



Snowbound

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## **Snowbound**

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## **Snowbound**

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### **Dedication**

To John, the one person who believes that I can do anything and who is my inspiration for all things romantic. You are the love of my life.

To my dedicated and dear friend, Erica. Okay, maybe I could have done it without you, but it wouldn't have been nearly as fun!

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### Chapter One

The last thing Jonah Masterson wanted was company. Not that he was unsociable. Generally, he was a rather amiable kind of guy. At least he'd thought so, until he came home a day early from a business trip to find his fiancée in bed with another man.

Not just any man, but his literary agent.

Make that his *former* literary agent.

Just then, Jonah hadn't been such a friendly sort of fellow.

The resulting nasty breakup with both of them had plunged him into a serious bout of what a friend had termed "depression-induced writer's block".

*Oh, please.* He was far from depressed. It had been a major shock to him to realize that he wasn't heartbroken. He was just pissed off that he'd trusted the wrong woman. Again.

Of course, his good buddy Jack had pointed out that if Jonah wasn't hurt by it, that was a good thing, because it meant he had never really loved Marian in the first place.

For a complete idiot, Jack had a point.

Now he just wanted to be alone for a while, and there wasn't a better place to be alone than his family's isolated cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He had only one neighbor within five miles, and it was a thirty-minute drive to the nearest thing resembling a town. He had no cell phone, and he only answered the landline if he felt like it, which wasn't often. The same went for email. With the

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exception of an occasional urgent message from his new agent, who happened to be female, he largely ignored the fact that his inbox was rapidly reaching maximum capacity.

Jonah leaned back, sinking into the soft cushions of the sectional, and propped his bare feet on the wooden coffee table. While the wind howled outside, he celebrated his solitude with three fingers of Jack Daniels over ice. He stared down into the glass in his hand. Maybe the whiskey wasn't something he needed, but one glass couldn't hurt.

He laid his head against the cushion, let his eyes drift closed and listened to the crackling of the wood burning in the fireplace and the soft clicking of sleet against the skylights. A spring storm had rolled in, not unusual for late March in the Blue Ridge Mountains, bringing with it the promise of nasty weather for the next few days. The weatherman had changed his original forecast as the temperature dropped and now predicted around eight inches of new snow, which would be wonderful for the ski resorts and hell on the roads.

No matter. Jonah had no plans to go anywhere. Tonight he had opted for the CD player in lieu of the television, and George Winston softly tickled the ivories through the speakers he had built into the bookcase. All in all, the atmosphere was warm, homey and comforting.

And lonely, he thought, before reminding himself that being alone had been his intent when he'd come to the cabin he'd inherited from his grandparents.

"Language...has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone," he said aloud to no one in particular, but the dog laying beside the fireplace raised his head and looked at him. "Paul Johannes Tillich." He smiled at the dog as he raised his glass in salute.

A man was never truly alone if he had the company of a good dog. A dog didn't get bored with you and go off searching for

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another master behind your back. Not that Jonah wanted to be anyone's master, but that was beside the point. A dog was loyal. Too bad he couldn't say the same thing about his former fiancée.

The dog in question rose and walked over to lay his head on Jonah's knee. "You know what I want?" The dog angled his head, his brown eyes intent on his master. "I want a woman who reads. I want a woman who knows Byron from a hole in the ground and can still rock my world." He sipped from his glass and scratched behind the dog's ears. "That's what I want, Chewie. A literate woman with hot hands and a big..." He chuckled to himself when Chewie raised his head to listen. "Vocabulary," he finished with a shake of his head. "What did you think I was going to say?" Chewie growled softly and dropped his head back to Jonah's knee.

"What?" Jonah lifted the glass, shook it slightly so that the ice clinked against the side. "I'd fix you one, but I thought you were trying to cut back," he teased, ruffling the fur on the dog's neck. "You know how you are once you get started."

Chewie was a huge mass of thick, brown fur with big, sad eyes. Jonah had spotted him on a visit to a local animal shelter and couldn't bear to leave him there. The shelter had called him a "St. Bernard mix", but Jonah was certain there had to be some elephant in the bloodline someplace. "Large breed dog" simply didn't do Chewie justice.

He buried his fingers in the dog's soft fur. The quiet wasn't so bad, after all, even if the celibacy sucked. Maybe a little later he'd drag out the Xbox and vent some of his pent-up frustration on virtual enemy soldiers.

As he lifted the glass to his lips again, the blast of a car horn shattered the quiet. He glanced toward the window, frowning at the flecks of ice that ticked against the panes. *What kind of idiot would be out driving in this weather?*

He barely had time to finish the thought before the sound was followed by the loud snap of ice-covered branches and the sickening scrape of wood against metal. The distinct metallic

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crunch that came next could only be the impact of an automobile. Against what, he didn't take the time to consider.

He leaped from the sofa and darted to the front window. His cabin was surrounded by trees, and the rapidly falling darkness only made it that much more difficult to see.

His need for seclusion took an instant backseat. Muttering an oath, Jonah grabbed his coat from the rack by the door and shoved his hands into his gloves. Chewie whined and scratched frantically at the door. "I'm hurrying!" he snapped at the frustrated animal as he stamped into his boots. He snagged the flashlight he kept in the hall closet and flicked it on to check the battery before heading out into the pelting sleet, with Chewie on his heels.

As he stood at the edge of the ice-slicked asphalt, Jonah spotted one of the car's headlights shining at the bottom of a shallow embankment. His boots slipped on the ice, and he stumbled down the trail of broken branches and mangled, leafless shrubbery. Icy rain slid inside his boots and chilled his sockless feet, while sleet pelted his head and face. He briefly wished he'd thought to grab a hat, but the thought vanished when he got a good look at the vehicle.

Damn. It hurt to see a brand new BMW crunched like that. The car had skidded off the road and slammed hard into a fallen log at the bottom of the ravine, the impact shattering the left headlight and buckling the left side of the bumper. The vehicle had come to rest with the driver's door wedged tightly against the log. Chewie lumbered to it, jumped up, his massive paws on the car door, and barked loudly.

"I'm coming!" Jonah trudged his way through the brittle shrubbery, his flashlight glimmering on ice-covered branches, and aimed the beam through the window on the passenger side.

The woman in the car slumped against the driver's door, her seat belt still in place. The engine had stalled, but the dash lights and a single, unbroken headlight were still on, and he could hear,

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faintly, the music playing on her radio. Smoke swirled inside the car and danced across the beam of his flashlight.

*Fire?* He couldn't smell the smoke, but he didn't want to take any chances. A quick scan of the vehicle's interior revealed she was alone. He could see a purse on the floorboard in front and a coat spread across the backseat.

He rapped on the window with gloved knuckles. "Hey! You okay?"

She didn't answer, didn't move.

Behind him, Chewie whimpered and pawed at the ground. Jonah tugged at the door handle. The ice that had already formed on it cracked noisily and fell away as he yanked, but the door didn't open.

Locked.

Cursing under his breath, he stepped back and seriously considered kicking in the window, until he spotted a rock roughly the size of his fist on the ground. He lifted it, and with a pang of regret at causing further damage to the car, struck the rear passenger window. With the exception of a small chip in the glass, it remained intact.

Safety glass. It figured. Jonah struck the window again and then grunted in frustration when it failed to break. He glanced over at Chewie. "It always looks easier than this on television," he muttered, and raised the rock once more.

On the third try, the window shattered. Tiny cubes of safety glass scattered over the seat and to the ground as the smoke plumed out through the broken window. The smell was all wrong, though, and it took Jonah a moment to realize it hadn't been smoke at all, but the dusty powder from the airbag. That, at least, was a relief. He reached through the broken window, unlocked the front passenger door and jerked it open. The ice on the frame splintered into shards on the frozen ground at his feet. Jonah swept the tiny cubes of glass off the leather seat with his gloved hand and slid inside the car.



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A light dusting of powder covered the vehicle's interior. The contents of the woman's purse were scattered on the floor, and Mozart emanated softly from the speakers. Jonah spared half a second to appreciate her taste in music before switching off the ignition and pocketing the keys. Carefully, he laid a hand on her shoulder and spoke to her. She didn't respond.

His fingers trembled a little as he pulled off his gloves. Whether from the cold or fear that he wouldn't find a pulse, he wasn't sure. He offered up a silent prayer when he touched his fingers to her throat, and let out a long sigh of relief at the flutter of her heartbeat beneath his fingertips. He moved his hand in front of her mouth. The gentle warmth of her breath caressed his fingers. She had a pulse and was breathing steadily. At least she was alive.

Jonah gently laid her back against the seat and looked her over for other obvious injuries. A cut along her temple was still oozing blood, but not much. He cupped her face in one hand and carefully brushed back the blonde strands of her hair. "Come on, honey. Open your eyes."

She still didn't move. The car's interior lights gave him a better look at her. She reminded him of the cameo pendant his Irish grandmother had worn on special occasions. She was pretty, with soft, even features. A slightly up-tilted nose, high cheekbones and a perfect cupid's bow for a mouth. Her skin was pale, her eyes closed. Her long lashes rested on her cheeks. Jonah laid a hand over hers. Her delicate fingers were like ice. He muttered an oath as the wind whipped more sleet in through the shattered window.

He was well aware that basic first-aid procedure advised against moving an accident victim, if you could help it, but it was freezing outside and he had no idea how long it would take for Emergency Services to arrive, if they were able to get through the icy roads at all. He was not going to leave her out in the cold long enough to go back up to his cabin and try to make the call.

He unfastened her seat belt, carefully hooked his hands under her arms and pulled her from her seat, maneuvering her

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over the gearshift to cradle her in his lap. He picked up the overcoat from the backseat and tucked it around her in an effort to keep her as warm and dry as possible. He glanced down, startled to see her eyes flutter open. Her expression was puzzled, but before he could form words to reassure her, she was out again, limp in his arms.

He picked up her purse, stuffed her belongings back into it and slung it over his shoulder. There was bound to be some kind of identification in it, but he wanted to get her out of the cold before he searched for it. He rose and lifted her into his arms. The cold pierced his lungs as he took a deep breath, whistled for Chewie and started back up the hill.

Soaked to the skin from melting ice, his jeans and boots spattered with mud, Jonah kicked open the door to his cabin. He carried the woman inside and laid her on the wide sectional sofa in front of the fire. The short skirt of her red suit slid up when he laid her down, and he couldn't help but notice that his damsel in distress had legs for days.

He shook his head, silently chastising himself for his less-than-gentlemanly thoughts. He tossed her coat over a chair, dragged the folded quilt from the back of the sofa and tucked it in around her. Then he did what he figured any other red-blooded man would do in a crisis.

He called a woman.

\* \* \* \* \*

The engine of Viv Keller's ancient four-wheel-drive truck rumbled to a stop in front of Jonah's cabin less than ten minutes later. She was his nearest neighbor, and being family, one of the few people whose presence he could tolerate these days. At seventy-two, Viv's energy level rivaled those of people half her age, and she seemed to have some old-fashioned cure for just about anything that could possibly ail a human being. She also had an

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annoying habit of telling one's future through the reading of tea leaves. Jonah had found himself on the receiving end of her unsolicited advice more times than he cared to count, but fortunetelling aside, he knew there was precious little Viv wouldn't do for him.

He left the woman to Viv's ministrations and went back down to the wrecked car to cover the broken window with plastic sheeting. Minutes later he returned to the cabin, drenched and freezing, and peered over Viv's shoulder. She was perched on the edge of the sofa, applying some odd-smelling salve to the cut on the injured woman's forehead. Jonah shivered as he rubbed his hands together and blew on them for warmth.

"Will she be all right?"

"Back off, boy. You're dripping on me." She flapped a hand at him to shoo him away and reached for a bandage. "She'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Why don't you go take a hot shower? I'll tend to her."

Chilled to the bone, Jonah didn't argue. He felt rather helpless anyway, and Viv didn't appear to need his assistance. He threw another log on the fire on his way out of the room and left the woman in Viv's care.

A short time later he emerged from the bathroom, toweling his hair. He felt somewhat better dressed in clean, dry jeans and a warm sweatshirt, but the hardwood floor was cold under his bare feet. He moved toward the fireplace and curled his toes into the warmth of the thick rug in front of the hearth.

Viv glanced at his feet and scowled. "You're gonna catch your death running around with nothing on your feet. It's freezing outside."

He resisted the urge to point out that he wasn't outside, not to mention that colds were caused by viruses, not being cold or

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wet. It would have been a hopeless argument anyway. His Aunt Viv had always had a very stubborn streak.

Viv had removed the woman's red suit jacket and laid it carefully on the hearth. He picked it up and ran a thumb across the Italian name on the label before he turned to study the blonde lying on his sofa.

Her golden hair fell across the dark blue cushion, and her eyes were still closed. That perfectly shaped mouth—*why was he thinking of it as perfect?*—was open slightly, her chest rising and falling with her even breaths. Her skin was pale, or maybe she was just fair; he couldn't tell very well in the dim light. One hand lay on her chest, the other at her side. Her nails were short, neat and unpolished, and he made a mental note that she wasn't wearing any rings. The gold watch, however, was an understated but very expensive Cartier.

"How is she?"

"Still out." Viv gathered up her various tins and packages and dropped them into her blue canvas backpack. "Name's Katherine Winstead."

"How'd you find—?" Jonah started to ask, then followed her gaze toward the woman's purse. A leather wallet lay open beside it. "Oh. Duh."

She glanced at the unconscious woman. "I looked at her ID. Lives in Charlotte." She picked up the wallet and handed it to him. "Flatlanders," she murmured with disdain. "Ain't got a lick of sense sometimes, out driving in this weather."

Jonah studied the driver's license photo. A pretty blonde smiled back. Her hair had been shorter in the picture, just below her chin. He thought she might have dimples, but it was hard to tell in the tiny, digital photo. He'd always been a sucker for dimples.

Frowning, he looked up at Viv. "Shouldn't I call someone?"

Viv leveled her eyes at him from beneath the brim of a battered Atlanta Braves baseball cap. "Who exactly are you going to call? Emergency Services can't get through with these roads iced

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over, you know that. Besides, she ain't critical. Just a bump on the head and a few bruises."

"Aunt Viv, she's unconscious. She could have a concussion, or internal injuries."

"You young people," she said, waving him off again. "Think you gotta have a doctor with some fancy medical degree for every little old thing." She fingered the bandage she'd taped over the cut on the woman's forehead. "Been treating folks in these mountains for everything from colic to arthritis for nigh on fifty years. Don't you think I can handle a bump on the head?"

"What if someone's looking for her? Shouldn't we at least report the accident?"

Viv cocked her head. "And just how do you intend to get hold of the sheriff? Carrier pigeon?" She nodded toward the phone. "Phones are down."

"They weren't a half hour ago. I called you."

"Well, they are now. I tried to call him while you were in the shower. Line's dead as a doornail."

Jonah dropped into the leather recliner. Someday he'd have to join the twenty-first century and get a cell phone. "So, what do we do?"

"She'll wake in a bit. Maybe she's got one of them cellular phones somewhere. Didn't see one in her purse, though."

Jonah nodded once. "Okay. I'll go back down and check her car in the morning."

"Good enough." Viv stood. "She might be in some pain when she wakes up." She gave him a pointed look. "You've got some Motrin or something around here, right?"

"I think so." He watched as she headed for the door. "Wait! Aren't you staying?"

Viv raised an eyebrow. "Hadn't planned to. My dogs are waiting for their supper."

"You're welcome to one of the guest rooms." He started toward the hallway. "I don't know if there are sheets on the bed,

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but—" Jonah stopped in mid-sentence as she slipped her boots on. Panic gripped his gut, its claws as icy as the falling sleet. "Viv, you can't leave me alone with her."

"Why not?"

*Why not?* "Christ, Viv. If she wakes up and finds herself alone with a strange man she's probably going to panic." Not to mention the fact that he had no desire for company.

*What if she does have dimples?*

Shaking his head, Jonah followed her to the door. "I have no idea what to do for her. I hate to break this to you, but I quit Boy Scouts long before I earned that first-aid merit badge. I can't possibly—"

Viv shot him a condescending look. "It ain't brain surgery, Jonah. She'll probably have one hell of a headache when she comes to, might be a little sore. Nothing's broke. Worst case, you can give her some Motrin and brew her up some of this tea. It'll help with the soreness." Digging into the backpack, she pulled out a small tin of tea and shoved it into his hands. "You can brew tea, can't you?"

"I think I can handle it." He cast a quick glance at the woman on the sofa and didn't like one bit the little twist he felt in his gut. "Viv, I came up here to be alone." He watched her shove her hands into an ancient pair of leather gloves, oblivious to his protests. "I'm trying to work. I don't have the time or the inclination to play nursemaid to some blonde."

He thought he saw her lips quirk, but she controlled the smile. "You can handle it. Said so yourself."

He blew out an exasperated breath. "What if she's confused when she wakes up? What if she's got amnesia or something? I think she'd feel much safer with you here."

Viv laughed. "Lord, boy. You act like you ain't never been alone with a woman, and I *know* that ain't the case. She's gonna be confused and in pain, and likely mad as a wet hen about her car. It'll all be fine. This morning after I had my tea—"

"Don't even start, Aunt Viv."

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Viv shrugged. "Suit yourself. I was just going to give you fair warning." She crossed the room and pulled her coat down from the rack. Jonah took it from her and helped her into it. "Brew her some tea, fix her something to eat," Viv advised. She reached up and tapped him lightly on the forehead. "You got a way with women and a creative mind, Jonah. Put 'em to use."

"Wait a minute. Fair warning for what?"

Viv grinned, her wrinkled face creasing, and winked. "Just be a gentleman, Jonah, and everything will be fine." She swung the backpack onto her shoulder, rubbed Chewie on the head and left Jonah alone.

He stood for a moment, the tin of tea in his hand, glaring at the closed door. With a resigned sigh, he walked through the kitchen and tossed the tin on the counter. He looked down at his dog. "'Brew her some tea,' she says." He opened a cabinet, pulled out an old kettle and moved to the sink. "Like that's going to make everything all right," he grumbled as he filled the kettle with water. "Like that woman's just going to wake up and be perfectly fine with the fact that she's stuck in a cabin in the middle of nowhere with a man she doesn't know."

He snapped the faucet off and set the kettle beside the stove to wait until she awoke. "'You can brew tea, can't you?'," he mocked Viv's tone. "I love that crazy old lady, but I swear there are times I'd like to pinch her head off." He turned to look pointedly at the dog. "If Blondie in there isn't awake by morning, we're finding a phone and calling the authorities."

Jonah took a few minutes to dig out some clean sheets for the guest room and make up the bed before he returned to the living room. At least if she woke up, she'd have a clean bed to sleep in. He peered out the big picture window in the den. Sleet still clicked against the glass, kicked up every now and then by a gust of wind.

He picked up the iron poker and stoked the fire, then tossed another log onto the grate for good measure. His drink still sat on

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the table beside the sofa, the ice now melted. He picked up the glass and stared at the watered-down whiskey for a moment, then dumped it into the soil of a nearly dead potted ficus tree. It wouldn't help matters if she smelled alcohol on his breath when she woke up.

His gaze swept the room and came to rest on the still-unconscious woman. Bruises darkened the smooth curve of her cheek and her forehead. Her makeup had smeared slightly, and soot-colored smudges marked the skin beneath her eyes. He found himself wondering what color her eyes would be. He hadn't been able to tell in the brief moment she'd opened them. Probably blue, he thought, then stopped himself and cursed under his breath.

What difference does the color of her eyes make?

Jonah's gaze fell on the red silk jacket folded on the hearth. Armani, he remembered. Ruined Armani, most likely, but he didn't doubt she could afford a closet full of them, if the expensive car and watch were any indication.

That thought brought his mind to another. Why exactly had she been traveling in this weather? What was a woman driving an expensive car and wearing designer clothing doing out in the middle of nowhere?

He sat down in the recliner and studied her. The collar of her blouse had slipped aside to show deep purple markings already forming on her shoulder where the seat belt had done its job. He winced and rolled his own shoulders in sympathy. Yeah, she was going to be sore.

With nothing to do but wait her out, he leaned back in the recliner, reached for the dog-eared copy of *The Two Towers* laying on the table and read until exhaustion overtook him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah felt himself being nudged awake and tried to ignore it. In his dream, the beautiful damsel in distress he'd just rescued



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was slowly untying the laces of her corset and quoting poetry, vowing to show him her undying gratitude for his chivalry. When she leaned forward, her breath warm on his ear, he groaned softly. Then he scowled at her bad breath.

Jonah growled and shoved Chewie's paws off his chest. "Stupid mutt," he murmured, pushing the chair into an upright position. The book tumbled to the floor. He bent to pick it up and heard the woman moan softly.

He glanced at Chewie, who cocked his head. "Okay, I take back the stupid part." He tossed the book onto the end table but stayed where he was. He didn't think it would be a good idea to be looming over her when she opened her eyes.

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### **Chapter Two**

The first thing Katherine was aware of was the scent of burning wood. A memory flashed through her mind of herself as a little girl sitting beside the hearth in the huge kitchen, eating a homemade cookie and listening to her mother's cook tell stories. She could almost hear the crackling sound of burning wood, the muted thud of a charred log as it fell into the ashes below the grate.

The loud pop from the fire was not a memory. She forced her leaden eyelids open. Her head pounded with the effort, and she fought the dizziness as the stone hearth gradually came into focus. Warmth radiated from the flames dancing in the grate and gently caressed her face.

She turned her head slowly, very slowly, because even the slight movement made it throb, and let her eyes follow the stone chimney upwards. The smooth river rocks embedded in mortar formed a vertical path that climbed up to the vaulted ceiling. She studied the exposed wooden beams that ran across it. Had she somehow made it to the spa?

"Hello." The voice was soft and deep, and without a doubt, masculine.

Startled, Katherine turned her head toward the sound. The pain behind her eyes throbbed in response. She blinked hard and tried to focus. The man to whom the voice belonged leaned

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forward in a chair across from her, his elbows on his bent knees. For a moment, she simply stared at him.

He was barefoot, dressed in a weathered sweatshirt and faded jeans, and certainly didn't look like an employee of any spa she'd ever patronized. He looked more like one of the ruggedly handsome heroes on the cover of the romance novels she liked to read.

She blinked again and let her gaze travel around the unfamiliar room. It looked like a cabin of some kind, not too small but definitely not the posh resort to which she'd been headed.

Her gaze landed on the man again. He looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't remember where she'd seen him before. She wanted to focus, to remember, to think, to speak, but she couldn't seem to do anything other than let her eyes drift shut again.

"It's okay," his deep voice reassured her. "You're safe here."

Oddly comforted, she relaxed back into the blackness and slept.

When she managed to surface a second time, it was in a panic. She couldn't remember why, but a frantic feeling of helplessness overwhelmed her. Her vision grayed as everything around her became a spinning blur of white.

Katherine bolted upright and tried to stand, only to have her knees buckle beneath her. She threw her arms forward to brace herself as the floor rushed up toward her.

The impact never came. "Hey, take it easy." The strong hands that caught her gently lowered her back to a seated position on the sofa and held her steady. "It's okay. Sit back." Her stomach lurched at the sudden movement, and she pressed her lips tightly together in a desperate effort not to throw up. She rubbed her fingertips against her aching forehead.

