this time, but did take to heart that she’d said she was done. It was more like he was indulging in something he loved, than trying to push her into something he wanted her to have.

Slow, gentle licks started her off. They were just the right thing to recall the sensations of earlier without over-stimulating her into pain or discomfort. Brooke sighed and relaxed. A few moments later he switched to a pointy stroke over her clit, which swelled to meet it. She felt herself go damp. Ritt tested her with a finger, placing it just outside her cunt while he tongued her clit, waiting for her response. When it wasn’t enough, she shifted her hips down and he slipped that finger inside, pressing upward to pinch her clit between tongue and finger.

“Oh, that’s good.” She moved herself up and down on his finger until he began thrusting, slowly. She squeezed him, and he moved faster, both with his mouth and his finger. He added a second finger, then touched more sensitive skin, lower, with his pinky. The orgasm that had been taking its time was suddenly on her. She cried out, lunging, but Ritt stayed with her, making sure none of the stimulation stopped until she came down and gently nudged him away.

“Holy crap, that was good,” she told him. “If I had any doubts about you before, you just killed them.”

“I think,” Ritt said, repositioning her and covering them with the quilt. “You should stick around a while, see if there’s anything to that dream of yours.”

“I told you.”

“Don’t be smug.” He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. His were now pale gold, and full of the beginnings of an emotion Brooke hardly dared hope was love. She smiled at him.

“You were awfully prepared down there, in your office.”

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He actually blushed. "Call it optimism."

"You should have said something sooner. We could have been doing this since I got here."

"I haven't had unprotected sex with anyone, ever. Just because you're different from any woman I've ever slept with doesn't mean I'd change."

"I wouldn't want you to. Though," she admitted, "I wouldn't mind getting pregnant."

"Brooke, this is just beginning." Ritt sighed and rested his chin on her head, pulling her close into his chest. "I can easily see it happening the way you want it to, but I'm not willing to keep moving this fast. As good as moving fast has been for us," he admitted.

"It's okay," Brooke told him, sighing contentedly, feeling like she'd come home. "We can slow down. As long as we keep moving."

NATALIE J. DAMSCHRODER

Natalie J. Damschroder became a writer the hard way—by avoiding it. Though she wrote her first book at age five (appropriately titled, *My Very First Book*) and received accolades for her academic writing (Ruth Davies Award for Excellence in Writing for a paper on deforestation her senior year in college), she hated doing it. Colonial food and the habits of the European Starling just weren't her thing.

Shortly after graduating from college, however, she found her niche—romantic fiction. After an internship with the National Geographic Society, customer service for a phone company just wasn't that exciting. So she began learning how to write the books she'd loved to read all her life. Four books and six years later, she finally sold. Now she struggles to balance her frenetic writing life (how else can she get all the stories in her head on paper?) with her family, the most supportive husband in the world and two beautiful, intelligent, stubborn, independent daughters (one of whom has already declared her desire to be a writer, too). She somehow also fits in a day job and various volunteer positions in and out of the writing industry.

More can be found at www.nataliedamschroder.com.

* * *

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