"Are you all right?"

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The deep rumble of his voice sent involuntary shivers down her spine. She raised her head slowly as the nausea subsided, and met his gaze.

He crouched on the floor in front of her, his hands still on her arms. Gradually, her eyes focused on his face in the dim light of the fireplace. She'd knew she'd seen him before, but she couldn't force her scattered thoughts into order long enough to place him.

He had thick, dark hair, with ends that curled just above the collar of his sweatshirt. A beard shadowed the strong line of his jaw as if he hadn't thought to shave in a few days, or simply hadn't bothered to. Dark eyebrows furrowed slightly above eyes that were a deep brown, and currently filled with concern. Katherine stared into them, unable to tear her gaze away, and wondered exactly how hard she'd hit her head.

"Where am I?"

"This is my cabin."

She pulled away and fisted her hands in her lap to keep them from shaking. "Why am I here?"

He lowered his hands and rested his elbows on his knees. "I brought you here. I couldn't just leave you in your car."

She stared at him, her fuddled mind still trying to piece together what had happened. Why couldn't he leave her in her car?

He frowned slightly. "Stop looking at me like a deer caught in the headlights. I'm not going to hurt you."

*A deer in the headlights.* Oh, God. It hadn't been a dream. She pressed her hand over her mouth as the memories came rushing back in a flood. Rain that turned to sleet and covered the winding roads in a sheet of thin, slick ice. The huge buck that stood in the middle of the highway, the ice on his antlers gleaming in the beam of her headlights. His unblinking stare as she laid on the horn just before her little car careened out of control. The blur of white and loud snap of branches slapping the windshield when her car skidded and slid and spun. The final, abrupt crunch of her vehicle slamming into...something.

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"My car..."

"Is still at the bottom of the ditch," he informed her. "Can't get a tow truck up here until this weather lets up." He rose and slowly moved backward to sit on the edge of the coffee table across from her. "How're you feeling?"

Katherine gingerly touched her forehead. "Like I've been hit by a train."

"Actually, it was a tree," he said with a slight smile. "Or technically, a fallen tree trunk. You okay?"

She shifted her weight a little, tested her sore muscles. "I think so. My head hurts, and I'm a little sore."

"That'll probably get worse before it gets better."

If it was meant to be reassurance, it failed miserably. She frowned. "How bad is my car?"

"Your car's a little banged up, but I don't think it's totaled. Nice Beamer."

"Thanks." She raised her eyes to his again and suddenly remembered those dark eyes looking down into hers, the safe feeling of being in his arms as he wrapped something warm around her.

"You got me out."

He shrugged. "Seemed like a better idea than leaving you in the cold."

She wet her lips. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He held out his hand. "I'm Jonah Masterson."

"Katherine Winstead," she said, laying her hand in his. His hand was warm and wide, nearly covering hers, and she shivered as a little current shot under her skin.

Jonah smiled, then released her hand. "I know. I looked at your ID."

He moved away to grab a log from the wooden bin beside the fireplace. "I'd have called an ambulance, but I didn't know how long it would take them to get here." He laid the wood over the fire

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and picked up the poker. "With the roads this icy, you'd probably have been half-frozen by the time they got here, so I took a chance and pulled you out myself. The phones went out not long after I got you to the cabin. It happens a lot when the weather's bad."

Katherine turned toward the window and stared into the darkness beyond it. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip. Her mother had always admonished her about the habit, but she still had a tendency to do it when she was nervous. And if being stuck alone with a stranger wasn't reason to be nervous, she didn't know what was. She picked up a sofa pillow, hugged it against her chest and looked up at him. He stood on the other side of the coffee table. With his hands in the pockets of his jeans, he rocked on his heels.

"I have coffee. Or tea, if you'd like some."

Her head was pounding. Maybe something with caffeine would help, but she didn't think she could stomach coffee yet.

"Tea, if it's not too much trouble."

Jonah nodded. "It'll just be a few minutes." He stared at her for a moment longer as if he wanted to say something, but didn't. Instead, he cleared his throat and pointed toward the kitchen.

"Tea."

She forced a slight smile. "Please."

"I'll be right back."

Katherine watched him disappear into the kitchen. She took a deep breath and winced at the pain in her ribs and shoulder, then turned her head to look out the big picture window again. It was dark now, but she could see the snow piling up on the windowsill. All rational thought told her she should be frightened. After all, she had no idea where she was, and worse, neither did anyone else.

She was alone with a man she didn't know, a man who could easily take advantage of her if he wished. She considered the thought briefly, then discarded it just as quickly. That, of course, was ridiculous. If he'd wanted to hurt her, he could have done whatever he wanted while she was unconscious. Of course, it could

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be that he was just waiting to gain her trust so she would let her guard down, and then —

*That's your mother talking.* She shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. Just because Anne Fitzgerald Winstead mistrusted everyone on the planet didn't mean Katherine should. After all, the man had probably saved her life.

But she kept her eyes on the kitchen doorway anyway, watching for his return. She nearly jumped out of her skin when something cold and wet nudged her elbow.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the kitchen, Jonah flipped the burner on and set the kettle to boil. He told himself he was not going to think about how attractive she was. He'd admit she was pretty; there was no denying that. But he wasn't going to contemplate why he'd been ridiculously pleased that instead of the standard blue he'd expected, her eyes were the same dark shade of amber as the Jack Daniel's he'd dumped earlier. He wasn't going to think about the jolt that had rocketed through his system when she'd touched his hand, or the way her fingers felt so soft and cool in his palm. The fact that he'd been right about the dimples in her cheeks was bad enough, but there was no way he was going to consider why he'd felt such an intense pull toward her when they'd touched. Why hadn't he talked Viv into staying?

He pulled a cup from the cabinet, tapped a bit of Viv's tea into a steeper and dropped it into the cup. He placed the heels of his hands on the counter and leaned against it for a moment. While he waited for the water to boil, he stared out the window at the falling snow. His thoughts drifted back to Katherine, sitting on his sofa hugging a pillow. She looked like some sort of lost fairy, pale and fragile in the firelight.

A damsel in distress.

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Marian had been a damsel in distress, too. She'd looked completely forlorn as she tried to change her own tire in a short skirt and heels. He'd only stopped to help, and then she'd turned those huge blue eyes on him and smiled. She'd had dimples, and look where that had gotten him.

He pushed the unwelcome thoughts of his traitorous ex-fiancée aside as he remembered he hadn't asked if Katherine wanted cream or sugar in her tea. He stepped back through the doorway into the den. "The water's on to boil. Do you want—?" Jonah stopped in midsentence.

Katherine looked up at the sound of his voice. She was leaning forward on the sofa, both hands buried in Chewie's thick fur. She turned her head toward Jonah and grinned when the dog tried to lick her face.

If there was ever a completely irrational flash of jealousy, Jonah felt it just then. That he was envious of the attention a complete stranger was paying to his dog was ridiculous, but there it was. He was saved from further contemplation when Chewie decided to launch himself onto the sofa and tried to worm his way into her lap. Katherine squealed as Jonah lunged for him.

"Oh no, you don't, pal." Jonah grabbed him by the collar and hauled him down to the floor. "Sorry about that. I've tried to teach him the finer points of subtlety, but I don't think it took."

"He's wonderful," Katherine crooned. Chewie sat with his massive head on her knees, his eyes closed in bliss while she rubbed behind his ears. "I always wanted a dog."

"You never had a dog?" Jonah didn't think he'd ever been without one. He had a hard time imagining any child growing up without a dog.

"My mother didn't approve of keeping pets."

"Animal activist?"

Katherine smiled down at Chewie. "Hardly. The only thing furry allowed in my parents' house was my mother's mink."



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Chuckling, Jonah walked back toward the kitchen. He was at the doorway when he remembered he still hadn't asked how she took her tea. He glanced back over his shoulder. "Cream or sugar in the tea?"

"Both, please." She scratched Chewie behind the ear, and the dog let out a soft, growling moan in response.

It was completely and totally ridiculous to be jealous of a dog, Jonah reminded himself and went back to check on the tea. He plucked the whistling kettle from the burner and poured the steaming water over the sieve of tea and into a waiting cup, then added the cream and sugar.

On his way back to the den, he stopped by the kitchen's bay window to peer out into the darkness. The sleet had become heavy snow that was piling up on the windowsill. And most likely the roads, he thought with a frown. From the look of things, she wouldn't be leaving anytime soon.

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### Chapter Three

Katherine leaned forward on the sofa, propped her elbows on her knees, her chin on her fists, and stared into the fire. Chewie lay at her feet. Jonah's footsteps on the wooden floor startled her, and she jerked her head up.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to sneak up on you." He handed her the tea. "You okay?"

She relaxed, just a little, and sat up straight again. "Aside from the fact that my entire body hurts, yes."

"A hot shower would probably help." He switched on a lamp beside the sofa, knelt in front of her and held up one finger. "Follow my finger." She did so as he moved it slowly back and forth in front of her eyes. Apparently satisfied, he dropped his hand. "Look at me."

Katherine met his gaze. His eyes were so dark, and so warm, she felt an odd sensation, as if she were falling into them. Her breath caught, and her hands trembled slightly. The teacup she held rattled against the saucer, and she tightened her grip on it with both hands.

He moved back slightly. "Your pupils aren't dilated. That's a good sign."

She nodded. Of course. He was only checking for signs of a concussion. No reason to read anything into it. She took a slow, deep breath.

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"No dizziness? Lightheadedness?"

Katherine lifted the cup to her lips and smiled at him over the rim of the mug. "Is that your opinion of blondes in general?"

He chuckled. "I have two sisters. I learned early on to avoid random generalizations whenever possible, particularly regarding women." He moved to the recliner and eased his tall frame back on the leather cushions.

"Good to know. And, in answer to your question, no dizziness now. Just a headache." She fingered the bandage on her forehead before she took another sip from her cup. "This tea is wonderful. What kind is it?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I'll have to ask Viv. She said it would help with the soreness."

"Viv?" She glanced around the living room. Another woman in the house would have made her feel much more comfortable. "Your wife?"

Jonah stifled a snicker. "My aunt. She lives just up the road. She's the one who bandaged you up. I tried to talk her into staying, but she's got these dogs that are like kids to her. She won't leave them alone overnight."

Katherine stared down into the teacup. "I see."

"Look, if you're uncomfortable here with me, I can go up to Aunt Viv's to take care of the dogs and have her stay here with you. I don't think she'd mind."

She raised her eyes to his. It was a sweet offer, but she felt bad enough for imposing on him as it was. "I couldn't ask you to do that."

"It might be a few days before we can get your car out."

She shook her head. "I don't want to put you out of your own home."

Jonah appeared to think it over, then shrugged. "Well, you're welcome to stay here as long as necessary. As soon as the phones come back up, you can call someone, if you need to."

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She appreciated his attempt to ease her discomfort at being alone with him. "Thanks. I have a cell phone, but I think it was on the seat."

"I didn't see it when I got you out, but then again, I wasn't really looking."

"It's okay. I couldn't get a signal up here anyway. I had just tried to use it when..." Her voice trailed off, and she licked her bottom lip again.

"Well, the phone lines should be back up by tomorrow. They don't stay down long." He leaned forward in the chair. "Can I get you anything? Are you hungry?"

She shook her head and stretched a little. Her traumatized muscles were already beginning to stiffen and ache. "What I'd really like is that hot shower you mentioned."

"Bathroom's that way." He indicated the hallway behind him. "It's the first door on the right."

"Thanks, but..." She glanced down at the ruined suit she wore and realized she didn't have any dry clothes. "My suitcase is in the trunk."

"I was a little more concerned about getting you out of the cold than searching your car." He started to rise. "If you'd like, I can go back—"

"No, not in this weather. It can wait."

"You sure you don't need your phone? Isn't there someone who'll be worried about you?"

It reassured her that he seemed so concerned about notifying her family. She considered his suggestion for a moment before shaking her head. "No. I'm supposed to be on vacation. I told my family I would be incommunicado this week. No phone calls, no email. My mother would drive me crazy otherwise." She sighed and turned to look at the darkness outside the window.

"Okay. I'll go back down and look for your phone in the morning. In the meantime, if you'd like a shower, I'll see about finding something for you to wear tonight."

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He disappeared down the hallway. When he returned, he held out a pair of blue flannel pajamas imprinted with black-and-white cows jumping over bright yellow crescent moons. Katherine looked down at them, then up at him. "Umm...thank you."

"They're my sister's," he explained. "Leah's a bit on the eccentric side." She pressed her lips together. "Okay."

Jonah stepped back, feigning insult. "They were a gift from me."

Katherine took them from him and bit back a grin. "Then I'd say eccentricity must be a family trait."

A wave of dizziness hit her as she rose to her feet, and she swayed slightly. Jonah grabbed her shoulders to steady her. "You sure you're all right?"

She rubbed her fingers over her forehead and closed her eyes until the spinning stopped. His hands were still on her shoulders, her flesh warming at his touch. The scent of his soap, something clean and masculine, filled the air around her. "Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry. I just...got a little dizzy when I stood up."

She inched back and hugged the pajamas to her chest. "Bathroom?"

"In there," Jonah said, indicating the direction with a nod of his head. "There should be soap and shampoo and other girl stuff in there. My sisters leave it here for when they visit. Clean towels are under the sink."

Katherine nodded, stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. The lock was one of those simple punch-in buttons that could easily be sprung with a straightened paper clip, but she locked it anyway. It gave her some sense of security, false or not. She laid the pajamas on the counter and bent down to get a towel from the cabinet below.

Her head spun again, and she had to grip the counter with both hands for balance. Taking a few deep breaths, she sat back on her heels and waited for the room to stop whirling.

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She rubbed her temples and tried hard not to be irritated at her situation. This was supposed to be a simple trip to a luxury spa, a week of rest and relaxation. Now her beautiful little car was wrecked, her favorite Armani suit ruined, and she doubted the spa would give her a refund. Not to mention she was stuck in a cabin in the middle of nowhere with a complete stranger.

Granted, he was an absolutely gorgeous complete stranger. Not that it should matter to her. He was definitely not her type. Sexy, maybe, in a way that made her think of a brash knight on a white steed, riding to her rescue. Or an old western romance hero from one of her novels.

She preferred the cultured, well-bred men. Didn't she? Besides, she was practically engaged to Stephen Shackleford IV. It was just a matter of her formally accepting his proposal. Stephen may not make her blood sizzle, but according to her mother, he was a smart match.

So why was it that even now, she could still feel the warmth of Jonah's hands on her shoulders and smell the musky, masculine scent of him? She wasn't at all attracted to him. *Was she?*

*Head injury*, she reminded herself. Besides, having some sort of feelings for one's rescuer was simple psychology. She'd read enough romance novels to know exactly how common that plot device was.

She rose and looked in the mirror, laughing a little. She must have banged her head a lot harder than she thought if she was comparing her life to a romance novel.

But now was not the time to contemplate any of this. She peeled off the still-damp blouse and skirt, and it occurred to her as she removed her underwear that although he'd given her clothing, she had no clean lingerie.

Wonderful. There wasn't much she could do about it at this point. She just hoped Jonah wouldn't be considering whether or not she was wearing panties. And he'd have to get over hers drying on the towel rack, because she certainly wasn't going without them

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tomorrow. She turned the water on hot and stepped into the shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

As he wandered back into the living room, Jonah heard the spray of the shower and tried not to think of those long legs wet and soapy. Her suit jacket was still lying on the hearth. He picked it and her overcoat up and went to hang them in the entry. Giving in to impulse, he lifted the jacket to his nose. The scent she wore was soft and feminine, subtle and just sexy enough to make him think of things he knew he shouldn't. He straightened the jacket, hung it with her coat on the rack, then scowled.

A woman's things, particularly her fine, designer clothing, looked oddly out of place next to his battered leather bomber jacket on the plain wooden pegs.

Perhaps that was why he had chosen to come here, to the cabin. There were no little feminine touches to remind him of his ex-fiancée, Marian.

Before their breakup, Marian had already begun redecorating his brownstone in New York City. Well, redecorating wasn't exactly the word he'd use, since it previously had no décor to speak of. Marian had chosen floral wallpapers and sheer, feminine curtains. She'd even put frilly pillows on the bed. He hadn't minded so much at first, since they were engaged, but after their breakup, the changes she'd made were a constant reminder of her betrayal.

For several weeks after he'd thrown her out, Jonah tried to work at home, but he couldn't seem to break through the block as long as he was completely surrounded by memories of her. There wasn't a room he could enter that didn't have some girly touch she'd added, something to remind him of how much he'd thought he loved her.

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When he'd decided to get out of New York for a while, he called his sister Leah, an interior designer by trade, to redecorate his entire home while he was gone. She could dispose of Marian's selections as she saw fit, as long as they were gone when he returned.

With one duffel bag of clothes, his laptop and his dog, he'd climbed into his SUV and headed south.

The much-needed solitude of the last three months had been a blessing so far. He'd hiked with Chewie and chopped firewood on warmer days, and spent colder ones pecking away on his laptop. During one brief warm spell, he had finished the deck and added a hot tub. He was considering renting the place out when he wasn't occupying it, and the hot tub might increase its appeal, not to mention that it was a great way to relieve stress at the end of the day. Writing had come a bit more slowly, but he had a few ideas in the works now. He'd pitched a new book idea to his current agent, who had encouraged him to get started on it right away.

He'd stopped thinking about Marian. Well, almost. At least he'd come to realize he hadn't really loved her. He'd loved the idea of loving her, but he'd never really loved her. In some ways, it helped knowing he'd escaped that web before he'd become completely enmeshed.

Women had always been a weak spot for him. He wasn't ashamed to admit he had a healthy appreciation for the female form, but it was more than that. It wasn't just the sex, but like any other red-blooded male, he felt that certainly had its place. He simply loved women. He loved the way they looked, soft and curved and beautiful, and the sweet scent of perfumed skin. He loved the softness of them, loved to run his hand through silky hair, his fingers over satiny skin. He was intrigued by the way they bonded with each other, the way they could size people up in a matter of minutes, and that little smile they'd use that said they were privy to secrets no man ever would know or begin to understand.



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But for all his love of the fairer sex, Jonah had never been a womanizer. With two sisters, he'd learned to appreciate women without using them, to enjoy them without abusing them. When he did have a lover, the relationship was exclusive. He may have been a fairly amicable man, but there were some things he simply didn't share.

After he'd broken off his engagement, his mother chided him for always giving his heart far too easily. His sisters said he always trusted the wrong women.

His best friend Jack simply called him a sucker. Again.

He glanced over his shoulder at the closed bathroom door. He couldn't allow himself to be distracted by yet another damsel in distress, not with his pride just beginning to heal and a deadline only a few days away.

Resigned, he sighed again.

*Why did she have to have dimples?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Feeling more than a bit uncomfortable with the idea of wearing no underwear—*Mother would be appalled*—Katherine ran a hand through her damp hair and ventured into the living room. She knew she looked a fright, but it couldn't matter much, considering the flannel pajamas had to be the least sexy thing she'd ever had on her body. With her hair wet and no makeup, she seriously doubted she was going to inspire any lustful thoughts in her host. Which was a good thing. *Wasn't it?*

Chewie sprawled in front of the fire like a huge, furry rug and didn't bother to raise his head when she padded past him barefoot. She found Jonah in the kitchen. A bottle of wine sat open on the counter, and he was stirring something in a saucepan at the stove. He had removed the sweatshirt and now wore only a fitted T-shirt. The muscles of his shoulders and back flexed as he moved.

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Her pulse kicked up a notch when he acknowledged her with a quick smile over his shoulder before he went back to stirring.

Why didn't Stephen look like that in a T-shirt? Did Stephen even own a T-shirt? Or a pair of jeans, for that matter? And why didn't a smile from Stephen make her pulse race?

She shook her head in an attempt to rein in her thoughts. Didn't it just figure? The first man to ever raise her heart rate, and here she was with no panties, no makeup, wet hair and borrowed flannel pajamas covered with moon-jumping cows.

*Good grief.*

"I thought you might be hungry. I heated some soup." He nodded toward the wine. "I had the wine in the fridge, but there's soda and iced tea if you'd prefer."

Katherine picked up the bottle and noted it was a very good vintage. She wasn't going to turn it down. "Can I help with something?" She looked around. "Glasses?"

"Above the sink." He pointed with the spoon.

She poured the wine into two goblets and placed one beside him on the counter. Jonah spooned the soup into a bowl on a plate, added a slice of crusty bread and set it down in front of her as she took a seat at the small wooden table.

"It's chicken noodle."

She looked down at the steaming bowl in front of her. "It looks homemade."

He looked at her over his shoulder as he filled his own bowl at the stove. "It is."

"You cook?"

He sat opposite her. "It was either learn to cook or learn to live on frozen dinners." He scowled. "I like to eat and I hate frozen dinners."

Stirring the hot soup to cool it, Katherine inhaled the enticing aroma rising from the bowl. Her stomach growled in response, and she realized she hadn't eaten since lunch. She

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plucked a paper napkin from the holder in the center of the table and laid it in her lap.

She lifted the spoon to her mouth, sipped tentatively. The soup warmed her down to her toes, the salty flavor and perfect blend of seasoning sating her hunger. She was really starting to wonder if she was having some kind of psychotic episode. The man was drop-dead gorgeous *and* he cooked.

"This is wonderful," she all but purred.

Jonah smiled. "Thanks." They ate in silence for a while before he spoke again. "So, what were you doing out in this weather?"

"The weather wasn't bad when I started out," she remarked, almost defensively. "It wasn't even raining."

"Welcome to the Blue Ridge Mountains," he quipped. "The weather sneaks up on you."

Katherine laughed softly and swallowed another spoonful. "In answer to your question, I was going to Serenity Spa. I'm supposed to be on vacation this week." She wondered if it sounded as pretentious to him as it did to her. She saw his jaw twitch slightly and decided it probably did.

"I've heard it's nice."

"So my mother says. I've never been there. I'm not much into that sort of thing. I was just going to spend a long weekend at a beach somewhere, but Mother insisted on booking me an entire week at her favorite spa."

Jonah gave her a quizzical look, his spoon poised in midair between the bowl and his mouth. "If it's your vacation, why are you going where she wants you to go? Why don't you go where you want to go?"

A logical question. *Why, indeed?*

Because she didn't have the guts to stand up to her mother, that's why. *No panties, no makeup and no spine.* That about summed her up. Gently stirring her soup, she contemplated her

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answer. "I don't know," she said finally. "I guess I didn't want to hurt her feelings."

He shrugged but must have sensed her discomfort because he didn't press. She was glad. She simply didn't have the energy to defend herself.

"So, what happened out there? Did you take the curve too fast or something?"

Katherine shook her head. "No, I was driving slowly. I couldn't see very well, and I guess I took a wrong turn. I came around a curve, and there was this huge deer standing right in the middle of the road. I laid down on the horn, but he just stood there, staring at me like he dared me to hit him. I tried to swerve, but..."

"Ran off the road instead," Jonah finished for her.

She nodded. "The car just started skidding, and I couldn't stop it. I couldn't remember if it was turn in the direction of the skid, or in the direction opposite the skid. I tried both." She picked up her wineglass, embarrassed at the way her hands shook as she remembered the feeling of helplessness. "I couldn't stop."

"It wasn't your fault," he assured her. "I'm just glad you weren't hurt worse."

She picked up her spoon again, but her appetite was suddenly gone. She ate a little more of the soup, because she didn't want to hurt his feelings, and only drank half the glass of wine. He didn't push for conversation, but, oddly, the silence wasn't uncomfortable.

When she rose to carry her bowl to the sink, Jonah stood and took it from her. "I'll get that. You should get some rest." He placed the bowls in the sink. "Come on. I'll show you to the guest room."

Katherine followed him, too tired and sore to keep up conversation. He pushed open a door and gestured her in, his other hand still on the doorknob. "This is the room my sisters use when they visit. I just changed the sheets." He nodded toward the clothes folded on the antique dresser. "I dug out some of Leah's sweats for you to wear until I can get your suitcase."

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She turned to face him. "Thank you. For everything. I know I'm putting you out—"

He waved a hand to cut her off. "You're welcome. If you need anything, I'm down the hall."

Their eyes met and held, and this time the silence stretched uncomfortably. Jonah swallowed. How was it possible for a woman to look that sexy in flannel pajamas? At least those long legs were covered.

He only hoped she didn't see in his eyes what he was feeling just then.

She smiled, and her dimples briefly appeared. Obviously, she didn't. "Thank you. You're a nice man, Jonah Masterson."

He forced himself not to grimace. He'd been called *nice* far too many times for his liking. What it usually meant was, *I find you pleasant company, but you just don't do it for me.*

"Nice," he repeated with a shake of his head. Her smile disappeared, and the dimples with it.

*Uh-oh.* That certainly hadn't been his intention. He gave her a mischievous smile. "How do you know I'm not an axe-murderer?"

Her lips twitched slightly. "How do you know I'm not?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I guess we should both lock our doors." Katherine laughed. As much as he loved the sound of feminine laughter, it had never hit him like a punch in the gut before. He'd have to consider that. Then she flashed those dimples again, and his fist tightened on the doorknob.

*Get out.*

Her grin widened.

*Now.*

"Goodnight," he said, and stepped into the hallway. "Sleep well." "Thank you."

"Katherine," he added, "close your door, unless you want to share the bed with Chewie." *Or me,* he thought and mentally squashed the idea immediately.

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He heard her laugh as she shut the door, and was again a little surprised at the intensity of his physical reaction to it. What the hell was wrong with him?

*Nothing*, he assured himself. It was normal and healthy and fully expected that he'd respond to an attractive woman, especially after his months of self-imposed celibacy. Too bad this one was a guest, an injured guest, he reminded himself, and therefore off-limits, but that was nothing a cold shower wouldn't fix. Jonah walked into the guest bathroom to retrieve her wet towel, only to find her damp lingerie dangling discreetly on the towel rack behind the door.

Unbidden visions of the prim and proper Katherine Winstead with those scraps of white silk and lace girding her hips and covering her breasts danced through his mind. For once, he wished his writer's imagination wasn't quite so vivid.

Then another thought occurred to him. She'd washed out the underwear she'd been wearing, which meant that she hadn't been wearing any at all while she sat across the table from him. Thank God, he hadn't known that at the time.

He grabbed the damp towels and tossed them into the washer as he passed the laundry room on his way to his bedroom. In the master bathroom, he turned the water on cold, stripped and stepped under it. It was going to be long night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Katherine lay on the bed, wide awake, and stared at the ceiling. Her body was sore and bone-tired. The hot soup and wine had relaxed her, and the bed was sinfully comfortable, but her mind refused to shut down long enough for her to drift off.

Jonah's simple question echoed in her head. Why *had* she agreed to go to the spa? She hated spas. She hated the idea of total strangers slathering her body with all manner of disgusting

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substances in the name of beauty. She didn't even like getting a pedicure.

What she'd really wanted was a few days of sand, sun, and salt water. So why had she let herself be maneuvered, yet again, into something she didn't want to do?

She sat up and hugged her knees to her chest. How many times had she allowed her mother to manipulate her this way? So many that she didn't even notice it anymore? How much of where she was in life was due to her mother's machinations rather than her own choices? Was she really that easy to control?

She didn't even want to think about Stephen, or the panic that seized her whenever she pictured herself walking down the aisle to marry him.

Leaning back against the plump pillows, she stared at the ceiling again. How could one simple question from a man she barely knew make her suddenly doubt everything about her life?

## **Snowbound**

### **Chapter Four**

Jonah heard the sound of Chewie's massive paws clawing at his bedroom door and decided to ignore it. He closed his eyes tighter in an attempt to go back to his dream, the one in which a beautiful, dimpled blonde was slowly peeling off gaudy flannel pajamas to reveal sexy, white lace lingerie. She turned her back to him as she unhooked the bra, smiling demurely over her shoulder. His eyes slid down her back, and he realized the dimples in her cheeks were matched by a second set at the base of her spine, just above the lace of her thong. He felt his mouth go dry.

The annoying scratching continued. Jonah opened his eyes and stared blankly at the ceiling. Waking up with his body aching for a woman he'd just met was uncomfortable enough. Two erotic dreams about her in less than twelve hours couldn't possibly be a good sign.

He rubbed his fingers over his gritty eyes and glanced at the clock. Nearly 7 a.m., which meant he'd gotten less than four hours of sleep. It wasn't the first time he'd lost track of time while writing and stayed up until after three in the morning.

"I'm getting too old for this," he murmured, and pulled the pillow over his head. The scratching at his door persisted. "Go away, Chewie."

Chewie continued pawing the door, now adding whining for effect. Growling to himself, Jonah threw back the covers and



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stomped across the room. "Listen, pal, I was up until after three last night. When are you going to learn to use that damn doggie door?"

He flung open the bedroom door and stepped into the hallway at the precise moment Katherine emerged from the bathroom. She stared at him, those topaz-colored eyes raking over him. He looked down and realized he was wearing nothing but a pair of blue knit boxers that did nothing to hide the condition in which he'd awakened. It didn't help that she was standing there holding the very lingerie he'd just been dreaming about.

Her cheeks reddened. She cleared her throat. Her mouth opened as if she intended to speak, but then snapped shut. She turned and darted into her bedroom.

Jonah muttered a curse, spun back into his room and kicked the door shut. He fell onto the bed and pulled the pillow over his head. The dog would just have to use the doggie door or wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

Katherine closed the door behind her and leaned against it, groaning in embarrassment. Clearly, Jonah wasn't a morning person. Maybe he didn't notice that she had been blatantly staring at him, but good grief, what was a girl supposed to do? The man was gorgeous fully clothed. Nearly naked, he'd taken her breath away.

His coppery skin was stretched taut over a muscled chest. A dusting of dark hair trailed down over the rippling abs and disappeared into the waistband of his boxers. When he'd looked at her with that scowl on his face, her knees had nearly buckled.

Good Lord, what was getting into her? Her heart had lodged itself firmly in her throat, and the little currents that had skittered just under her skin were an entirely new experience for her.

Since when had the sight of a scowling, scantily clad, muscular male made her hormones do a happy dance? For that matter, when had her hormones *ever* done a happy dance?

## Snowbound

*Never*, she thought to herself, because physical attraction wasn't what was important in a relationship. Her mother had taught her early on that one chose a life partner based upon similar backgrounds, interests and goals, not chemistry.

Clearly, her mother had never seen a well-built man in boxers.

Katherine put a hand to her chest, as if the gesture would somehow slow her pounding heart. For heaven's sake. The man was her host, and she had no business forming any sort of fantasy around him.

She forced her inappropriate thoughts of Jonah aside and changed into her clean underwear and the sweats he'd left out for her. When she gathered the courage to venture into the hall, she saw Jonah's door was still shut. She refused to contemplate whether or not he slept in the boxers, and she wasn't about to knock on his door to find out.

After letting Chewie out, she dug through the kitchen cabinets until she found the makings for coffee and started a fresh pot. While it brewed, she wandered to the den. The fire had died down, the remains of the embers still glowing beneath the grate. It would have been nice to start another fire, but she had no idea how. Her experience with fireplaces was limited to flipping a wall switch to turn on gas flames. She decided it was best to leave that alone, lest she burn down her host's home, and turned to peruse the bookshelves built into the walls on either side of the stone fireplace.

She hadn't noticed the books last night, but then again she'd been a bit out of sorts. Everything from Shakespeare to science fiction, she mused, running a finger along the spines. He had quite an extensive library of fiction. Classics, adventure, mysteries...and it amused her to see the rather large collection of romances novels. Most likely his sisters' books. Most men would rather die than be caught reading a romance.

## Susan Greene

She scanned the names on the bindings, passed over ones she'd read before. After selecting a romance by one of her favorite writers, she went back to the kitchen and poured a fresh cup of coffee. Then she settled on the sofa and opened the book.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah rolled over and looked at the clock. He'd managed to sleep another two hours, and if he'd had his way, he would have slept the rest of the day. Since he had company, he figured the least he could do was get up and make breakfast. That meant he had to get dressed, which just annoyed him again. It was his cabin, damn it, and if he wanted to walk around *naked*, he should be able to. Why the hell hadn't he talked Viv into staying, or at the very least trading places with him for a while?

Because he was a sucker, that was why.

He stared out the window, mentally measuring the inches of snow that covered everything in a thick layer of white. He reminded himself that he needed to split some more of the wood he'd stacked beneath the deck. That led to thoughts of Katherine, in front of a roaring fire, wearing nothing but the white, lacy lingerie. He sighed and went to take another cold shower.

Feeling only slightly better afterwards, he dug through his drawer and yanked on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. He raked his fingers through his damp hair and contemplated shaving but decided against it. He wasn't going to go out of his way to impress this woman. She'd be gone in a few days, and as far as he was concerned, the sooner the better.

He poked his head into her room as he passed it, somehow not surprised that she'd made the bed. The pajamas lay neatly folded on the pillow. He found her in the den, curled into the corner of the sectional sofa. Her knees were drawn up, a book resting on her thighs, her head leaning against the sofa cushion.

## Snowbound

There was a half-empty cup of coffee on the table beside her, and Chewie was curled on the floor next to the hearth.

She'd changed into the sweats he had given her and pulled her hair back into a loose ponytail. He resisted the rather juvenile urge to give it a tug and told himself not to wonder whether she was wearing the lingerie that had hung on the bathroom towel rack.

Apparently engrossed in the book, she didn't look up as he approached her from behind. Jonah peered over her shoulder to see what she was reading. He was a little flattered that it was a book he'd written, until he realized she was sound asleep. And she was only on page fifteen.

He sighed deeply. "There is nothing so agonizing to the fine skin of vanity as the application of the rough truth," he muttered to himself. The quote from Edward Bulwer-Lytton echoed in his head as he went to the kitchen to cook breakfast.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah had finished frying the bacon and was working on scrambled eggs when she wandered into the kitchen. He knew before turning around that she was behind him. He hadn't heard her, just...*knew* she was there. Uncomfortable with the little prickling feeling that skittered down his spine, he rolled his shoulders and shifted his stance.

Katherine walked over to dump her cold coffee into the sink beside him and laid the book she had been reading on the counter. He glanced down at it.

"Good book?"

"Very good, so far."

Suppressing a smile, he nodded. "There's fresh coffee, if you want some. I'll have breakfast done in a minute."

"Thank you." She reached for the pot to refill her cup.

Susan Greene

She was standing so close Jonah could smell the fresh scent of her shampoo. He wanted to turn his head and bury his face in her hair. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Hard as a rock. You?"

He closed his eyes momentarily, really, *really* wishing she wouldn't make references like that. "I stayed up pretty late. I've a deadline coming up." He hadn't written much, because no matter how hard he'd tried to ignore it, his body had made him well aware that she was sleeping in the next room, wearing no underwear. He glanced at her sideways and cleared his throat. "Listen, I apologize about earlier. I was kind of out of it."

Her dimples winked when she smiled back at him. "It's okay. Now I don't have to wonder." She turned, leaned her backside against the counter beside the stove and blew on her coffee.

Jonah gave in and slid her a sidelong look. "Wonder?"

Katherine sipped from the cup. "Whether you wear boxers or briefs."

With a chuckle, he turned back to the eggs. He supposed he deserved that. He couldn't decide which was worse: Katherine seeing him in his shorts or his being embarrassed about it because she so obviously wasn't. When he looked at her again, her tawny eyes twinkled at him, and her lips curved into a smile.

And those dimples. *Geezus*.

At least she was trying to find some humor in her situation. He bit the inside of his lip to keep from smiling, or was it to keep himself from giving in to an urge to explore those dimples with his tongue? His fist tightened on the spatula he was using to stir the eggs.

"Well, that's good. Wouldn't want that question keeping you up at night."

Her smile widened. "You're blushing."

"Am not," he said, and spooned the eggs onto a plate.

## Snowbound

"I think it's sweet." *Sweet*. That was another word Jonah had heard way too often. He was thirty-two years old, and women were still calling him *nice* and *sweet*, just as his sisters' friends had in high school. God forbid, she'd be calling him *cute* next.

Jonah handed Katherine an empty plate and set the eggs and bacon on the table. He poured himself a cup of coffee and joined her. "How's your head this morning?"

Katherine brushed a fingertip over the cut. She had left the bandage off, and Jonah could see the bruising around the cut. "It's better. No dizziness, just a little throbbing from time to time. Whatever was in that tea really helped."

She had to be in more pain than she was willing to admit. He'd seen the marks on her shoulder from the seat belt, and the one on her cheek was darker this morning than it had been last night. He hated seeing anyone hurt, but bruises on a woman's delicate skin always tugged at him hard.

He gripped the mug handle to keep from reaching over and skimming a finger along her hairline, or worse, sliding his fingers into that silky blonde hair and pulling her to him.

"Good," he said, his voice a little strained, and reached for a slice of bacon instead.

Katherine unfolded a napkin and laid it in her lap, just as she'd done the night before. He fought a smile. Those society manners were deeply ingrained, no matter what the setting. She'd probably been to some fancy finishing school.

"I realize I'm really imposing on you by being here. I promise as soon as I can get out of your way, I will."

"I told you you're welcome to stay as long as you need to. I just can't promise I'll be much company. I tend to be rather solitary when I'm working."

Katherine angled her head. "Don't you get lonely way up here?"

More so than he was willing to admit. He shrugged. "I don't notice it much."

Susan Greene

"Is that part of the reason you live here? To be alone?"

He munched a bite of bacon and smiled. "I don't live here."  
Katherine gave him a puzzled look, so he explained. "I come here when I need to get away for a while."

"Where do you live?"

Jonah poked at his eggs with a fork. "New York."

"State?"

"City."

She nodded at this bit of information and concentrated on her breakfast. She had almost finished her eggs before she spoke again. "I have a hard time imagining you in New York City."

Jonah angled his head. "Why's that?"

Katherine lifted a shoulder, let it drop. "I don't know. You just seem to..." She waved a hand around the room. "*Fit* here."

He laughed. "Meaning right now I probably look as scruffy as a mountain goat." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I forget about things like haircuts when I'm up here."

"You said you were on sabbatical. What do you do?"

"I teach," Jonah told her, and moved his chair back. He stood and took the coffee pot from the counter. "More?"

"Please." She slid her cup over.

He refilled it and then grimaced as she added several spoons of cream and sugar.

She stirred her coffee. "Thank you."

He wrinkled his nose. "How can you drink coffee with all that stuff in it?"

"I like it this way."

He filled his own cup and sat down. "It ruins a perfectly good cup of coffee."

"It's too bitter without it. I like things sweet."

Jonah remembered she'd just called him sweet, and tried not to read anything into it.

Katherine picked up her cup. "So, what do you teach?"

"Literature and English."

## Snowbound

She looked surprised, which, for some reason he couldn't name, amused him. "High school?"

"Columbia University." Jonah grinned at her shocked expression, then rose and picked up his plate. Before Katherine could ask anything else, Chewie wandered into the kitchen.

"Watch him," Jonah warned with a nod toward the dog. "He's a Class-A mooch."

She started when the dog nudged her under the table. Well, nudge was hardly the word for it with a dog his size. It was more like a shove. She nearly fell out of her chair.

Jonah snapped his fingers. "No, Chewie. Go on."

With a sad, sidelong look, the dog obediently lumbered to the door and scratched. Sighing, Jonah opened the door.

Katherine eyed the dog. "Why doesn't he use that little door when he wants to go out?"

Jonah shrugged. "I think he's scared of it, the big chicken."

She laughed, and it surprised him again how her laugh could make his blood just a little hotter.

"Chewie," Katherine said thoughtfully. "That's an odd name. Did he chew things up when he was a puppy?"

"No. I mean, he did. All puppies do, but I named him that because he reminded me of Chewbacca." When Katherine blinked, her expression puzzled, he raised an eyebrow. "You know, Chewbacca. Chewie. *Star Wars*?" She shook her head. "Han Solo? *The Millennium Falcon*?" She slowly shook her head again.

He frowned, moving toward the sink.

"Don't tell me you've never seen *Star Wars*."

"All right. I won't tell you."

Jonah picked up the pans he'd used to cook and placed them into the sink, then turned to regard her. He hadn't planned to say anything, considering the pampered way she probably grew up, but he couldn't let that pass.



Susan Greene

"What kind of childhood did you have, woman? That has to be some form of abuse, depriving your kid of the best science fiction movie of all time. Geez."

Katherine stifled a chuckle behind her napkin, and his eyes narrowed. "What?"

"You said *geez*."

He scowled and turned his attention back to the sink, twisting the faucet on. "I was trying to be polite."

"I thought it was cute."

He rolled his eyes skyward. *Good Lord*. There it was. The dreaded *cute*.

The odds were not looking good.

*Since when are we calculating the odds?* he asked himself. He studied her for a long moment. He'd found her attractive last night, even soaking wet, bruised and bloodied. Now, in the light that streamed in from the kitchen's big bay window, he could see he was wrong. She wasn't just attractive. She was beautiful. Her hair was pulled carelessly back, stray wisps of bangs angling across her forehead. She wore no makeup, and needed none. Her amber eyes, now regarding him coolly, were set off by long lashes and elegantly arched brows. And when she smiled at him like that, he felt something inside his chest tighten. And she'd called him *cute*.

He muttered a curse as he turned back to the dishes.

"What?" she asked.

"Cute," he repeated with disdain, turning to look at her over his shoulder. "You called me *cute*."

Katherine raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"Puppies are cute. Kittens are cute. Babies are cute. Grown men are *not* cute." He turned around and took her plate, placing it in the sink a little harder than he'd intended to. Water splashed onto the counter, but he ignored it.

Behind him, Katherine laughed. "I'm sorry, but I've never known a guy to get offended at being called cute."

## Snowbound

He regarded her over his shoulder. "And how many times have you actually said that to a man's face?"

She pressed her lips together. Whether she was thinking or trying not to laugh, Jonah couldn't tell. "Probably none," she admitted.

"That's why you've never known one to be offended." He squeezed liquid soap into the running water.

"I'll do that," Katherine said, moving closer to the sink.

"You're company." He nudged her aside.

"You cooked. I'll clean. It's only fair. It's not like I'm invited company." Katherine reached for the dish sponge at the same time Jonah did. His hand closed over hers. It was small and soft and fit just exactly inside his.

She turned her head and their eyes met, her lips inches from his. *Too damn close.* "I'll do it," he said, backing up a bit. Averting his eyes, he wrested the sponge from her fingers and nodded toward the window above the sink. "It's still snowing. Might be a while before we can get that tow truck up here. I'll go back down in a minute and get your things from the car."

"Can I help?"

"No need for both of us to trudge down that hill. Why don't you go back in the living room and restart the fire?"

Katherine slid the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip. A completely innocent gesture, he was certain, but he couldn't stop the brief mental image of his own tongue gliding over that perfect mouth. *Ice. Cold shower. Snow. Think cold thoughts. This woman is not for you.*

"I thought of that earlier," she said, "but we've always had gas logs. I don't know how to start a real fire."

Jonah inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. *The hell you don't.* "It's okay. I'll do it before I go back down to your car."

"I'd really like to help," she insisted.

"Can you cook?" he asked. Katherine nodded. "Then you cook dinner. I've got to work a while today. I'm up against a

**Susan Greene**

deadline." He reached for a dishtowel. "In the meantime, go relax. Take a nap or something. I'm sure you're still pretty sore."

"Deal." She picked up the novel she'd been reading earlier. "I really wanted to find out what happens in this story anyway."

He nodded toward the book in her hand. "You like romance?"

Katherine shrugged. "Okay, so it's not exactly classic literature. Call it a weakness. Realistic or not, I'm a sucker for a good love story, and J. Kincade is one of my favorite authors."

Jonah allowed himself a smug smile as she left the kitchen.

## Snowbound

### Chapter Five

Katherine walked back into the den, the book in one hand and her mug of coffee in the other. She put both on the coffee table and sat on the sofa, dropping her head into her hands. God, had she really made that ridiculous boxers-or-briefs comment?

She had been hoping he wouldn't bring it up, because the sight of Jonah standing almost naked in the hallway was something she was desperately trying not to think about. She'd barely been able to eat the breakfast he'd cooked, and it had been even harder to have any kind of civil conversation, since the image of him, rumpled and sexy and wearing nothing but those boxers kept flashing through her mind. A little shiver ran down her spine, and she raked her fingers through her bangs.

*Stop it!* she ordered her rebellious hormones. She had no right to think that way about him, in any case. She was only a temporary, uninvited guest in his home, and as soon as her car was fixed, she'd leave and never see him again. So what if he was attractive? She might be on vacation, but that was no reason to let good common sense be overruled by some fleeting chemical attraction. She had a great career, and a very suitable man had offered her a proposal of marriage. Her life was already mapped out.

*If you're so sure, why haven't you accepted his proposal? If your life is so perfect, what are you doing going on this little trip to begin with?*

## Susan Greene

Katherine knew at some point she'd have to answer the questions, but for right now, she chose to ignore them. Cuddling into the corner of the sofa, she opened the book and lost herself in the story.

\* \* \* \* \*

After finishing the dishes, Jonah rebuilt the fire before he trudged out into the snow to retrieve Katherine's suitcase and another bag he assumed was a laptop computer. On the porch, he stomped the snow off his boots and stepped inside. He set the bags in the foyer, unzipped the side pocket of the suitcase and dropped her car keys in it before removing his coat. Katherine looked up at him over the back of the sofa as he bent to untie his hiking boots.

"Got your bags."

She smiled, and he felt his stomach muscles tighten just a little. He was going to have to be very, very careful, or that smile could become a serious addiction.

"Oh, you found my computer, too! Thank you."

Nodding, he leaned against the wall with one hand to toe off his boots. "You're welcome. I couldn't find a cell phone anywhere. I looked under the seats, in the glove compartment and in the console. If it fell out of the car when I was getting you out, it's buried under a foot of snow now."

Katherine sighed, then shrugged. "No one is expecting me to call."

"I'll look again when the snow stops. I put plastic over the broken window last night to keep the snow out. It should stay dry enough until we can get a tow truck up here."

"I broke a window?"

"I broke a window," he admitted, "to get the door unlocked. Sorry."

## Snowbound

"For heaven's sake, don't apologize." She rose from the couch, closed the book and laid it on the table. "You might very well have saved my life."

Jonah dismissed the notion with a brief shake of his head. He picked up the suitcase and changed the subject. "You travel light for a woman."

"I thought you avoided random generalizations," she reminded him as she followed him into the hall.

"I didn't think that was a generalization. I've never known a woman who could pack everything she needed for a week into one bag."

When he laid the suitcase on its side across an armchair in one corner of the room, a paperback slid out of the unzipped pocket and tumbled to the floor. Even facedown, Jonah recognized the cover. It was an older romance, one of his, that had recently been rereleased. He bent to pick it up and bumped his head against Katherine's as she did the same.

He backed up, rubbed his head and looked up at her. Her fingers were against her forehead, her eyes closed. Without thinking, he ran his fingers along her hairline, then brushed the bruise on her cheek. Her skin was soft under his fingertips, and he jerked his hand back. "Damn. That had to hurt. Are you okay?"

She blew out a slow breath and opened her eyes. "Yeah. I think so."

"Why don't you lie down for a bit? I've got some work to do anyway."

"Thanks, but I think I might take a shower and get my own clothes on, now that I have them." She tugged the paperback from his hand.

Jonah let it go and watched her slip the book back inside the suitcase. He found himself wondering if she had any more of that sexy lingerie packed in that bag. *Don't go there*, he reminded himself and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Suit yourself. I'll be upstairs in the loft."

## Susan Greene

"Jonah," she called after him as he walked toward the door. He glanced back. "Thanks."

With a brief nod, he pulled the door shut behind him and retreated to his study. Maybe the heroine of his current novel would have a penchant for lacy thongs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Katherine indulged in a long, hot shower and changed into her own clothes, a pair of casual khaki slacks and a soft pink cashmere sweater. She read for a while on the comfortable sofa, totally engrossed in the romantic tale, until Chewie's scratching at the door interrupted her.

She went to the kitchen door to let him out again. The clock over the stove showed it was well past noon. Jonah hadn't come down from his study in the loft, but she hadn't been bothered by the time alone. In truth, it had been nice to just relax and read a good book. But she was starving, and she figured the least she could do was take him some lunch.

She dug through the refrigerator, found ham and cheese, and made sandwiches for herself and Jonah. Carrying his on a plate, she headed up the stairs.

"I brought you some lunch," she said quietly as she stepped into the loft.

"You didn't have to do that." He turned in the chair to regard her through his wire-framed glasses.

Katherine's heart skipped a quick beat. How could a man look so adorably sexy in glasses? He was such a contrast; rugged mountain man one minute, quiet professor the next, and it was disconcerting that she found both equally appealing. The way he was looking at her just now had her stomach fluttering with a thousand feathery-winged butterflies. Fighting the urge to lay a hand over it to calm them, she cleared her throat.

"I was hungry, so I thought you might be, too."

## Snowbound

"Thanks. I appreciate it. I get involved in whatever I'm working on and forget the time."

He smiled, and the butterflies seemed to multiply by fission. "No problem. I'll just...I'll go back downstairs and let you finish." Without waiting for a response, she retreated back down the stairs to eat her own sandwich and try to regain some semblance of composure.

After lunch, she read a while longer before giving in to the temptation of a nice, long nap. When she finally awoke, it surprised her to find the sky had darkened. She jumped up, remembering that she had agreed to fix something for dinner. And she was starving. One thing about her situation, it hadn't affected her appetite at all.

She went into the bathroom, ran her brush through her hair, hastily pinned it up with a clip and ventured into the hall. Except for the faint sound of music from upstairs, the house was quiet. Chewie sprawled across the rug in front of the hearth, only lifting his head to watch her cross the floor. With a sleepy doggy groan, he let his head drop to the floor and closed his eyes again.

She didn't find Jonah in the den or the kitchen. Assuming he must still be working in the loft, she figured there was no reason to disturb him until she had dinner ready.

She didn't get the opportunity to cook often, but she had always enjoyed doing so when she could. As a child, she'd loved hanging out in the kitchen of her parents' home. The aromas rising from simmering pots, the pungent scents filling the air as fresh herbs were chopped on the butcher block, the clamor of pots and pans, and the chatter of the kitchen staff were fond childhood memories. Her mother's cook, Rosa, would sneak her sweets and instruct her on the proper use of spices while she worked. She had taught Katherine several basic recipes, including an awesome homemade marinara.

She was able to locate a can of tomato sauce, one of stewed tomatoes, and some spices in Jonah's cabinets. It wasn't quite the



## Susan Greene

same as making it from scratch, but it would do. She set a pot of water on the stove to boil and got to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Katherine tasted the sauce one last time and nodded in satisfaction. Not the best she'd ever made, but it was pretty darn good. Jonah still hadn't come down from his study. She hated to interrupt his work, but she had cooked dinner, as promised.

She paused at the top step. He sat at his desk, his back to her. His long fingers skimmed the keyboard of his laptop with skilled ease, and she wondered, just briefly, if they moved that skillfully over a woman's body. Shoving that addling little thought aside, she concentrated on the music emanating from speakers on either side of the screen. She smiled when she recognized it as a big band tune from the forties.

As she stepped onto the landing, his hands froze above the keyboard. He turned in his chair, blinked and slid his fingers under the glasses to rub his eyes.

"What time is it?" he asked before glancing at the computer screen to answer his own question. "It's after six. I lost track of time. I didn't mean to abandon you."

"It's okay. I had a nice, long nap."

He smiled. "Good."

She flicked her tongue over her bottom lip and stepped closer to the desk. "Do you always listen to music when you work?"

"Usually." He removed the glasses, much to her chagrin, and laid them aside.

"Glen Miller," she noted, and his smile widened.

"You like swing?" Jonah turned up the volume.

Katherine recognized *In the Mood* and grinned. "It reminds me of my granddaddy. He loved to dance."

## Snowbound

He rolled the chair back from the desk and stood, holding out a hand. "What about you, Ms. Winstead? Do you dance?"

"A little," she lied. She'd learned to dance as soon as she could walk, her little feet on top of her grandfather's big shoes, her tiny hands held in his. The family reunions on her father's side were one of her fondest memories. They had always included a live band. By the time she was eight, she could waltz, tango, fox trot, polka and swing dance. She could probably still remember most square dance calls.

Jonah caught her hand in his and twirled her. Then he swung her into his arms and out again. She fell in step and followed his lead perfectly. The song played out, and the music slowed to a bluesy rendition of *Moonlight Serenade*.

She found herself pulled against him. His hand on her lower back guided her into a slower dance. Katherine was so surprised at how smoothly he moved that it took her a minute to realize she was pressed against just over six feet of solid, muscled man. She didn't forget for long though. One of her hands rested in his palm, his strong fingers closed over hers. Her other hand lay against his broad shoulder, and she had to curl her fingers to keep from sliding them up into the dark hair that teased his collar.

"Just a little?" he asked.

She shrugged, trying to appear as nonchalant as possible, but it was rather difficult the way her pulse was racing. It was the head injury, she assured herself, not the proximity of the man in front of her that was making her head spin. "My granddaddy was an excellent teacher."

"Apparently you were an excellent student."

"You're not so bad yourself."

He turned her in a slow circle. "My mother taught us. She used to make me practice with my sisters. Since there were two of them and only one of me, I got double practice time."

"My granddaddy told me never to marry a man who didn't dance. He said a man who can't dance has no sense of romance."

## Susan Greene

Katherine smiled up at him and then allowed herself the luxury of leaning her head against his shoulder, just for a moment. It was as much a defensive move as anything, because if she'd continued to look up at him she thought she might have to take a bite out of that sensual mouth. She closed her eyes and wondered not for the first time exactly how hard she'd hit her head. It must have been worse than she thought to have her thinking such inappropriate thoughts about a man who was only trying to be nice to her.

Jonah spread his hand on her back. Her sweater was soft and warm beneath his fingers, and the woman under it warmer still. Katherine laid her cheek against his shoulder, and her hair tickled the side of his neck. Her hips moved in perfect time with his.

It had been an impulse, dancing with her, but a damn good one. She felt so good in his arms, so soft under his hands, and he didn't think it was possible to get enough of her scent.

He held her close and indulged himself by inhaling slowly. She smelled of the floral shampoo, the soft fragrance he'd noticed on her jacket and, oddly, Italian seasoning. Shoving to the back of his mind the sudden and slightly twisted little fantasy involving Katherine and the creative use of marinara sauce, he leaned back and looked down at her. A hint of a smile curved his lips.

"You smell like oregano."

Her amber eyes flew open wide. "Oh, God! Dinner!" She pushed herself out of his arms and bolted down the steps.

*Damn*, Jonah thought, silently lamenting the loss of her warmth in his arms as he followed her to the kitchen, where she was frantically searching cabinets while bubbles boiled over the sides of a pot.

"Colander?" The request was more demand than query.

Rather than try to explain where it was, Jonah bent and pulled it from a lower cabinet. She yanked it from his hand, dropped it into the sink and grabbed the pot. He chuckled as she dumped the pasta through the strainer, set the pot aside and then dumped the strained spaghetti into the pan of sauce. She was

## Snowbound

fussing to herself in a low voice, and moving so quickly he was afraid if he stepped into her path she'd plow him down.

He leaned a shoulder against the doorframe and watched as she stirred the pasta, still muttering to herself. "I've heard talking to plants helps, but I didn't know it applied to spaghetti."

Katherine scowled at him over her shoulder. "I don't think it's helping. Crap. I overcooked the pasta. You'll be lucky if it's edible."

"It smells great." He opened the fridge. "I have a bottle of merlot in here somewhere." He dug it out and moved to the drawer for a corkscrew. "You didn't have to do this, you know."

She lifted the pot off the heat and regarded him. "We had a deal."

Jonah poured two glasses of wine. "I was just trying to get you out of my kitchen," he teased. "I wasn't sure if you cook the same way you drive." She shot him a playful glare, her eyes narrowed. "I didn't really intend for you to cook. Sometimes I get so involved in what I'm writing, I forget everything else." He took out two plates and set them on the counter, then pulled a loaf of bread from a cabinet.

"As long as I'm imposing on your hospitality, I intend to at least try to make myself useful," she informed him and picked up a plate.

Jonah opened another drawer to retrieve silverware and gave her a teasing smile. "How are you with laundry?"

"Great. I send mine out twice a week, faithfully," she said, and shoved a plateful of spaghetti into his hand.

He cocked an eyebrow and dropped a fork on her plate. "Windows?"

"XP. Pro. I'm not one of those people who hold Microsoft in disdain. DOS is positively archaic."

Jonah laughed out loud. It had been a long time since he'd simply enjoyed the company of a woman, particularly one that could one-up him with wit.

**Susan Greene**

“Let’s eat by the fire,” he suggested.

With a shrug, Katherine picked up her glass and followed him to the den.

## Snowbound

### Chapter Six

"So why were you going on vacation alone?" Jonah asked as he refilled her wineglass. They sat on the floor in front of the sofa, their empty plates on the coffee table. Katherine raised her goblet in thanks before she sipped the wine. It had been a long time since she'd indulged in enough alcohol to give her even the slightest buzz, but she definitely had one now.

She was surprised at how much she was enjoying Jonah's company. That he was pleasant to look at aside, she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so comfortable in the presence of a man. She had no idea how long they'd been sitting and talking in front of the fire, and she couldn't have cared less. If it should have bothered her that he was a stranger, she couldn't for the life of her remember why.

"A friend was supposed to be coming with me, but her baby got sick, and she had to cancel at the last minute. It was supposed to be a week of girl talk and relaxation," she finally answered, then cast him a sideways look. "Did I mention I hate spas?"

"Then I'll ask again. Why were you going to one?"

"Because my mother decided it would be good for me and booked the trip. One does not argue with Anne Fitzgerald Winstead."

"It's your vacation," Jonah countered.

Susan Greene

"You don't know my mother. She can be very persuasive." The wine was definitely going to her head, and she didn't care. "I needed some time away to think. She wants me to get married."

He blinked. "Just in general, or to someone specific?"

Katherine rolled her eyes. "Oh, she's picked him out all right. Stephen Conrad Shackelford the Fourth."

"I thought the days of arranged marriages were history."

"I wish," she grumbled. "I mean, she's not going to force me to marry him, but she practically has the wedding already planned."

"I take it he's agreeable?"

"He asked," Katherine muttered, glancing down at her bare left hand.

If Jonah had any reaction at all to that bit of news, he didn't show it, but he did cast a puzzled glance at her ringless finger.

"Congratulations."

Katherine threaded her fingers through her hair. "I haven't accepted yet. I'm not sure I want to marry him. Mother is still trying to convince me he's the perfect match for me."

"Don't you think that should be your choice?"

She looked at him. "I've dated him on and off for over a year, and he's a nice guy, but..."

"You wanted some time to think it over."

"All I wanted was a week with no pressure. I wanted to think for myself, relax and read a few good books. I love to read, and I rarely have time." Lowering her voice to a hushed, secretive tone, Katherine cast him a sideways glance. "My mother doesn't approve of romance novels."

Jonah sipped his own wine. "Why?"

"She thinks they're silly and a waste of time. She's done her level best to discourage me from reading them since she caught me with my first Harlequin at fifteen."

"A waste of time, huh?"

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"Yes. She swears there's no such thing as love at first sight or overwhelming passion. According to her, it's all overdramatized emotion and lurid sex designed to do nothing but sell books. She says there is no such thing as all-consuming love."

Jonah sat back against the sofa. "And what do you think?"

Katherine stared at the wine in her glass, turning the goblet slowly between her fingers. "I don't know." She lifted her shoulders and let them drop. "Just because I've never experienced it myself doesn't mean I don't like to think it's a possibility."

Jonah turned to face her. "What about Stephen Shackleford the Fourth?" He paused. "Do you love him?"

She heaved a sigh. Stephen was a nice enough guy, but he had certainly never rocked her world. "I don't know."

"Then it's probably wise to take some time to consider it. It's a big step."

"And one I only intend to make once," she stated firmly.

"But how would I know? I've never been in love before."

"I think you'd know."

"My mother says one shouldn't make an important decision like marriage based upon emotion, but I can't imagine living with someone I don't feel passionate about. I care about Stephen. It's just...I've never felt that spark, you know?" She held up her glass, watching the flames through the rosy liquid.

"And yet you still believe it exists."

"I have to believe it. Because if passion doesn't exist, then it's possible that real love doesn't exist, and without that, what's the point?" She sighed into her wineglass. "Maybe it's me," she continued with a small chuckle. "I asked her once, when I was about eighteen, if there could be something wrong with me. She laughed. Can you imagine? I was so embarrassed. Mother told me there was no such thing as a kiss that makes your bones melt, or sex that registers on the Richter scale."

Katherine sighed. "Maybe she's right."

He lifted one eyebrow in question. "Meaning?"



Susan Greene

"Maybe I'm just not capable of feeling that kind of passion. I've never been a very passionate person."

He smiled. "Or maybe you just haven't met the right person."

She downed the last sip of her wine as she stared into the fire. "I don't know why I'm telling you this. I'm sure it does wonders for your image of me." She put the glass down next to his and raked her fingers through her bangs, pushing them out of her face. "I sound like a hopeless romantic."

"There's nothing wrong with being a romantic. I happen to be quite fond of romance myself." He leaned over to refill her glass. The scent of him sent a ripple of heat through her. *This is not good*, she thought, and moved away slightly.

"What do you do when you're not reading romance novels and running from your overbearing mother?"

"I'm a graphic artist."

"An artist?"

She nodded. "Magazine ads, web pages. I've always loved to paint, but that's not a very lucrative career for most. So I adapted."

"My mother paints. Sort of weird abstract stuff that I've never really understood, but she paints. Both of my older sisters are artists, too. Well, one is a sculptor. Reba does these amazing little gargoyles. They're pretty cool. There's a lever you press in the back of its head that opens the mouth, and you hide a key under its tongue. She sent me one. Ugliest little bastard I've ever seen, but it's come in handy a time or two when I forgot my keys. Leah is an interior designer in New York. She's redecorating my place while I'm gone."

"What about your father?"

"My dad does carpentry. He learned from my grandfather. He's an incredible craftsman. He makes furniture, mostly, but between the two of us we managed to expand this place." He cast a glance around the room. "Dad helped me build the bookcases and add on the extra rooms."

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He sounded so proud of them all, and Katherine felt a slight twinge of jealousy. Her own family had never been close. "Sounds like a wonderful family."

"They are. They get on my nerves sometimes, but they're great."

What must it be like to have a family who understood you and loved you and accepted you the way you were? What must it have been like to grow up in a house where people actually encouraged you to do the things you loved and to try new things? She pushed the comparison to her own childhood away, wanting to know more about him. "And you?"

"I'm just a college professor. I write some. I've never been much of an artist."

"Don't knock it. Writing is art," Katherine said. "It's just painting with words."

Jonah cocked his head. "That's what my mother says, too. I guess I never really thought of it as art. But I couldn't draw, I'm only a mediocre carpenter, and I was hopeless as a sculptor." He sipped his wine. "So your mother talked you out of painting as a career."

She nodded. "I wanted to major in art, but Mother didn't approve. She convinced me it was a totally unmarketable degree. Art wasn't a worthy career of a Winstead. It was far too bohemian for her taste. So I got a degree in graphic arts from Meredith instead."

Chuckling, Jonah sipped his wine. "But you chose a field in which you could still be artistic." He shifted his position and rested his elbow on his knee. "Makes perfect sense to me."

Why hadn't that ever occurred to her before? "I suppose."

"Meredith, huh? Was that your mother's idea, too? Sending you to an all-girls' school?"

"Of course. She didn't want me distracted from my studies. I was accepted at Carolina, which is where I really wanted to study, but Mother insisted on Meredith. Where did you go to school?"

Susan Greene

"Oh." He hesitated. "Princeton."

*Princeton?* She wouldn't have guessed that in a million years.

"You went to Princeton?"

"Don't look so shocked. It's bad for my ego."

"I'm just a little surprised. You don't seem like the Ivy League type."

"I'm not," he said, "but a scholarship's a scholarship. My parents weren't exactly rich, and the opportunity was there."

"You went to Princeton on a scholarship?"

He looked a little sheepish. "Yes."

"You must have been a really good student."

"I wasn't, really. I've just always had a knack for memorizing things, so I test well. Came in handy because I hate to study."

Katherine took a moment to absorb this new information, sipping her wine thoughtfully. "An English major, I presume?"

"Comparative Literature," he corrected.

"And you write."

"Yes."

"Do you publish in the academic journals?"

"Only as much as necessary." He rose to collect the empty plates. "Mostly I write for my own enjoyment."

"What do you write?"

"Novels."

Rolling her eyes, Katherine picked up the wineglass and followed him to the kitchen. "What kind?"

Jonah shrugged and laid the dishes in the sink. "Fiction."

"Gee, that narrows it down," she muttered, leaning a hip against the counter. "You're published?"

"Yes." Jonah opened the refrigerator, pulled out another bottle of wine and held it up with a questioning look. Katherine looked down into her glass, then lifted a shoulder in a gesture that said *sure, why not?*

"Anything I might have read?"

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"Maybe." He set the bottle on the counter and picked up the corkscrew. While he deftly uncorked the wine, she noticed his hands again. The man had wonderful hands. Strong, capable hands. She'd never given much thought to a man's hands before, but Jonah's seemed to draw her attention, not to mention that they conjured up all kinds of interesting thoughts as to what he could do with them. *Inappropriate thoughts*, she reminded herself, wondering not for the first time what had gotten into her.

He leaned over to fill her glass, filled his own and abruptly changed the subject. "Have you always gone by Katherine? Why not Kathy or Kate or Katie?"

"My mother hates nicknames."

He leaned back on the counter. "So why did she give you a name that lends itself to about ten?"

"Good question. But it's always been Katherine. No one's ever called me anything else."

He tilted his head to one side and studied her. "I think you look like a Katie."

She shook her head emphatically. "No."

"Sure. It's the dimples."

"God, no. Anything but Katie."

"I bet you were a cheerleader."

She angled her head. "Captain of the debate team."

"Captain Katie." He nodded. "It suits you."

"You don't know me well enough to say what suits me. Call me Katie at your own risk, pal."

Jonah laughed. "All right." He paused, then grinned. "Katie."

She lifted her glass. "You changed the subject. We were talking about your books." That sexy, rakish grin firmly in place, he touched his glass to hers without comment. "Why won't you tell me what you write? You use a pseudonym?"

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Jonah nodded. "Yes, and so far, I'm blissfully anonymous. I like it that way." He pushed himself away from the counter and walked back into the living room.

Katherine absently rubbed at the sore spot on her forehead and followed. It was highly possible that three—or *was it four?*—glasses of wine on top of a head injury might not be a good thing, but at least she wasn't in pain. "You don't want people to know who you are?"

"I like my privacy."

"I can't argue with that." She smiled and raked her gaze over the books on the shelves. She selected a book and flipped it open to the author's photo on the dust jacket. "I guess you don't put your photo on your book jackets."

Jonah sighed. "Do you ever give up?"

Grinning, she shut the book and shelved it. "Maybe you're not a quiet professor-slash-writer at all," she teased. When he moved to add another log to the fire, she found herself staring at his jean-clad rear end. The man *looked* good in jeans. Since when did she find a barefoot man in jeans sexy? Of course, he'd looked pretty good in boxers, too.

He turned and looked at her, and she felt the heat rush to her cheeks. She cleared her throat. "Maybe you really *are* a psychotic axe-murderer."

Jonah made a tisking sound. "What gave me away?"

"It was the boxers."

"The boxers?"

She nodded. Why had she brought up the boxers again? She was losing her mind and didn't really care. Or maybe she was just drunk. What difference did it make anyway? "Didn't you know? All murderous psychopaths wear boxers." She waited a beat before delivering her punch line with a shrug. "They have to cover their axes somehow."

Jonah laughed and choked on his wine. He swallowed, coughed and tried not to spill what was left in his glass.

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Katherine giggled. Where had that come from? It certainly wasn't her habit to make jokes about men's underwear, but she had to admit she loved making him laugh.

"That was really bad," he told her. "Smartass."

"Better than being a dumb one," she deadpanned, and lifted her wine to her lips.

He grinned. "Can't argue with that."

Good Lord, the man had a gorgeous smile. A sweet, sexy, devastating smile. How could his smile make her stomach flip like that? Maybe it was the wine. She swallowed hard and poked him in the chest with a finger. "Yeah, well...you better just watch it, buddy, because I've got you pegged."

"Do you?"

"Absolutely." She lowered her voice and leaned forward a bit. "Don't think I haven't figured out that the deer is in on it."

Jonah regarded her curiously. "The deer?"

"The one in my headlights. You've trained him to run women off the road so you can play your knight-in-shining-armor role and rescue them. Then, of course, they're so grateful to you for saving their lives, they end up granting you sexual favors to repay you for your chivalry."

"Damn." Sighing, Jonah slouched down on the sofa. "None of the other women caught on to my evil scheme. I'm ruined. Devastated. My evil plot is in tatters. I'll have to shoot that buck." He looked up at the stone chimney rising toward the beamed ceiling. "I could mount him over the fireplace." He held up his hands, thumbs forming right angles as if framing something, and peered through them. "What do you think?"

Katherine bit her lip and gazed up at the chimney before she turned to Jonah. "Well, I'm not one to judge the lifestyles of others," she quipped, desperately trying to keep a straight face, "but if you're into that sort of thing, wouldn't it be easier if he was on the floor?"

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It took Jonah a full five seconds to process her words before he burst out laughing. "Touché. Captain of the debate team, indeed. I'm not too proud to admit when I'm outgunned."

"A rare and admirable quality," she said, and raised her glass in salute.

He rose from the sofa and reached for the glass as she brought it to her lips. "Nope. No more wine for you. You have a head injury."

"Hey, I'm not done with that." She tried to keep a grip on the glass, but when his fingers brushed hers, the hot current that shot under her skin made her release it instantly.

"Yes, you are." Leaning closer, he looked into her eyes.

Her breathing quickened, and her pulse raced. For one glorious moment, she thought he was going to kiss her. Then he shook his head and stepped back. She slowly expelled the breath she hadn't realized she was holding and wondered why she felt so disappointed.

He picked up his glass from the table. "We should probably go to bed."

When she raised an eyebrow, he winced. "Okay, that came out wrong. Our separate beds. I didn't mean...I wasn't coming on to you."

He headed into the kitchen, but Katherine lingered behind, watching him with folded arms. Why hadn't he kissed her? He sure looked as if he wanted to, at least for a moment.

*Come on to us, please!* her hormones begged.

Jonah turned to look back at her. "What?"

"I'm trying to decide if I should be grateful you're a gentleman, or offended that you're not coming on to me."

He cradled the glasses between the long fingers of one hand and leaned on the doorframe. "It's self-defense. Smart women scare me. I have a very fragile ego." He turned away to carefully deposit the glasses into the sink.

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He didn't see her gaze rake over his broad shoulders and then proceed down to admire his butt again. "Nothing fragile about you," she muttered.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Huh?"

She smiled innocently. "I said I agree with you. I'm a little sleepy." *I'm drunk and I'm temporarily insane. If you make a pass at me, I'm going to jump you.*

*Make a pass, please!* her hormones pleaded again.

"What you are, is drunk." He sounded a little displeased.

"I am not drunk," she lied.

"Could've fooled me." She watched him rinse the glasses, then wipe his hands on a towel. "Why don't you go to bed? I've got a few things to finish upstairs."

"All right, then," she said as she strolled out. She decided she might just be sick and tired of gentlemen. "Good night, Jonah."

"Sleep well," he called after her.

She stole one more glance at him and sighed. *Sleep well*, she thought. *Yeah, as if.*



## Chapter Seven

By morning, the phone lines were once again working, and Jonah called a local auto mechanic to pick up Katherine's car. Zeke Cahill promised he'd be there as soon as he could, but he couldn't give him an exact time because there were four other vehicles he'd have to tow in first.

That done, Jonah offered Katherine the use of his phone to call her mother. He overheard her leave a simple message telling her that she was fine and that her cell phone wasn't working. She promised to call again before the end of the week.

Viv called Jonah to check on Katherine and to apologize for not coming down the day before. After Jonah assured her that the younger woman was fine, Viv began asking uncomfortable questions about his houseguest. Brushing off her blatant attempts at matchmaking, he thanked her again for her help and hung up.

The day passed much like the first. Jonah spent most of it in his loft office. He came down for a quick lunch of sandwiches and more of his homemade soup, sitting with Katherine while he ate, and then returned to the loft. After lunch, she stretched out on the cushy sectional, pulled the quilt over herself and read until she fell asleep with Chewie beside her like a furry sentry.

When Jonah came down the stairs that evening, she was still napping on the sofa. The book she'd been reading lay open in her lap, and he picked it up. A mystery this time. Not one of his, but a

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good one, nonetheless, and he carefully marked her page before placing it on the coffee table. She was curled into the corner of the sectional. Her hair was down, and it swung forward to curve under her chin.

He felt bad that he left her to fend for herself most of the day, but she hadn't given the slightest indication that his inattention bothered her. She'd fixed their lunch again and entertained herself with his books and CD collection.

Marian had always bitched about the time he spent writing. She complained that he spent more time with his hands on a computer than on her. But Katherine seemed perfectly content to amuse herself.

He smiled as he remembered how she'd felt in his arms when they had danced, the heat he felt from her as he pressed her against his body. There was passion there, all right, but she kept it firmly banked. What would happen if she let even a fraction of it slip? Did she have any idea what kind of fire she was capable of igniting in a man?

Maybe he could make her see that her mother was wrong and that she had every right to want, and insist upon, a marriage to someone who would love her the way she deserved to be loved. In every sense of the word.

He'd come close—too damn close—to kissing her the night before. She'd made him laugh, and it had been a long damn time since he'd felt like laughing. And she was so beautiful standing there giggling at her own joke, her whiskey-colored eyes glinting in the firelight, her dimples creasing her cheeks on either side of that pretty little mouth. All he'd wanted to do was cover it with his own and drink in the taste of her.

But one good look in her eyes had told him she was in no state of mind to make a rational choice, and he'd forced himself to pull back. She'd told him she was practically engaged, and there was no way in hell he would do to another man what Marian had done to him, no matter how attracted he was to her.

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Leaning over her, he touched her shoulder. "Katie," he said softly. "Wake up."

Katherine stirred but snuggled further into the cushion. Jonah chuckled and pulled back the quilt. "C'mon, Sleeping Beauty. Dinner time."

She groaned, stretched and opened her eyes. "Aurora," she said.

"Huh?"

"Sleeping Beauty wasn't her name. It was Aurora. The story was called Sleeping Beauty."

Jonah's lips curved. "So you're an expert on fairy tales, too?"

She sat up, slid her legs around and put feet on the floor. "Of course. They're the natural precursor to romantic fiction, don't you think?"

He hadn't thought about it, but it made perfect sense. "Your mother allowed you to read such nonsense?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Heavens, no. Rosa, our cook, used to tell me stories when I'd sneak into the kitchen to visit. And by the way, the prince didn't just shake Aurora's shoulder and say 'wake up.'"

Jonah leaned back. "I figured having only known you for two days, kissing you awake might not have been the best move. Besides, what if I turned into a frog?"

Katherine laughed and smacked him with a sofa pillow. "A kiss from a princess turns a frog into a prince, not the other way around. Don't you know anything about fairy tales?"

"I don't know. Maybe someone should write a story about a guy who's a frog trapped in a prince's body and has to find some girl frog to kiss him and make him a frog again before he can reclaim his title as Lily Pad King or something."

She raked a hand through her hair, brushed it back from her face and studied him silently for a moment. "You're an unusual man, Jonah."

He grinned. "So I've been told. Hungry? I'm starving."

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"I could eat."

He stood, offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet. As she rose, he suddenly realized he'd misjudged the distance between the sofa and the coffee table. The space was far too narrow for both of them to stand at the same time. Jonah caught her around the waist to keep her from falling, but in the effort to hold on to her, he lost his own balance.

He fell onto the sofa, inadvertently pulling Katherine into his lap. One of his arms encircled her waist, and his other hand still held hers. He looked down at her to ask if she was all right, but the expression on her face robbed him of speech. She was in his lap, the rounded curve of her hip between his thighs. A bit too late he realized that his physical response to her closeness was more than evident to her, what with her cute little butt right between his legs, but what the hell was he supposed to do about that?

"Sorry," he muttered.

For a moment she simply stared at him. Her mouth opened as if she wanted to speak, but no sound would come. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, but whether that was because she was startled or for another reason, he didn't know. All he knew was that she was too close. He had only to lean forward a few inches, and his mouth would be on hers. He didn't think she would resist, but the look of pure shock in her wide amber eyes froze him in place.

Practically panting, she shifted her weight, flung herself off him and disappeared into the bathroom. His erection strained against the denim of his jeans as if trying to follow her, virtually screaming *Come back!*

Refusing to let his hormones get the best of him, Jonah dutifully ignored the incessant pleas for mercy from inside his jeans. Instead, he went into the kitchen, took the leftover spaghetti out of the fridge and proceeded to heat up dinner.

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## Susan Greene

Katherine sat down on the closed toilet lid and dropped her head into her hands. What in the world had gotten into her?

She'd fallen into his lap quite by accident and, to be honest, the hardness she'd felt against her hip hadn't been totally unexpected. He was, after all, male, and she was sitting right between his legs. In truth, he'd looked a little embarrassed about it.

No, it wasn't his reaction that bothered her. It was her own. When she felt him harden against her, she'd been ridiculously flattered. Then, in a flash, she had been insanely turned on. Her pulse had leapt wildly, her skin heated from the inside out, and her breath had clogged in her lungs. The second she had realized that wonderfully hard presence was because of *her*, her body had gone into overdrive, and every nerve ending stood at complete attention and screamed *Yes. For God's sake, what are you waiting for?*

The mental image had come unbidden. Her legs astride his lap, his hands roaming over her naked body, grasping her hips and pulling her against him.... She shook her head to clear it. The vision had nearly sent her over the edge before he even touched her. Terrified he'd somehow been able to read her thoughts, she had bolted from the room.

Of course, that was ridiculous. There was no way he could have known what she was thinking and in any case, his desire had been far more apparent. It was just a physical reaction. A male/female thing. It didn't mean anything.

She stood, bent over the sink and splashed a little cold water on her face. Using a small towel, she patted her cheeks dry and checked her reflection in the mirror. A little flushed, maybe, but what could she do? She smoothed back her hair and tugged the hemline of her sweater a bit straighter.

There was absolutely no reason for her to be embarrassed about it. He probably had no idea what she'd been thinking, and since she had no intention of acting on it, there was nothing to worry about.

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Jonah stirred the spaghetti in a pot on the stove. Considering what she'd had to work with, the marinara was a miracle. And he'd always felt spaghetti was better the second day, after the pasta had soaked up a good bit of sauce.

He could have used the microwave, but he preferred to reheat leftovers the old-fashioned way, unless he was in a big hurry, which he almost never was. He dropped the spoon in the pot, switched off the burner and stepped over to the fridge. He considered pulling out another bottle of wine but decided that for tonight, he'd stick with iced tea. He didn't want her to think he was trying to get her drunk again, especially after that little incident on the sofa.

It all happened so quickly that there was no way to prevent his reaction, nor was there any hope of hiding it. And he *had* apologized. It wasn't as if he had any intention of taking her right there on the sofa.

*Oh, but you considered it,* his rebellious Y-chromosomes reminded him. *No, you considered it,* he argued mentally.

*She wants you. You know she does. You saw it in her eyes. You felt her pulse pounding in her wrist, under your fingers.* He closed his eyes tightly. No, he wasn't so oblivious that he didn't see her eyes darken or notice her breathing become shallow.

His fist closed tighter over the handle of the tea pitcher. But she'd bolted. That was reason enough for him to keep his hands to himself, wasn't it?

*Don't be a moron.*

*Since when is being a gentleman moronic?* he thought, then realized how utterly ridiculous it was to have an internal conversation with one's DNA. Setting the pitcher on the counter, he reached into the cabinet for the dishes.

Katherine walked into the kitchen and smiled nervously, showing just the barest hint of those dimples. She was still slightly

Susan Greene

flushed, but she was clearly trying to act as if the incident hadn't occurred. If that was what worked for her, then he could play by those rules.

*She wants you*, the voice in his head crooned.

*Gentleman*, he reminded it.

*Moron*, came the response.

Ignoring the voice, Jonah spooned spaghetti onto the plates and offered her the first one. "Hope you don't mind, but I love leftover spaghetti."

"Of course not." She took the plate and moved to the table. "It's always better the second day."

"My thoughts exactly." He handed her a glass of tea and slid into the chair across from her. "I talked to Zeke earlier. He ran into some trouble with another tow that took most of the afternoon. He's planning on coming to get your car first thing tomorrow."

"Oh. Thanks." She poked at the spaghetti with her fork but didn't take a bite. "Hopefully he'll be able to fix it quickly, and I can get out of your hair."

Jonah raised his head to look at her. "In a hurry to leave?"

"Well, no, it's not that," she said. "It's just that I've been in your way for two days now, and I feel like—"

"Katie," he said quietly.

"What?"

"You're not bothering me, except when you're insisting that you're bothering me. Are you uncomfortable being here?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Are you enjoying yourself? Getting some rest?"

"Of course, but Jonah—"

"Do you think there is anything either you or I could have done differently to avoid this situation?"

She thought a moment, shook her head and opened her mouth to speak. He cut her off before she could. "Katie."

"What?"

He grinned. "Shut up and eat your dinner."

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Suppressing a smile, Katherine dug into her spaghetti.

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Jonah looked over at Katherine as he spooned the coffee grounds into the filter of the coffeemaker. She had insisted on doing the dishes, and since she'd seemed so concerned about being in his way, he decided to let her. Now, as she rinsed the last plate and set it in the drainer to dry, she rolled her head from side to side, stretching her neck muscles.

"Sore?" he asked, and flipped the switch that would set the automatic timer on the coffeemaker.

"A little." She wiped her hands on a towel, folded it and draped it over the edge of the sink. She turned to face him and smirked at his disbelieving look. "Okay. Yes. I'm really sore. All over."

He was quiet for a moment, then smiled. "I think I have just the cure for that," he announced, and disappeared from the room.

She followed him to the living room, where he held up a hand for her to stay put. He ducked into the room in which she had been sleeping. She heard him open and close a few drawers before he emerged a moment later and tossed a balled-up piece of fabric at her.

Katherine plucked it out of the air, shook it out and held it up. She looked at him in disbelief. "A bathing suit?"

"Just put it on. It's my sister's, and she's about your size, so it should fit. Throw the sweats on over it for now and grab a pair of shoes. Something you can kick off quickly. And put your hair up." He was back down the hallway and behind his own closed door before she could protest.

*Swimming? In this weather? What on earth was he thinking?*

Sighing, Katherine went to her room and dug the sweats out of the drawer. Before going into the bathroom, she grabbed a pair of slippers from her bag.



## Susan Greene

After she wriggled into the suit, she frowned at her image in the mirror. There were still deep bruises on her shoulder and across her hips where the seat belt had held her in place. Oh, well, nothing could be done about that. At least it was a relatively modest suit. It might not have been the most fashionable, but it was practical and it fit. Why should she feel self-conscious about wearing a bathing suit in front of Jonah? She'd paraded up and down public beaches in suits far more revealing than this one.

She tugged on the sweats over it, pulled her hair up into a clip and stepped out of the bathroom to find out what he was up to.

He waited for her in the living room, wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and a black sweatshirt. She had noticed that indoors he was normally barefoot, but he had slipped his feet into a pair of untied hiking boots and pulled on his gloves.

How was it possible for a man to look that sexy in sweats and hiking boots?

"Stay here for a minute. I have to go clear a path."

"A path?" she asked, but he was already out the door. She watched as he stomped over to one corner of the deck to retrieve a snow shovel and began clearing a path from the door to a large wooden structure she had assumed was just another section of the deck. He shoveled the snow from the top of it, exposing a smooth surface slightly raised from the deck floor.

It wasn't until he set the shovel aside, unlatched and lifted the top that Katherine realized it was a hot tub, cleverly sunken into the deck. Jonah flipped a switch to start the jets. The water began to bubble, the steam rising in the cold evening air as he checked the water temperature.

He turned and gave her a thumbs-up signal, then rose. He kicked off the boots, peeled off his sweats and set them aside on the dry edge of the spa. Katherine watched, fascinated by the play of muscles across his back as he slipped into the steaming water. His shoulders were broad and well defined, and his body tapered down to a trim waist. And a really nice butt, she'd just bet,

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although it was hard to tell in swim trunks. As dry as her mouth was, she was grateful he hadn't been facing her when he'd decided to disrobe. How did a guy who sat and wrote books all day get a physique like that?

Sinking to his shoulders, he grinned at her and motioned for her to join him.

*Go go go go go!* her happy little hormones urged.

No way. Did she look insane? He was practically naked!

Still, the warm water did look incredibly inviting. She opened the door a crack. "Come on, Katie," he called.

"It's freezing out here," she complained from the doorway, and dropped the slippers to rub her arms against the chill.

"Not in here," he countered. "Come on. It'll be good for those sore muscles. Grab those towels I dropped by the door on your way out, will you?" He did have a point, damn him. The hot water would do wonders for her aching body. She was a grown woman, and perfectly capable of maintaining her self-control, wasn't she?

She slid her feet into the slippers, picked up the towels and stepped out into the frigid air

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## Chapter Eight

"You're going to freeze, Katie. Get in the water."

She turned in a slow circle, looking up at the night sky, and hugged the towels against her chest. "It's so quiet out here," she said, her voice hushed.

"The snow absorbs the sound," he explained. "Sort of like insulation."

"Amazing. Look at these stars! It's beautiful!"

Jonah cast a glance upward from the hot tub. "Yeah," he answered curtly. "Beautiful and freezing. Get in the water!"

Katherine ignored him and leaned against the wooden deck rail, the towels still clutched in her arms. "I can't see the stars this well at home. I'd almost forgotten what it was like." She turned to grin at him. "See that? That's the—"

"Big Dipper. Yeah, I know that one. Little Dipper, too, although those are the only ones I can ever find. Fascinating. Get in the water. You can tell me all about it."

"Oh, all right." She dropped the towels beside the hot tub and kicked off the slippers. The deck was freezing under her bare feet, so she quickly shed the sweats and dropped into the water. Heat washed over her, the bubbling water soothing her aching muscles. "Oh, this feels good."

"Told you."

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She moved to the side opposite of Jonah, settled back on one of the seats and let the jets gently pound her skin. Since the hot tub was big, there was barely a chance of even their toes touching underwater. As long as he stayed on his side. Her head fell back, and she closed her eyes, letting the sensations take over.

"Helping?" he asked after a few minutes.

"Some," she admitted.

He crossed the hot tub to sit down on the bench beside her. She edged away, and he gave her an exasperated look. "Come here and turn around. I'm not going to bite you, nor do I intend to put any moves on you. I just want to help you loosen up those muscles."

"Oh." Unsure what to make of that declaration, she turned her back to him. His hands came up to her shoulders, and he kneaded the sore tendons on either side of her neck, careful to avoid the bruises.

Her head dropped forward. Oh, but he was good at that! Warm and strong, his fingers worked to gently loosen the tension with just the right amount of pressure. His palms brushed against the skin of her back as he rubbed, creating a very erotic friction. If she had been a cat, she'd have purred.

"You know a lot about stars?" he asked.

"Some." She hoped any hoarseness he caught in her voice would be attributed to the cold night air. She lifted a hand to point up at the sky. "See those three stars? That's Orion, or rather his belt. That bright star on his left shoulder is Betelgeuse. If you look to his right, you can see the curve of his bow." Her finger traced an arcing line in the air above her head.

She felt Jonah lean closer, his breath warm on the chilled skin of her exposed shoulders. She stiffened for a moment before she realized he was just trying to see where she was pointing.

"Yeah. I see it now. He was the hunter or something, right?"

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Katherine nodded. "Or something," she said with a laugh. "Come on, Professor, you know the story. He was in love with Merope, but she wouldn't give him the time of day."

"I had the same problem in high school with a girl named Susan Baxter."

"Ha, ha," she quipped. "Anyway, the legend says he chased her for seven years before he stepped on Scorpius, the scorpion, and died."

"Tragic, that."

Katherine smirked over her shoulder. "Where's your sense of romance?" Jonah didn't answer. His hands moved lower to rub between her shoulder blades. She arched her back, stretching the stiff muscles, and turned her attention back to the stars.

Finally, he spoke. "Yes, I know the story. The gods felt sorry for him, so they placed him in the heavens on the opposite side of the sky from Scorpius, so he would never be hurt again."

Katherine stared up at the diamond-bedecked sky. "It would be nice to have that kind of divine protection."

Jonah was quiet for a moment before answering. "Would it?"

His response surprised her, and she turned to look at him over her shoulder. "Wouldn't you rather not be hurt?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Not that I'm a glutton for punishment, but I think you learn far more about yourself from the disappointments in life than you do from getting what you want all the time."

Katherine didn't miss the slight undertone of resignation in his voice and wondered what disappointments he'd suffered. "Interesting perspective. Sounds like the voice of experience to me."

"I guess we all have our regrets," was all he said.

Sighing, she leaned back against the warmth of his hands. Clearly, the topic wasn't one he wished to discuss further, so she changed the subject. "There's Polaris."

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Jonah cleared his throat. "Where?"

"Right above the cup of the Big Dipper." She pointed upward again. "See it?"

"Yeah. I thought that was the North Star."

"Same thing. If you were standing at the North Pole, it would be directly overhead."

She heard him chuckle behind her. "You know an awful lot about stars for a city girl."

With a shrug, Katherine lowered her hand into the water. "My grandfather had this old house down on the coast. Whenever we visited, Granddaddy would take me walking on the beach at night to show me the stars. He pointed out the constellations and quoted poetry." She turned to look at him again. "He was quite a romantic."

"This was your dancing grandfather?"

"Yes," she said with a laugh.

"Clearly not a relative of your mother's," Jonah pointed out.

"My father's dad."

"So you come by this romantic streak honestly."

Katherine shrugged and looked away. "I guess so. Never thought about it."

"You like poetry about stars, huh?" He was quiet a moment, and his hands stilled on her skin. When he spoke, his voice was soft. "There is no light in earth or heaven but the cold light of stars."

"Longfellow." Katherine smiled without turning around. She didn't know many men who were familiar with the poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, but it shouldn't surprise her that he was, considering he taught English. She shivered as the heels of his hands slid down either side of her spine, and tried to remember some of the poetic descriptions of stars her grandfather had often quoted.

"The skies are painted with unnumbered sparks. They are all fire, and every one doth shine."

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"Shakespeare," he said. "Julius Caesar. Pretty good for a graphic arts major."

"I minored in English," she said.

His hands skimmed up her arms and came to rest on her shoulders. "Okay, who said this? 'The stars are mansions built by Nature's hand, and haply, there the spirits of the blest dwell, clothed in radiance, their immortal vest.'"

Katherine pursed her lips. She knew that one. Closing her eyes, she tried to hear her grandfather's voice in her head.

Jonah leaned forward. "Give up?"

She nearly jumped at the shock of his heated breath against her cheek. "No. Give me a minute. Umm...Wordsworth. It's Wordsworth."

"A little slow on that one," Jonah teased. "Your turn."

"Okay, let me think." Katherine huffed out a sigh and watched the fog from her own breath dissipate quickly as she thought. With a mischievous smile, she turned halfway on the bench, almost facing him.

"Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars, and he will make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night, and pay no worship to the garish sun." She quoted Shakespeare with an exaggerated, dramatic accent, lightly dragging her fingers over his cheek as she spoke.

"That's a gimme," Jonah said, laughing. "Leave it to a hopeless romantic to pick Romeo and Juliet."

Their gazes locked, and Katherine's fingertips froze against his face. She'd exaggerated the quote as a joke, but suddenly he wasn't laughing anymore. She could no longer feel the cold stinging her cheeks or the heated bubbles gently bombarding her sore muscles. Under that immense span of starlit sky, in the silence of the snowbound night, the universe dwindled to the existence of only two people.

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Jonah laid a hand over hers on his cheek. "Would that I were the heavens, that I might be all full of love-lit eyes to gaze on thee."

The quote from Plato, spoken in his soft, deep voice, sent shivers through her. Liquid heat coursed through her limbs, heat that had nothing to do with the steaming spa and everything to do with the man beside her.

She struggled for something to say, and the quote spilled from her lips without conscious thought. "For the night shows stars and women in a better light."

"Touché. Again." Jonah's mouth curved at her counter with Lord Byron.

She held his gaze, lost in those dark eyes. Jonah's hand on hers was warm and wet. Why couldn't she breathe? Why did she suddenly feel so lightheaded? It had to be the steam from the hot tub, rising around them. Maybe she was overdosing on chlorine. Or the head injury. She could always blame that.

He lifted her chin with his other hand, and the heat she saw in his eyes was definitely not from the bubbling water. "The decision to kiss for the first time is the most crucial in any love story. It changes the relationship of two people much more strongly than even the final surrender; because this kiss already has within it that surrender."

She felt her heart pound just a bit harder against her bruised ribs, but she was only vaguely aware of the pain as she tried to grasp Jonah's words.

"Emil Ludwig."

She desperately tried to remember the topic of conversation, but somehow focusing on anything but Jonah's dark eyes was becoming impossible. "Who?"

"He was a German biographer."

Katherine wrinkled her nose. "What does that have to do with stars?"

"Not a damn thing," he murmured, and lowered his head. His lips were cold, but warmed quickly as he rubbed them against



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hers. His hands slid down her arms, and he gently turned her to face him. Her fingers moved from his cheek to thread through that wonderful mass of thick hair, which was damp from steam and bubbling water.

The little sound she made in her throat was supposed to be a protest, but it came out as a soft moan against his lips as her other arm slid around his neck and drew him closer.

The man's mouth was magic, and so gentle on hers, so much softer than she had imagined. And she had a great imagination. His kiss coaxed a response from her that she'd never intended to give. His hands smoothed over her back, and he pressed her against his body until her breasts were flattened against the solid wall of his chest. It took only the slightest touch of his tongue for her lips to part in welcome to the sweet invasion.

Katherine molded herself against him and let him take the kiss as deeply as he would. His tongue swept inside her mouth, and she shuddered at the sensation. The heat spread through her body from the inside out and threatened to boil the water around her.

It was real. Her mother had been dead wrong. This kind of passion did exist, and this man's touch was making her skin sizzle. If she didn't back away soon she was going to explode in his arms.

*Yes! Yes! Yes!* Her hormones had completely surpassed a simple happy dance and were well on their way to starring in the next version of *Riverdance*. She shouldn't be doing this. This man was her host. And he was all wrong for her. *Wasn't he?* She should extricate herself from this situation immediately. And she would. Any minute now.

How could it be so difficult to pull away from a man she barely knew? It was bad enough that she was letting him kiss her, but that was before she realized she was in his lap and kissing him back! His hands slid down her body, her sides, her thighs, then stroked back up just as slowly, while he held her captive with that clever, insistent mouth.

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She should stop. She really should, but all she knew was that she didn't want to. She didn't want him to stop kissing her or touching her like this. *Ever*. She didn't want to put an end to the exquisite feelings rocketing around inside her.

Jonah's mouth left hers, and the involuntary whimper of protest from her throat became a gasp as his teeth bit lightly into the soft skin of her neck. "Katie," he murmured softly. The deep, honeyed timbre of his voice rattled her to the core when his mouth took hers again. His hands slid down, cupped her behind, pulled her against him. His current state of arousal was more than apparent.

Horried to realize that at some point she'd straddled his lap, she suddenly jerked away and pushed herself out of his arms.

Katherine's trembling fingers traced her still-tingling lips, and she slowly raised her head to meet his gaze. Oh, God. What was she doing? She was supposed to be contemplating a marriage proposal, and here she was kissing a man she'd just met. And it wasn't just a simple, friendly kiss. It was a kiss that melted her bones, turned her brain into mush, and all but had steam coming out of her ears.

Jonah's breathing was as ragged as hers, and his dangerously dark eyes left her no doubt that the kiss had affected him as much as it had her. He lifted a hand to reach for her, and she jerked back.

What the hell had gotten into her?

She clambered out of the hot tub, snatched up her sweats and a towel and bolted barefoot for the door. Heedless of the water still dripping from her body, she ran into the guest room, shut the door behind her and leaned against it, breathless.

She'd lost her mind. That was the only explanation. She'd crawled into his lap. She'd practically acted out her earlier fantasy, right out there in the open. How could she so completely forget herself? How could she let herself become so overwhelmed with passion?

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Silly romantic notions, her mother had assured her.  
Designed to do nothing but feed one's fantasies.

Fantasies, indeed. Anne Fitzgerald Winstead had no idea.

How could her mother have been so wrong? Katherine was shivering, but it wasn't from the cold. She stripped off the wet bathing suit and toweled off before her shaky hands pulled on the sweats.

She rubbed her arms while she paced back and forth across the wooden floor. Ever since her mother caught her reading her first dime-store romance novel, the woman had done her best to convince Katherine that the kind of romantic passion in books was the fanciful figment of overactive imaginations. Love had very little to do with compatibility, and attraction even less. One couldn't trust one's emotions, and certainly not one's hormones, to make wise decisions.

Love at first sight? Chemistry? Her mother had scoffed at the notions. Sex was a biological necessity for procreation. Those unattainable expectations were exactly the reason the divorce rate was so high. She assured Katherine that in real life, sex never measured up to the earth-shattering, mind-blowing experiences people in romance novels shared.

Her mother had obviously never been kissed by someone like Jonah Masterson. And oh, God, the man could kiss. He'd merely brushed his lips over hers, and she'd melted into a quivering puddle.

In the year that she'd dated him, Stephen had never, ever kissed her like that. Kissed her until she was limp with desire and bubbling with need, her lips numb, her body feeling empty and aching for things she didn't know existed.

It wasn't as if she was some naïve virgin, but the select few men with whom she'd shared her bed had only served to prove her mother's theory instead of debunking it. Sex simply had never been the epiphany she'd hoped it would be.

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But Jonah... She shuddered again at the thought of his soft, hot mouth, his clever hands and the ache he stirred deep inside her. If one kiss from Jonah was enough to set her body on fire, she could only imagine what making love with him would be like.

Oh, no. She couldn't *possibly* be considering sleeping with a man she'd known for only two days. She'd always been the good girl, the dutiful daughter, who never did anything remotely outside the scope of propriety. She couldn't do this.

Could she?

Jonah certainly seemed willing, and she had to know if there was more. She needed to know if she really was capable of that kind of passion. What better way to find out than with a man she barely knew and would never have to see again after she left?

She stopped pacing for a moment and looked into the mirror over the dresser. She could do it. If he was willing, she could have a fling with this man, no strings attached, and find out exactly what she was capable of feeling. People had affairs all the time, right? She could be bold, daring and seductive if she set her mind to it. It didn't really take much effort in Jonah's presence.

If this kind of passion existed, then some of the decisions she'd made thus far in her life needed serious reassessment.

A knock startled her, and she froze in front of the mirror.

"Katie?" Jonah's voice came from the other side of the door.

Riveted to the spot, she stared at her reflection and took a few deep breaths. Could she really do this?

She thought of Jonah's mind-bending kiss.

*Oh, hell yes.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah paced up and down the hallway outside Katie's closed door, ignoring the way his clothes stuck to his damp skin. He'd followed her inside, shucked out of the wet trunks and yanked on the sweats, not bothering with anything under them.

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He paused to scrape a hand over his chin. Damn it, he hadn't intended to kiss her. He meant it when he'd said he had no intention of making a move on her. Maybe touching her hadn't been the best idea, but she had to be sore, and he just wanted to help her relax a little. And, okay, he'd admit he'd been dying to get his hands on her for two days. But he was an adult. He could control his impulses. Or so he thought, until the silky feel of her warm, damp skin beneath his hands had nearly driven him crazy.

Then she'd quoted Byron and Shakespeare and touched him back, and all reason was completely blanked out by lust. She was the embodiment of his ultimate fantasy—a literate woman with hot hands.

Not to mention what she could do with that perfect mouth. Not a passionate person? Where the hell had she gotten that idea? *Don't think about that. It's not going to happen. You cannot get yourself mixed up with this woman. You don't even know her. She's practically engaged to another man, and...Oh, damn.* She'd told him she was seeing someone, and he still made a play for her. How stupid could he be? No wonder she'd bolted.

He stopped walking and rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. He should apologize. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. Closing his eyes tightly, Jonah silently prayed he was doing the right thing and knocked softly on Katherine's bedroom door.

"Katie?"

She didn't answer. He leaned his forehead on the frame and sighed, hoping she was at least listening. "Look, I don't know what just happened out there. I mean, I know what happened, but...I had no intention of..."

*Hell.* Some parts of him certainly had. It didn't really matter how he said it, there was no way she was going to believe that getting her into the hot tub wasn't some kind of setup. He knew he had no business touching her, but somehow logic and reason took a major hike when she turned those whiskey-colored eyes on him.

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"Okay, listen. I didn't mean to make this complicated. I know you're seeing someone, and it's never been my style to poach on another man's territory, so...I'm sorry."

He listened but heard nothing. She was either ignoring him or she'd gone to bed. Either way, he'd just have to leave her alone and let her work it out. He was just about to step back from the door when it flew open.

"You're sorry?" Katherine glared up at him, her amber eyes flickering gold with fury. "You're sorry you kissed me?"

"No, I didn't mean that." *Well, just hell.* That wasn't what he meant at all. "I meant..."

"Poaching on another man's territory? What the hell do I look like, a damn game preserve?"

Jonah blinked. Not once in the forty-eight hours she had been in his life had he heard her utter a single curse word. His mouth opened, but before he could speak in his defense, he found his back slammed against the wall opposite her door.

He was still trying to process that prim little Katherine had used the words "hell" and "damn" at all, much less in the same sentence, but it was difficult to think with her sweet mouth fused to his.

He sucked in his breath as the fingers of one small hand worked their way beneath his sweatshirt and tugged it up over his head.

Before he could say a word, she was pressing herself against his bare chest. Her fingers slipped into the waistband of his sweatpants. The way her mouth still clung to his, he wondered if she'd ever come up for air. "Christ, Katie, wait a minute," he gasped, and jumped a little as her hand slid further inside his pants.

She jerked her head up. "I'm through waiting. I'm sick and tired of letting everyone else make my decisions for me." She lowered her mouth to his neck and nibbled the tense cords of muscle there. "I want you, Jonah. I've never wanted a man in my

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life, but I want you. I want to know what passion is. I want to know it's real."

Her fingers found their target—*hot hands indeed*—and it was all he could do not to let his eyes roll back in his head. She looked up at him.

"Do you want me, Jonah?"

He stared down into her eyes, the heat in them as potent as the Jack Daniels they reminded him of, and figured there was no sense in denying it. Her fingers were currently wrapped around the rock-hard evidence.

"Oh, hell yes," he admitted on an exhale.

"Then show me. Show me it's real."

"What about your...um...intended?" he asked between rasping breaths.

"He's not my intended," she answered. "He's my mother's choice, not mine."

"But you said you—" He sucked in a breath and gripped her wrist to momentarily still her hand. His hormones raged at the insult, and he tried again to speak. No matter how much he wanted her, he wasn't going to do to someone else what his fiancée had done to him.

"You said you'd been seeing him for a year. Don't you think he'd object to—?"

She lifted her eyes to his, and the look in them cut off his words. Desire burned with gold fire in the smoky topaz. "I never slept with Stephen, nor did I ever agree to remain exclusively his."

Jonah breathed out slowly. His grip on her wrist loosened. "Be sure, Katie."

"I am." Her eyes held his, and she took a deep breath. "Just...no strings. No promises."

Jonah blinked. Wasn't that supposed to be the guy's line? He couldn't remember and didn't much care at the moment, as the busy hand inside his sweatpants had completely robbed his brain of its blood supply.

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"Okay," he agreed breathlessly. "But you're going to have to stop that, or this'll be over before it starts."

She giggled, moved her hand away and nipped his shoulder. "Touch me, Jonah. I want your hands on me. Now."

She didn't have to tell him twice. He released her wrist and moved his hands between them and up the inside of her damp sweatshirt, delighted to find her naked beneath it. He groaned and closed both hands over her breasts. When she moaned against his mouth, he shuddered.

She ran her hands over his shoulders, her palms hot against his skin. Jonah yanked off her sweatshirt and wrapped his arms around her, his mouth covering hers. Her hand slid down again, and she tugged at the waistband of his sweats. He needed to get her to his bed, fast. He had a box of condoms in the nightstand drawer—

In the nightstand next to his bed in New York.

"Wait..." He cupped her face in his hands, forcing her to look at him. "Damn it, Katie. I don't have any protection."

She shook her head, looking a little dazed. "What?"

His breath was coming in ragged gasps. "I don't have any protection. I wasn't exactly expecting company."

"Huh?" She blinked hard, her brows furrowed, and shook her head. "Oh. Oh!" Her lips curved. "It's okay. I'm on the pill."

"Are you sure?" His voice was husky, and just a little desperate. He briefly wondered why she'd be on the pill if she wasn't sleeping with anyone, then decided it hardly mattered at this point. He shivered as she moved her hand lower again and captured her mouth with his, tracing her lower lip with his tongue.

She moaned. "Oh, God, I'm sure."

Jonah obviously needed no further encouragement. He slid one hand into the back of her sweatpants to cup her bottom. With his other hand, he worked the pants down over her hips. Katherine shoved them the rest of the way down, stepped out of them and



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pressed her mouth against his neck, reveling in the feel of his pulse pounding against her lips.

Her knees almost buckled when his fingers slid down between her thighs. She strained against his hand as he stroked her, her body silently begging for his touch. Obliging her, Jonah plunged his fingers into her.

Her world shattered. The razor-thin edge upon which she had balanced pitched and threw her headlong into oblivion. Waves of intense pleasure flooded her. She could barely hear his murmuring over the rush of her own blood and the rasp of her breath against his shoulder.

"My bed..." he murmured. He lowered his head, closed his mouth over her breast and bit gently.

She gasped and dug her nails into his shoulders as the heat spiraled her back up to the edge. God, she was going to come again, just from his mouth on her breast.

"Here," she panted. "Right here. Right now. Oh, God, Jonah. Now!"

He didn't argue. He grabbed her shoulders and reversed their positions so that her back was against the wall, then kicked off the sweatpants she'd pushed down to his ankles. With both hands he gripped her bottom, lifted her against him and drove into her hard, pinning her to the wall with his weight.

Katherine wanted to cry out but could only suck in enough air to make a small sound in her throat as he filled her. Her arms and legs locked around him as she dragged her fingernails over his broad shoulders and wove her fingers into his hair. She'd never felt anything like it before and wondered if she ever would again. At this moment, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but this man and the incredible pleasure he was bringing her.

His skin felt slick against hers, and her fists tightened in his damp hair. His fingers clenched her backside as he pushed deeper into her, merging their bodies until she felt him in every cell.

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He began moving then. Instinctively she matched his rhythm and wondered how in the world she'd ever missed sex like this. He rocked against her again, deeper still, and she forgot to think about anything at all. When she crested again, she felt Jonah's entire body go rigid against hers as he growled into her neck and followed her.

His forehead dropped to her shoulder as her head hit the wall behind her with a thunk. Katherine smiled and dragged her fingers through his hair. Her lungs ached as she struggled to breathe.

"Wow," she managed to gasp.

"That about covers it," he agreed without lifting his head.

"Oh, God," she panted.

"Thanks, but no, it's just me," Jonah teased, and brushed his mouth against her damp skin. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Hurt me?" She tightened her fingers in his hair and pulled his head up to look at him. "How?"

He leaned forward and kissed her bruised shoulder. "You're still pretty banged up. I wasn't exactly gentle."

"I wasn't exactly gentle, either," she reminded him.

"But your bruises—"

"What bruises?" Katherine asked, and kissed him hard.

Jonah laughed against her mouth. "You know, I usually make it a lot longer than that."

Katherine giggled. Good grief. Why did she have to giggle? Couldn't she at least have managed some kind of sexy, husky laugh? "You lasted longer than I did. I have no complaints."

"Good." Jonah raised his head, and grinned. "I know you said no promises, Katie, but I have to promise you one thing."

"What's that?"

"This will happen again."

She framed his face with her hands. "Now would be good."

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Chuckling, he lifted her away from the wall and carried her into his bedroom. He yanked back the quilt and laid her on the bed, then curled around her and pulled the covers over them.

Katherine lay on her back, with Jonah's head resting on her shoulder. His fingers played up her thigh, and his breath was warm against her skin.

"Jonah."

"Mmm?" His lips moved to her throat.

"I've never done that before."

His fingers froze. He raised his head and blinked hard.

"What? You've never...what?"

Katherine stifled another giggle at his shocked expression.

"No, not that. I mean...I've never seduced a man before."

Clearly relieved, he pulled her against him and wrapped his arms around her. "S'okay," he assured her as he nuzzled her neck.

"Neither have I."

"Ha, ha."

"Besides, that wasn't seduction, honey. That was a full-frontal attack. You slammed me into the wall and ripped my clothes off."

She put her hand over her mouth. "I did, didn't I?"

Jonah rolled over until she was under him, and pulled her hand away from her mouth. "Thank God. I thought I was going to die from wanting you."

"You did? Want me, I mean?"

"Oh, yes. The first time you smiled at me, and I saw those dimples, I was toast." He kissed her, long and deep, until she was arching against him. "I want you now," he told her, as he trailed kisses up her neck. The pressure began to build inside her, the heat spreading to her fingertips. "And after that, I think I'm going to want you again very soon. In every way possible."

Thank God, she thought, and let him take her wherever and however he wanted.

## Snowbound

### Chapter Nine

"I still can't believe I'm doing this," Katherine murmured sleepily. She snuggled against Jonah's side, one hand against his chest.

"Doing what?"

"Lying here in bed with you. I've never done anything like this in my life. This is incredible." She pressed a kiss against his neck. His skin still smelled faintly of chlorine from the hot tub, mixed with the deep, musky scent that was his alone. "You're incredible."

Jonah chuckled, his arm around her pulling her just a bit closer. "Although I'm more than flattered at your assessment of my prowess, I think I should inform you up front that my...uh...*performance* last night wasn't so much a testament to my innate virility as it was a direct result of both the intense physical and intellectual stimulation manifesting itself in my immediate environment."

Laughing, Katherine rested her chin on his chest so she could look at him. Her eyes widened with feigned surprise. "A disclaimer?"

"I don't want to mislead you. Last night was an unmitigated anomaly." "So, what you're saying is, getting it up that often in one night isn't normal for you?"

He leaned down to kiss her on the nose. "Until you."

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Katherine grinned and rolled on top of him. "Well, Professor, I'd have to concur with your assessment that the vivification experienced in this specific encompassment has been somewhat singular, not to mention prodigious, in nature."

He lifted a lock of her hair and studied it. "You sure you're a real blonde?" When she groaned and tried to roll away, he caught her wrist and grinned. "Prodigious, was it?"

"Preternatural," she informed him. "And completely divergent of my previous experience."

"So, what *you're* saying is, it was the best sex you've ever had."

"Oh, God, yes."

"I can live with that."

Giggling, Katherine kissed him. He was warm, his mouth warmer still against hers, his tongue hot as it traced the inside of her lips. Delightful little shivers ran the length of her spine as his fingers traced up and down, and she lifted her head to look into his dark eyes.

Jonah frowned. "What?"

"I can't believe my mother was so wrong."

"Katie, I understand that this has been some sort of revelation for you, and I appreciate beyond belief your allowing me to be a part of it. But can I ask one favor?"

"What's that?"

"Can we not talk about your mother when we're naked?"

"Fine," she agreed, and smiled as he flipped her onto her back and pinned her wrists to the pillow beside her head. Katherine wriggled beneath him. "Then we'll talk about something else. Like what you write."

"Books." He nipped gently at her lower lip and bent his head to nibble her neck. He pulled her arms down to her sides and held them there as he moved down her body, leaving a hot, wet trail in the wake of his kisses. He had gotten as far as her ribs when she regained her breath enough to speak.

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"Don't try to distract me, Jonah, because it isn't going to work. If I'm sleeping with you, I have a right to know."

He raised his head and grinned. "We're not sleeping," he answered, and lowered his mouth again.

She growled in frustration, as much at his refusal to answer her as at her own inability to ignore what he was doing to her. She was only human, after all. And this was all so new. So amazing...so...

Oh. My. *God*. Where on earth did this man learn to do *that*?

Grasping for a hold on sanity, she persisted with her question. "What's in the books, Jonah?"

"Words." His voice was a low rumble against the skin of her belly, and the vibration of it made her shiver. Or that could have been the stubble of his beard gently scraping the inside of her thigh. Or possibly it had been the warmth of his tongue as it traced the crease where her thigh met her torso. She probably wouldn't ever really know for sure because just then she found herself caught up in such a whirlwind of sensation she couldn't have formed a coherent thought to save her life.

And she was wrong. He was very, very good at distracting her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah opened his eyes and glared at the alarm clock loudly wailing on his nightstand. They had been in bed nearly ten hours, and very little of that time had been spent sleeping. He smacked the alarm button and growled.

"What?" Katherine's sleepy voice sounded muffled. She was lying on her stomach, her arms beneath her head, face buried in the soft pillow.

"I have to get up." He rolled until his body halfway covered hers, his chest against her back. Nuzzling her neck, he traced his fingertips over the soft skin of her shoulder. "But I don't want to."

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"Then don't."

"Have to. Chewie needs to go out, and Zeke will be here anytime to haul your car out." Pressing a kiss against the back of her neck, he pushed himself up into a sitting position. "You sleep. I won't be long."

"K," she murmured, too exhausted to disagree. Jonah leaned down to kiss her again, but she was already asleep. With a little laugh, he rose from the bed, grabbed clean boxers and jeans and went to shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah sat at his computer, his fingers tapping a staccato rhythm on the keys. Earlier that morning, he had helped Zeke haul Katherine's little BMW up from the ditch. In doing so, they had discovered her cell phone under the car. Unfortunately, they discovered it after the car had been moved and the front tires had rolled over it, rendering it useless.

As Jonah collected the pieces, Zeke assured him that although her phone was toast, her car was fixable. If he got right on it, he could probably have it finished by the end of the week.

That worry out of the way, Jonah went up to his loft and finished his edits for the deadline, sent them off via email to his editor and started a new chapter. The story was forming in his mind and flowing out his fingertips, coming almost faster than he could type. He supposed, on some level, that he had Katie to thank for that. The writer's block he had been suffering had finally dislodged, and like a dam breaking, the words tumbled onto the screen.

Pleased with his progress, he paused to take a sip of the coffee he'd poured nearly an hour before and grimaced when he realized it was mud cold. He thought about going to get more and decided it would be a nice gesture to take a cup to Katie, if she was awake.

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The thought of her made him lean back in the chair and smile. He had come to the remote cabin to get away from women and focus on his writing. It wasn't as if he had never gone long periods of time without sex, because he had, but he hadn't realized just how lonely self-imposed celibacy would be.

He knew he was not meant for a life of solitude. He enjoyed the company of a woman, whether as a friend or as a lover. He'd had his share of both, managing somehow to keep most of the latter as the former. At least until Marian, and he refused to think about her.

He hadn't been all that thrilled at the prospect of having Katie stay with him when Viv first insisted upon it, but in retrospect he had to admit he had enjoyed her company even before last night. She had a quick mind and a razor-sharp wit and wasn't afraid to use either. And last night, she'd proven beyond any shadow of a doubt that she was not the dispassionate creature her mother raised her to be. In fact, she'd seemed downright shocked at her ability to simply *feel*.

He was just egotistical enough to enjoy the fact that he'd been the one to show her that pleasure, and she'd reveled in giving it right back to him.

Thinking of her now, warm, soft, and asleep in his bed, suddenly made writing about love a lot less appealing than making it. He took a moment to save his work and close the file, then stood and stretched.

It was well after ten in the morning, and he hadn't intended to take quite so long. He retrieved his cup of cold coffee and headed downstairs to find Katherine.

As he reached the bottom step, he saw her. She was seated on the sectional, totally absorbed in whatever she was reading. The quilt was tucked in around her legs, her knees pulled up in her customary reading position with the book propped against them. She had showered, and her damp hair spilled forward in dark gold ropes over her shoulders. Chewie lay beside the sofa, gnawing a



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rawhide bone, and she scratched his ear absentmindedly as she read.

He paused on the last step to watch her. It was odd how right she looked sitting there, in his shirt, petting his dog, his grandmother's quilt wrapped around her long legs. As if she belonged there. She raised her head, her eyes meeting his, and smiled.

Jonah felt something in his chest tighten and knew he could be in deep trouble if he wasn't careful. She wasn't his, she wasn't staying, and he had no right to stand there contemplating how perfectly she fit into his life after less than three days.

She had made it quite clear the previous night that she wanted no strings, and he had agreed. He had no right to change the rules on her. He'd just have to keep a tight rein on his emotions and enjoy what they had for as long as it lasted. What man wouldn't want a week or so of no-ties, guilt-free sex?

*A man who wants a lifetime of a lot more than that.* He blinked at the unbidden thought and pushed it aside.

Katherine looked up to see Jonah standing barefoot on the bottom step. His hair was mussed, as if he'd washed it and toweled it dry without brushing it. The dark beard he hadn't yet shaved covered nearly his whole jaw and gave him even more of a rugged look. His denim shirt hung loose over faded jeans. One hand was shoved in his pocket; the other held a coffee cup.

He was wearing his glasses, and it occurred to her again that somehow the man made even the studious, wire-framed glasses look incredibly sexy. But it was the grim expression in the dark eyes behind the lenses that erased her smile.

"Jonah? Is something wrong?"

Her voice seemed to jerk him out of his pensiveness. The shadow swiftly disappeared from his warm, brown eyes, and he smiled back at her as he crossed the room. He deposited the cup on a nearby table and leaned over the back of the sofa to kiss her. "The

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only thing that could possibly be wrong is that you are not in my bed."

"Neither are you," she pointed out.

"Good point. Let's rectify that, shall we?" In one swift move, he leaped over the back of the sofa. She giggled as he moved over her on his hands and knees. He paused, a puzzled expression crossing his face, and reached for the book she had been reading.

"What are you reading?"

Katherine flipped the binder back to the first typed page, looking for the title. "A manuscript, I think."

"Oh, geez," Jonah muttered. The mild expletive made her laugh, and he reached for the notebook again. "Where on earth did you dig that up?"

She hugged it to her chest and nodded toward the shelf. "It was up there." Holding it tightly, she resisted his attempt to take it from her. "Hey, I'm not done." A slow smile crossed her face. "It's one of yours, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Gimme that." He reached for it again.

"No." She held it tighter. "I want to finish. It's very good."

"Good for kindling, maybe. I wrote that tripe years ago. It's just a kid's story. I thought I'd disposed of every copy, but I guess my mother kept one. She's sentimental that way. Hand it over, Katie."

"No. I want to finish it. I'm just to the part where the shepherd girl meets the dragon. I want to know what happens."

"They all live happily ever after. The end."

Katherine dropped her shoulders, regarding him with a condescending look but held on to the notebook. "Indulge me."

His grin was wicked. "I thought I had."

Katherine smiled back. "Yes, and for that I thank you, but I still want to read it."

Sighing, he sat up, leaned against the back of the sofa and closed his eyes. "Fine. Read it, then. Just remember that I wrote this

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drivel several years ago, before realizing fantasy was not my genre."

"I don't know," she said teasingly, and laid the binder on the coffee table. "I happen to think you're pretty good at fantasies." She shoved back the quilt and crawled over to him. Her legs were bare beneath the flannel shirt, and she placed her knees on either side of his thighs.

Without raising his head, he opened one eye. "Do you?"

"Mmm hmm." Katherine ran her fingers through his hair as she kissed and nibbled at his neck, then slid her hands down his arms to pin his wrists to the sofa cushion. Sitting back on her heels, she grinned at him mischievously. "Want to hear one of mine?"

He cleared his throat. "Sure."

"Do you remember yesterday, when I fell into your lap?"

"You had a fantasy about me?"

She rolled her eyes. "Do you want to hear this or not?"

He nodded. "Absolutely."

She scooted herself forward to settle more comfortably against him and felt his response. *I do that to him*, she thought, smiling in satisfaction. She kissed him and started to slowly unbutton his shirt. "I knew you wanted me."

"I thought this was your fantasy," he murmured, as he pulled his arms out of the sleeves and dropped his shirt on the sofa.

"It is." She lifted his hands to her thighs, and her breath caught. Her eyes closed for a moment to enjoy the warmth and friction of his calloused palms against her skin beneath the long shirt. The little moan that escaped his throat as his hands moved over her bare bottom spurred her on.

"I wanted to crawl into your lap and let you take me right here, on your sofa. I wanted your hands on my hips, holding me against you...." She smiled impishly, her hands braced on his bare chest. "But I wasn't wearing your shirt."

"What were you wearing?" he asked, his voice a little raspy.

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"Now you sound like an obscene phone call," she chided, and leaned down to nibble his ear.

"It's your fantasy," he reminded her, turning his head to kiss her.

Katherine pulled back and looked down into his dark eyes. "Mmm. Nothing. I wasn't wearing anything."

Jonah smiled, took off his glasses and tossed them onto the coffee table. "I think this is a fantasy I can make real for you."

Katherine leaned her head back to allow his lips better access as he moved them down her neck to the first button of her shirt. His fingers traced the outline of her breasts through the flannel and lifted them gently, while his tongue darted into the opening above the buttons, teasing the cleavage he created.

"You want this off?" He gave the shirt a playful tug.

"Yes," she whispered.

His eyes met and held hers, the dark passion in them so intense it took her breath away. Amazing how just a look from this man could make her so hot. She was contemplating the wonder of that when Jonah fisted his hands in the front of her shirt and yanked hard. Buttons popped, soft cotton ripped, and Katherine jumped in surprise, then giggled when he shoved it down her arms and dropped it to the floor.

"I've always wanted to do that," Jonah admitted, his hands now freely roaming her naked form.

"So you get to indulge a fantasy of yours, too." With a little laugh, Katherine leaned into him and reached for the button of his jeans. Struggling to kiss him and undo his zipper, she growled in frustration.

"You're going to have to move for a minute, honey. I can't get these off with you in my lap."

"Damn it," Katherine griped, and he chuckled as she slid off him long enough for him to shuck the jeans and the boxers and kick them aside.

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He gripped her hips and hauled her back into his lap. He drove into her hard. She cried out, digging her fingernails into his shoulders.

His wide palms spread over her backside and kneaded soft curves. He lifted and lowered her again. The feeling was so exquisite, so completely decadent, that Katherine could do little more than cling to him and meet his thrusts. The tension built quickly, an aching pleasure that tightened inside her until it bordered on pain.

The sensations rioting inside her were more than she could stand, the heat almost unbearable. Gasping, she tried to pull back. "I can't."

"Yes, you can." His fingers tightened on the smooth curve of her bottom and forced her against him. "Stay with me," he murmured, and she felt his hand slide between them. His other hand on her hip held her in place as he moved inside her. His mouth captured hers, muffling her cries as her world exploded. Blinding white light became a firestorm of glittering color as her body shuddered against his. Wave after wave of intense sensation pounded her relentlessly.

Somewhere in the distance she heard him groan, and felt molten heat explode inside her. Her bones melted. Whatever he was murmuring in her ear was completely unintelligible, and she wondered if she'd ever have the capacity to form a coherent sentence again. Or a thought. A thought would be good.

Only vaguely aware of the chill as the cool air moved over her sweat-damp skin, Katherine lay slack against Jonah's shoulder and gasped for breath. His arms were wrapped around her, and she could feel the pounding of his heart against her breast.

"Jonah..."

"Hmm?"

Her voice sounded hoarse. "That was..."

"Prodigious?" he offered.

"Oh, God, yes."

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He ran his hands up and down her back, and she shivered.  
“Any other fantasies you want to share?”

She shook her head. “I can’t think.”

“Good.”

She didn’t move as he tucked the old quilt around them both. When he shifted their positions to lie down, she made a small sound of protest. “Your legs are going to cramp,” he said with a chuckle as he pulled her against him on the sofa and snuggled with her under the quilt.

“Oh.” He was right. Her thighs had already started to ache, and her toes had gone numb. But what was a little thing like circulation compared to such indescribable pleasure?

She laid her cheek against the hard muscle of his chest, gave in to the overwhelming exhaustion that suddenly overtook her, and slept.

Susan Greene

## Chapter Ten

Sprawled on Jonah's big bed, Katherine yawned and stretched her arms over her head, feeling more relaxed than she had been in...well, forever. The previous afternoon had been wonderful. After her long nap on the sofa, Jonah had shown her what was left of her cell phone, and she'd almost felt relieved. Not having it meant she had an excuse not to answer the numerous voice mail messages she knew her mother would be leaving, even though she specifically requested no calls for the week. She tossed it into the garbage and shrugged. Jonah was right. It was *her* vacation, after all.

After dinner, they had alternated between making love and watching the first Star Wars trilogy on DVD. She agreed that they were indeed the best science fiction films she'd ever seen, but that hadn't been a difficult declaration to make considering they were also the first science fiction movies she'd ever seen.

Jonah decided she'd had a sufficient introduction into popular culture for one night and treated her to a massage in front of the fire, which, of course, had ended with them making love again on the quilt he'd spread across the soft rug...and on the sofa, the recliner and the coffee table.

Katherine had never felt so wanton in her entire life. If someone had told her a week ago that not only would she willingly make love to a man she had just met, but that she would do so in

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places and positions she would never have dreamed of, she would have been mortified.

With Jonah, however, nothing seemed to be off-limits. Sex with him ran the gamut, from slow and gentle to raw and primal, and much to her surprise, she found the entire spectrum appealing. Whatever sense of self-consciousness she might have normally had seemed to completely dissipate in the face of the unspeakable pleasure this man brought her, and she couldn't summon even one iota of guilt about it. Jonah had shown her with crystal clarity exactly how passionate an affair could be.

An affair. That's all it was. She didn't particularly like the terminology, but there it was. She couldn't possibly expect more than that. She didn't want more, anyway. It was an experiment, a test, after all, and the choice had been hers. She had been the one to lay down the ground rules.

No strings. No promises.

If she never had another lover that measured up to Jonah, well, that'd just be her bad luck, and she'd learn to deal with it. Right now, she planned to enjoy every moment she could with him.

That morning after breakfast, he and Chewie took her on a short hike up the backside of the mountain. Fortunately for her, one of his sisters had left a pair of hiking boots that fit her well enough.

The weather had been chilly but sunny, the sky a vivid and clear blue, and the view across the snow-covered mountaintops incredible. They perched on rocks overlooking the amazing vista and made out like teenagers and threw innumerable sticks for Chewie to chase. After a while, they walked hand in hand back to the cabin and fell into bed again, energized by the fresh mountain air. Jonah dragged himself up out of necessity to find them both something to eat and left Katherine to sprawl across his big bed. Rolling to her stomach, she let her thoughts wander to the unpublished manuscript she'd read. She had finished the tale in less than a day, fascinated with the way he could weave a story. The characters sucked her into the world he created, and her artist's



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fingers longed to create them on paper from the mental images formed by his words.

A spiral-bound notebook and a pencil lay on the nightstand. Katherine reached for them, turned to a blank sheet of paper and began to sketch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah ignored the blinking light on his answering machine as he sliced cheese from a block. He probably should at least listen to the messages, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. What if Zeke had left a message that her car was ready? The roads were cleared now. Would she even stay the rest of the week if she was free to leave anytime she wanted?

It wasn't a question he wanted answered just yet.

The phone rang again, and he paused to listen to the message.

"This is Jonah. Leave a message. If you don't, I don't know who you are, and I can't call you back." The machine beeped, and he heard a familiar sigh.

"Jonah, I know you're there. Pick up the damn phone."

Laughing at his sister's irritated tone, he grabbed the receiver and cradled it on his shoulder while he cut slices of ham. "What do you want?"

"Well, that's a lovely way to greet family. What's the matter? Aunt Viv driving you nuts?"

"She's always driven me nuts. What's up?"

"I had a couple of questions about your decorating job. I emailed you some pictures of tile colors, and you never got back to me."

It was his turn to sigh. "Leah, I told you. Pick what you want. I don't care, as long as that other stuff is gone. You have better taste than I do anyway."

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"Okay, just remember you said that." She paused. "So, how are you?"

"Good. In fact, I'm great. I'm almost halfway done with the latest book."

"So the writing is going well."

He adored his sister, but he really didn't feel like chatting when Katie was waiting for him, naked in his bed. "Very. Look, I can't talk long. I have company, so—"

"Company?" He could hear the excitement in her voice. "Female company?"

"If you must know, yes," he said, lowering his voice.

"You actually managed to meet a woman up there? What'd you do, cruise the local tavern? Geez, Jonah."

He laughed. "Not exactly. We had a bad snowstorm last weekend, and she wrecked her car in front of the cabin. She's staying here until it's fixed."

"Is she pretty?"

Jonah rolled his eyes. "Leah..."

"Well, is she?"

"Nope. She's butt-ugly. Short, fat and has buck teeth."

"You're lying," Leah teased. She paused, then sighed. "You're doing it again, aren't you?"

Jonah set the knife down and took the phone in his hand. "I'm not that hopeless, Leah. Give me a break." He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Katie hadn't followed him to the kitchen.

"But she does look damn good in your flannel pajamas."

Leah giggled. "The ones with the little cows?"

"The same. I had to loan her something to wear. I'm never going to look at those cows the same way again."

"You seduced a woman while she was wearing my cow pajamas?" Leah groaned. "Jonah..."

"I did nothing of the sort," he said defensively.

"You considered it."

Susan Greene

"Give me a break. I've been up here for months, and I've been celibate longer than that. I'm a guy, Leah. Yeah, I damn well considered it."

"So...what's she like?"

"She's smart, funny, and she's beautiful. And right now, I'm fixing lunch. So if you'll excuse me—"

Leah giggled. "What's her name?"

"Katie," he told her. "Well, Katherine, but I call her Katie because it annoys her. Now, may I go?"

"Yeah." Jonah was sure Leah was grinning ear to ear and most likely was going to call his other sister the minute she hung up the phone. "Give her the pajamas, Jonah. I'm never wearing them again."

"Good," he said. "Love you."

"I love you, too, Jonah. Don't get hurt," she added softly.

"I won't," he assured her, and hung up the phone. Picking up the plate, he tossed Chewie a scrap of ham and then made his way back to the bedroom.

In the doorway of his room, he stopped cold. Katherine lay on her stomach stretched across his bed. Her long legs were bent at the knee and crossed at the ankle in the air. She was still naked, though the sheet was almost artfully arranged to cover her delicious backside. He grinned at how ridiculously delighted he'd been to discover she did indeed have a second set of dimples at the base of her spine.

And how she'd shuddered beneath him as he explored them with his tongue.

Propped on her elbows, she was drawing something in the little notebook he kept beside his bed to jot down ideas that often came to him in sleep. Her hair fell forward and hid most of her face, but he could see the pink tip of her tongue pressed between her lips in concentration.

His chest tightened, as did his grip on the plate. She looked so beautiful, so completely relaxed, so...perfect, right there in his

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bed. And he suddenly realized that was exactly where he wanted her to stay.

She picked just that moment to raise her head and smile. His heart pounded hard against his ribs, but his insides melted like drawn butter.

Yup. It was official. Leah was right. He was falling head over freaking heels in love with her.

He could hear Jack's voice echoing in his head. *Sucker.*

Her smile thinned. "Are you all right?" Jonah gave himself a mental shake. *Get a grip. She's made it clear she doesn't want anything more than a fling.* It surprised him how much that realization hurt.

He forced a smile and moved to sit on the bed beside her. "I'm fine. Hungry?" He set the plate in front of her and looked down at the sketch she'd been working on. "What's this?"

"No, wait! It's not done!" Katherine made a lunge for the notebook, but he quickly rolled out of her reach and, in the process, dumped grapes, ham and cheese off the plate.

"You made a mess," she fussed as she scrambled to pick up the food, but he ignored her, his attention focused on the drawing.

It was as if she had somehow gotten inside his head and seen the world he created in his mind. The drawing was of a dragon, the one from his story. Even though it was a simple pencil sketch, Jonah could *see* the glimmer of the dragon's dark eyes, the sheen of iridescent blue-black on his scales.

"This is amazing," he murmured.

"It's not even finished," Katherine remarked, and plopped the plate of rescued food between them on the bed.

"It's still incredible. Look at this detail. It's like you read my mind."

She scooted closer to him. "I did, in a way. You created him, I just drew him."

Still stunned, Jonah shook his head. "This is just awesome. You did this just from reading the manuscript?"

Susan Greene

Katherine reached for a piece of cheese and popped it into her mouth. "Your descriptions are very vivid, Jonah. It didn't take a lot of imagination."

"So you say." He laughed. "I do well to draw stick people."

"You paint with words," Katherine told him. "The story is wonderful. You really should publish it."

His eyes met hers. "You think so?"

"I know so. Since you still haven't told me what you write, I don't really know what your target audience usually is, but I can tell you this one would have wide appeal, even for a children's book. Maybe even a movie deal. Fantasy's big right now."

Jonah laughed. He didn't know if he'd really care to see his creations on the big screen. Hollywood tended to take far too much creative license with an author's work, and so far he'd jealously guarded his. "I'll think about it."

"Think about it? Jonah, promise me you'll send this to your agent." Jonah studied the drawing, rubbing a hand over his chin, then lifted his gaze to hers. "On one condition."

"What's that?"

"I think it would go over better with visuals. I'll send it if you'll illustrate it for me."

Katherine nearly choked on the grape she'd just bitten into. "Me? I'm not an illustrator, Jonah. I'm a graphics artist. Illustrating a book takes a certain skill, and imagination—"

"Which you have, in spades," he said firmly. "You say no, we'll just forget it."

"Think of the money you could make on—"

"Katie, I have all the money I need. I write now because I enjoy it. I sell what I want to sell. You want me to publish the book, you do the illustrations."

"I don't know. I've never done this kind of work."

"You just did," he told her. "Will you at least finish this one? I really want to see what he looks like."

She laughed. "You should know, idiot. You created him."

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Jonah rolled his eyes and dropped the notebook on the nightstand. He picked up a grape and bent down to feed it to Katherine. "Please?"

She rolled her eyes and chewed. "Do you have a scanner?" He nodded. "Okay. I'll see what I can do."

Grinning, Jonah placed another grape between her teeth and sucked in his breath as she bit down lightly on it. On impulse, he leaned forward and sunk his teeth into the other half. He brushed his mouth over hers, then licked the juice from her lips. "Later," he said softly, and moved the plate out of the way.

"Yeah," she murmured, and pulled him down to her. "Much later."

\* \* \* \* \*

Much later, Katherine rested her back against Jonah's chest as he leaned into the corner of the sectional. Her laptop lay on her bent knees. She had finished her rough sketch of the dragon and scanned it in, and was now showing Jonah how she could use her graphics program to add dimension. They dabbled with colors, shades and textures, until he was satisfied with the results, and even more impressed by her talent.

"You're amazing," he said softly in her ear, and brushed a kiss over her temple as he looked over her shoulder at the screen.

Grateful he was behind her, Katherine blushed. "It's your creation." She closed the program and leaned forward to place the laptop on the coffee table.

Jonah shifted, caught her chin in his hand and turned her to face him. "I wasn't talking about the dragon," he said quietly, then lowered his mouth to hers. His mouth was soft on hers, gentle, and somehow all the more devastating for it. He broke the kiss and held her gaze, moving his thumb over her lower lip in a way that sent delectable tingles of sensation through every nerve cell in her body.

Susan Greene

Logic. Reason. She struggled for both. *Pheremones*. Just basic biology. Physiology. Something like that. Her X chromosomes to his Y.

Her mother might have been wrong about how good sex could be, but Katherine still wasn't convinced that great sex—okay, phenomenal sex—was an acceptable way to choose a partner for life.

Okay, so maybe emotions shouldn't have a part in it, but she was quickly realizing it was impossible not to feel something for a man who could make her feel the way Jonah made her feel. Just what that something was, she wasn't quite ready to contemplate.

She shoved herself out of his grip, rose to her feet and walked over to the bookshelves. "Which ones are yours?" she asked, running a finger along the edge of the shelf.

There was a pause before he sighed. "All of them."

She turned her head to stare at him, her eyes wide. "All of them?"

"The ones on that shelf, yeah."

Katherine did a quick mental inventory. "There must be thirty books here."

"Only twenty-one," he said softly. "Unless you count the category romances, which I don't do anymore. Then there are just over forty."

"Jon Masters," she said quietly. "The mysteries, the suspense thrillers." He nodded. Then she remembered the romance novels and touched her fingertip to the spine of one by her favorite author. One she'd read numerous times. "J. Kincade." She turned to look at him. "That's you?"

He nodded. "Kincade's my middle name."

"Jonah Kincade Masterson." She smiled to herself at the sound of it and, for one brief second, indulged in a purely teenage fantasy of how it would look printed on a wedding invitation.

*Whoa. About face! And forward march, as far in the opposite direction from that thought as possible.*

## Snowbound

"All of those books are yours?"

"I write fast," he said with a slightly self-conscious smile. "I get these people in my head, and they won't leave me alone until I get their stories out. It's like exorcising demons."

"Over forty books. In what, six, seven years?"

"Eight," he said sheepishly. "Look, it's not that big of a deal."

"Yes, it is." She selected one, then sat down again on the couch and studied the cover for a moment before raising her eyes to his. "This is so ironic. Do you have any idea how many of your books I've read? How many times I've lain in bed and fallen asleep with your words still in my head? Dreamed about the people you created?"

Jonah wiggled his eyebrows. "No, but I have to admit it's a rather intriguing thought that my books were sharing your bed long before I was."

Katherine rolled her eyes, flopped back against the cushion and put the open book over her face. "You saw one of your own books fall out of my suitcase. I've read at least three more in the last few days, and you never said a word."

He hooked a finger around the book and pulled it back. "What should I have said?" he asked, amused.

"You could have at least told me before I made such an idiot out of myself."

"And how, exactly, did you do that?"

"Prattling on about romance and how I love romance—" She felt the blood rush hot to her cheeks and knew she was blushing again.

"What?"

"One of the hottest sex scenes I've ever read was in one of your books," she admitted.

One eyebrow raised, Jonah contemplated that, unashamed by the little burst of pride it gave him. "Which book?"



Susan Greene

*"Moon over Montana."* She held up the book in her hand. "The one on the back of a horse. I needed a cold shower after that one."

Jonah chuckled. The category romances he'd written at the beginning of his career had been simply bread and butter, done to make enough money and enough of a name for himself to write what he really wanted. Using the androgynous pseudonym for those had been his first agent's idea, because she didn't think romance written by a man would sell. Over the years he'd been glad he'd taken the advice. He found it a little more than ironic that it would come back to haunt him now.

"And what did you think?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"I asked, didn't I?"

Katherine looked down at the book she held. "I thought if the men in Montana could make a woman feel what he made her feel, I was ready to pack my bags and head for Big Sky Country."

Grinning, Jonah took the book and tossed it aside. "And now?"

Katherine reached up and ran her fingertips through his hair. "I think maybe the man who created my fictional heroes has a lot more in common with them than he'd like to admit."

He shook his head. "It's just fiction, Katie."

"Fiction reveals the truth reality obscures," she said softly.

Jonah closed his eyes, knowing he couldn't argue with Ralph Waldo Emerson.

## **Snowbound**

### **Chapter Eleven**

Katherine groaned and shifted in the bed, searching out Jonah's warmth. When she didn't find it, she reached out with a hand, but grasped only cool, empty sheets. She opened her eyes, blinked against the bright light sneaking in through cracks in the blinds and glanced at the clock. It was not late, only a little after eight. Jonah had probably gotten up to let the dog out. She stretched, rolled over and fell asleep again.

The second time she awoke, Jonah still hadn't returned, and she figured he'd decided to let her sleep. Sitting up, she realized that even with the residual soreness from the accident, she felt better and more rested than she had in a long time. Who'd have thought that several days of nothing but relaxation and incredible sex would have that effect? And her mother thought a spa was the answer to stress. Anne Fitzgerald Winstead didn't know what she was missing.

Fully awake now, Katherine swung her legs over the side of the bed and reached for the clothes Jonah had shucked her out of the previous night. Her jeans were beside the bed, her bra just under the edge of it. She located the borrowed sweatshirt he'd tossed over a chair, but her panties were nowhere to be found. She dug under the covers, found the scrap of pink lace buried beneath the sheet and allowed herself a girlish giggle at the memory of Jonah slowly stripping them off with his teeth.

## Susan Greene

She tossed them into the bag of clothes she planned to send out to be laundered once she returned home. Then she pulled a clean pair out of her suitcase and went into the bathroom to shower and dress.

When she walked into the sunny kitchen, the first thing she noticed was the pot of fresh coffee, still hot. God bless the man. She poured herself a cup and was about to go look for him in the loft when she heard a rhythmic thumping coming from outside.

“Chewie?” she called, but the dog didn’t come. She peered out the window over the kitchen sink. The fluffy forms of trees buried in snow were bright white against the clear blue of the sky, but the dog was nowhere to be seen, and the noise continued.

Carrying her steaming cup of coffee, she walked to the glass doors that led to the deck. She set down the cup to slip into her borrowed boots and jacket, then picked it up again before she wandered out onto the deck. She leaned against the rail, looked over the edge and found the source of the sound.

Jonah turned a short log up to stand on one end. Using a sledgehammer, he tapped an iron wedge into the center of the log. He stepped back, raised the hammer over his head and swung downward, metal clanging against metal as he drove the wedge into the wood. The log split neatly and fell away into halves. Katherine watched as he repeated the process until the wood was split into four sections, then picked them up and tossed them under the deck.

She carried her coffee cup down the stairs and noticed the huge stockpile of firewood stacked beneath the deck. If Jonah had split all that wood, it was no wonder the man was built. That had to be a better workout than any gym could provide.

The day was not particularly warm, the air crisp with a chill, but he had removed his jacket and tossed it over the split-rail fence that bordered the property. Katherine smiled in pure feminine appreciation and watched the muscles of his shoulders and back bunch and shift beneath the tight-fitting thermal shirt he wore as he

## Snowbound

set up another log. With gloved hands, he gripped the sledgehammer's wooden handle and lifted it high over his head, then brought it down again.

Something almost primal stirred in her, the heat spreading low in her body. Katherine closed her eyes and indulged in a brief fantasy of Jonah splitting wood in the summertime, shirtless, the sweat beading on his dark skin, tanned even darker by the sun.

He slammed the hammer down again, and she opened her eyes to reality. She wouldn't be here in the summer. By summer she'd be a distant memory to Professor Jonah Masterson, although she was beginning to realize that she was going to have a very difficult time forgetting him.

He paused and rested the heavy head of the hammer against the top of the next log. Leaning on the handle, he looked up. The grin that split his face sent her heart cartwheeling.

"Morning," he called out, and lowered the hammer to the ground.

"Good morning yourself."

His boots crunched the snow as he walked over to her and nodded at her steaming cup. "I see you found the coffee." His hand covered hers, and he lifted the cup to his lips. After a sip, he wrinkled his nose. "Why anyone would want to ruin a good cup of coffee with all that cream and sugar is beyond me."

"How you drink it completely black is beyond me."

He reached for the cup and raised it to his mouth again.

"I thought you didn't like it," she said with a smirk.

"I don't, but the coffee's hot, and it's damn cold out here."

Katherine laughed. "So put on your jacket."

"Can't swing a hammer in that jacket."

"I'll fix you your own cup. Black," she said, turning toward the steps.

Jonah caught her sleeve, took the cup from her and reached up to place it on the deck above him. "I know a better way to get warm."

**Susan Greene**

He pulled her into his arms and covered her mouth with his. One gloved hand came up to her face, the worn leather soft against her cheek.

She melted into him, molded herself against him. The scents of warm leather and coffee and Jonah sent her senses into overdrive. Despite the cold, heat curled through her. If Jonah decided to undress her right here and now, she wouldn't have the slightest inclination to deny him. She was surprised the snow around them wasn't melting already.

His nose was cold against her skin, but his mouth was hot as it moved over her neck. "Your nose is cold." She giggled as he nuzzled the sensitive skin beneath her ear.

"But you're all soft and warm," he murmured. She felt a tug at the hem of her sweatshirt, then shrieked in shock when icy cold fingers touched her naked flesh beneath. Somehow he'd ditched the gloves and now had an iron grip on her waist with fingers so cold she was certain she was going to have frostbite wherever he touched. Jonah laughed and moved his hands to her back.

"Your fingers are like ice, Jonah!" Writhing, Katherine tried to free herself from his grip, but he only pulled her tighter against him. Holding her with one arm, he reached under her shirt to cup her breast through the thin silk of her bra. Her body bucked at the new assault as his fingers—well, she wasn't completely sure they weren't icicles—slipped inside the silk. She wanted to protest but couldn't stop laughing long enough to catch a breath. He backed up to one of the deck's support posts.

Knowing she was not going to overpower him, Katherine lunged forward and grabbed a handful of snow from the deck behind him. With one hand holding her captive and the other inside her bra, Jonah couldn't free himself quickly enough to ward off her attack. His eyes widened, then narrowed dangerously as he saw what was coming.

"Don't you dare, Katie," he warned, just before the icy handful of snow hit him directly in the face. Sputtering, he jerked

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his hand out from beneath her shirt but still held her against him as he reached up and grabbed a handful himself.

"No!" she squealed, and tried to jerk away, but his strong arm held her in place. He slid a hand around behind her and smacked his snow-filled palm against her back. Instinctively, she arched into him, pressing her body against his, and she had to wonder how the man could be so freaking cold and so aroused at the same time.

His frigid fingers closed over her breast inside her bra and, despite the cold, she arched into his touch. He leaned down to take her mouth again and ground his hips against hers. Nope. Apparently the cold wasn't having any effect on him at all.

On impulse, she reached behind him and grabbed another handful of snow. With her mouth still fused to his, she lowered her other hand to the waistband of his jeans and slid one finger just under the denim. Jonah growled softly and took the kiss deeper.

Katherine suppressed a giggle. She held the snow in her free hand and indulged herself with his kisses for a moment more before quickly tugging open the button of his jeans and dumping the snow down his pants.

Cursing, Jonah jerked his hand from beneath her shirt and jumped back. "That was *so* not fair," he complained, and shoved a hand into his pants to remove some of the snow. He tugged his zipper up and buttoned his jeans. "You fight dirty."

"Turnabout is fair play."

"I didn't put snow down your pants."

"No, but you did put your freezing hands inside my bra."

He ignored her remark. "Now my shorts are wet." He rubbed a hand over his jeans and stamped one foot to shake out more of the snow. "God, that's cold. Okay, you win."

Katherine grinned victoriously. "Still want that coffee?"

"Sure," he said, leaning over and giving her a quick kiss.

"Thanks."

Susan Greene

She was almost at the bottom step when a blast of cold smacked her in the back of the head. No, he hadn't. She stopped in her tracks and slowly turned to face a grinning Jonah. He stood where she'd left him, bouncing another perfectly round snowball in one hand.

Oh, yes. He had.

Her tone was even, her voice calm. "That was despicable."

He lifted one eyebrow. "Putting snow down my pants wasn't?"

Katherine narrowed her eyes. "You started it."

"And now I'm going to finish it," he said, and threw the snowball in his hand.

Katherine screeched and tried to run behind the stairs as the snowball smacked her in the shoulder. He came after her and hit her with another one as she ducked under the steps. She swung around to the other side and grabbed a handful of snow. Before she could form it into a ball, Jonah tackled her from behind and spun her around. His strong arms banded around her waist.

Laughing hysterically and wriggling in his grasp, Katherine tried to pull away. She stumbled and landed on her back in the snow. Jonah fell on top of her, his body pinning hers to the ground.

Her arms were trapped between them. She shoved at him, her hands against his chest. "Get off me!"

"I rather like you like this," he said, and leaned down to kiss her.

"It's cold, and I'm getting wet!"

He lifted his head and looked down at her. "Do you really think telling me you're getting wet is going to motivate me to get off you?"

Growling and laughing at the same time, Katherine grabbed a handful of snow and shoved it in his face. Jonah sputtered and shook it off. "You're going to pay for that."

Katherine wiped the dripping snow from his cheek. "I'm shaking in my boots."

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"You should be," he said, and lowered his head to kiss her again. Katherine moaned softly. If this was punishment, she was going to be very bad very often. His lips were cold, and melting snow dripped onto her face, but she didn't mind as long as he kissed her. Her jeans were soaked through, her hair was wet, and she couldn't have cared less as long as he kept making her feel the way she felt right then, with his mouth hungry on hers and his weight pressing her into the soft snow.

"You two keep that up and you're going to melt everything within a fifty-mile radius."

Jonah's head jerked up, and Katherine turned hers to look at the old woman standing on the deck. Dressed in ancient jeans and a flannel shirt, she peered at them from beneath the brim of a baseball cap. Her fists rested on her hips.

"Viv. Nice of you to drop by. We're fine, thanks for asking."

Katherine giggled beneath him, and he kissed her again.

"You know what'll happen then?" Viv said, a little louder. "Flash floods, that's what, given all this snow. For crying out loud, boy. Let the girl up. She's soaked to the skin. Gonna catch her death."

"You don't catch a cold from being cold," Katherine murmured from beneath him.

"Tell that to Viv." He moved off her and offered her a hand.

On her feet again, Katherine brushed the snow from her hair and looked up at the woman on the deck. She was watching Jonah with a raised eyebrow and a knowing expression on her face.

Viv shook her head and came down the steps. "So this is your damsel in distress, huh?" The older woman smiled up at Katherine. "She don't look much worse for the wear."

"Katie, this is my Aunt Viv."

"Hello." Katherine offered a hand and hoped desperately that Viv would assume the color in her cheeks was from the cold. "I wanted to thank you for what you did."



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Viv took Katherine's hand in hers. "Wasn't a big deal. I've been patching folks up around here for a long time now." She raked her dark-eyed gaze over Katherine. "You're taller than I thought. Pretty, too," she added, casting Jonah a sidelong glance.

"Yes, she is," he agreed.

Katherine felt herself blush and looked down at her snow-covered jeans. "Umm...thank you." With her free hand, she brushed at the snow stuck to her behind. Jonah reached over to help her, and she swatted his hand away. It was bad enough that they'd been caught making out like teenagers in the snow, and now here he was trying to cop a feel in front of his aunt.

The older woman shook her head and tugged Katherine's hand. "Let's get you inside and into some dry clothes before you get sick." She spared a glance at Jonah. "Knocking the poor thing down in the snow. You should know better, treating a girl like that. I ought to turn you over my knee."

"She started it," he said, and pointed at Katherine.

"I did not," Katherine argued. "You threw the first snowball."

"You put snow down my pants."

Viv shot her a look. "You put snow down his pants?"

Katherine shrugged. "He needed cooling off."

A large grin spread across the older woman's face. "I like you. Let's go inside." She turned to Jonah. "Finish splitting that wood, boy. We're going inside for some girl talk and tea."

"Girl talk is fine, but no tea," Jonah said as he walked back over to pick up the sledgehammer.

"Tea," Viv said, then turned to Katherine. "I make my own blend." She took Katherine's hand and led her toward the door.

"I remember. The first night I was here Jonah made some for me. It was wonderful."

"Do *not* drink tea with this woman," he warned Katherine. "She'll start predicting your future."

"You read tea leaves?" Katherine asked Viv, intrigued.

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Viv's smile widened, her dark eyes sparkling. Katherine could definitely see the family resemblance in those eyes. "As a matter of fact—"

"No tea, Aunt Viv!" Jonah called after them, but the door had already closed behind them.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Viv's insistence, Katherine changed into dry clothes before she joined her in the kitchen. Viv had prepared the tea and was filling the cups when Katherine entered the room.

"It smells wonderful," she told Viv.

Viv handed her a cup and sat down at the table as Katherine seated herself across from her. "Do you really read tea leaves?"

"Jonah didn't tell you, huh?"

"Tell me what?"

"That his family was a bunch of crazy gypsies."

Katherine inhaled the sweet aroma of the tea, then sipped. "No, he failed to mention that."

"He's not too keen on my predictions. He probably thinks I have some sort of pact with the devil." Viv's dark eyes glittered again, and Katherine wondered if there wasn't some truth to that.

"Your predictions often come true?"

"Honey, they always come true. The leaves don't lie. He don't much care for that, particularly if it means he has to admit I was right. Like that Marian. I told him she was no good for him, and when he started talking about marrying her..."

*Marrying her?* Katherine frowned. She'd definitely missed something along the way. "Jonah was engaged?"

Viv set her cup down and nodded. "For a while, but thank the good Lord he saw that tramp for what she was before he put a ring on her finger. I told him that girl was up to no good. She was too young and too ambitious. But he didn't want to listen. Always was a hard head, that boy."

Susan Greene

Katherine frowned. Jonah hadn't said anything about an ex-fiancée, even when they'd talked about Stephen. Viv sighed and looked down into her cup. "I guess he didn't mention that either."

"It didn't come up." Katherine leaned back in her seat and tapped her nails on the china cup. Viv seemed like the type who was brutally honest, so she figured it couldn't hurt to ask. "Was this recent?"

Viv met her gaze, her expression neutral. "A few months back. I think he'd seen it coming a lot longer than he'll admit to. That girl was wrong for him, and I told him so. Too bad it took him finding her in bed with another man to figure it out."

Katherine was horrified. "He caught her in bed with another man?" That had to be a blow to a man's pride, finding the woman he loved in bed with someone else. Katherine knew it happened all the time, but she couldn't imagine how much it must hurt. Her heart ached for Jonah.

"His agent," Viv told her, and shook her head. "No matter. It's water under the bridge now. Don't you be frettin' about that. He never loved her anyway. Just took him a while to figure it out."

"Oh." Somehow Viv's declaration wasn't making her feel any better. Had seducing her simply been his way of proving something to himself? No, that couldn't be right, because *she* had seduced *him*. Not that it mattered. Whatever was between them wasn't going anywhere, anyway. And she only had herself to blame for that.

"You're awful quiet, girl," Viv said. "Don't you worry that pretty head of yours. From what I saw, Jonah isn't giving his ex a thought these days. He's pretty taken with you."

Katherine felt the heat creep into her cheeks. "Well, about that..."

Viv waved a hand as she sipped her tea. "I may be old, but I'm not dead. The boy's got his father's good looks. There's something about those gypsy men, all dark and mysterious and handsome, that just knots a girl's insides, you know?"

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Since her insides were currently twisting themselves into a pretzel, Katherine could only nod her agreement. Viv smiled and reached over to pat her hand. "I've upset you. I'm sorry, honey."

"It's all right," Katherine lied. "It's...well, there's nothing serious between Jonah and me."

Viv squeezed her hand once and let go. "Well, we'll see about that. Done with that tea?"

Katherine looked down, surprised that her cup was almost empty. "Not quite."

"Gimme the cup," Viv said, and took it from her. "You gotta leave just a little bit in there." She took the cup in her left hand, put her right hand over the top and swirled the dregs of Katherine's tea around in the cup. When she placed it back on the table, she kept her hand over it.

"Now, if you want me to, I'll tell you what this says. If you don't, then..."

Katherine shrugged. "Why not?"

"All right, then." Viv lifted her hand and peered into the cup. She stared at it so long that Katherine shifted in her seat, trying to read the old woman's expression.

Finally, Viv spoke. "Interesting," was all she said before she lifted her gaze to Katherine's.

"What?" Katherine was almost afraid to ask. "Is it that bad?"

Viv looked down into the cup again, turning it this way and that.

"Well, no. Depends on how you look at it." She turned the cup around again. "Company's coming," she said. "Soon."

"Company? You see that in a cup?"

"Yes." She looked into the cup again. "This here symbol means you got company coming, and where it's located in the cup means soon. Let's see what else." She frowned, her wrinkled face wrinkling even more. "You changing careers?"

"I hadn't planned to," Katherine said, and then remembered Jonah's request that she illustrate his book. Maybe she would do

Susan Greene

the book, but no, she wasn't changing careers. Her mother would die if she gave up her career at a prestigious ad agency to become an illustrator. Or, God forbid, a painter.

Then it hit her. *What about what I want?*

Katherine watched the old woman tip the cup and scowl. She muttered something under her breath.

"What is it?"

Viv shook her head. "See this pattern? That means you'll have a new life, six months to a year down the road. There'll be some rough times, but it won't last long. You're going to be very successful. Financially and personally. Lots of changes ahead for you." Her dark eyes sparkled as she smiled. "Don't worry none. Change keeps people on their toes. It's easy just to go with the flow, but you don't want that. You want more. You'll never be happy if you settle for less, honey."

Katherine nodded, but she couldn't help wondering how much of this Viv was actually reading from the cup. She did want more, especially now that Jonah had shown her how much more there was to have.

Viv held out the cup so Katherine could see. "This here." She indicated what looked like a blob to Katherine. "This is the most important thing in your life. The one thing that makes everything else worth the trouble."

"What's that?" Katherine peered into the cup.

"This," Viv said, "is the symbol for love."

"Love?"

"Love," Viv reemphasized. She looked at Katherine, her dark eyes so piercing Katherine thought she must be reading her soul instead of her tea leaves. "You want it. You want everything that goes with it, and you can have it. It's there. You don't realize it, but it's there."

Love. The one thing she'd always wanted, always longed for, and never received from the people who meant the most to her. She supposed there might be some love for her hidden deep in the

## Snowbound

recesses of her mother's heart, but not once in her life had Anne ever told her she loved her. Katherine's father had often been away on business, and had always brought her gifts whenever he returned from his travels. In those rare times he was home, he'd usually found some time for his little daughter, but he'd never spoken the words, either. Since he'd passed away, her mother had become much more involved in her charity luncheons and country club events. Rosa probably loved her, though she'd never said as much. Most likely in an effort to keep her job.

Stephen, Katherine thought, and suppressed the urge to wince. Could he really love her? Would she ever love him? Could she marry a man she didn't love, even if he did love her?

And then there was Jonah. Was there any possibility, however slight, that he might develop some feelings for her? It was all too overwhelming to contemplate.

"How will I know?" she asked Viv.

"You'll know." Viv set the cup aside. "Soon enough. And you're going to be very successful at whatever you do. Brace yourself, honey."

*Brace myself?* Katherine blinked. "Is that all?"

"That's all I'm going to tell you. The rest...well, sometimes it's best not to know."

"How can it be best not to know? Shouldn't I be prepared?"

Viv leaned over and laid her wrinkled hand over Katherine's. It was cool, and soft despite the leathery texture of her skin. "Love isn't something you can prepare for, honey. It just sneaks up on you and, the next thing you know, you're poleaxed."

Katherine sighed. "*Poleaxed*," she murmured. *Well, that explained a lot.*

## Chapter Twelve

"Poleaxed?" Jonah stood in the doorway, pulling off his gloves. "Since when does girl talk include poleaxing someone?"

"Mind your business," Viv chided, and rose to get the teapot. "I wasn't talking to you." She took another cup from the cabinet and filled it before shoving it at him. "Drink this."

"I don't like tea," he said, but drank it anyway because it was hot and he was cold. He grimaced at the taste and looked at Katherine, who was still staring at the empty cup on the table.

"Oh, for crying out loud, what did you say, Viv?" He turned to Katherine. "Don't believe a word of whatever she said," he whispered in her ear.

"You have no idea what I said," Viv told him, and put her cup in the sink.

Jonah scowled at her before he turned back to Katherine. "I warned you not to drink tea with this woman. She thinks she can predict your future. What did she say to you?"

Katherine looked up at him and licked her bottom lip. "She said I'm going to be very successful."

"Oh." Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. There had to be more.

Viv nodded. "See? You think you know everything."

Jonah looked at his aunt. "Viv, don't you have dogs to feed?"

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"Fine way to treat family," Viv muttered, and added Katherine's cup to her own in the sink. "Boy likes to deny his roots. Generations of gypsies relied on tea leaves for—"

Jonah cut her off. "Your dogs, Viv?"

"I was on my way out anyway."

"I'll walk you to the door," Jonah said with a sweeping gesture of his hand.

"I know the way," Viv said, but Jonah was already getting her coat. She sighed and looked at Katherine. "It was nice to meet you, honey."

Katherine stood. "It was lovely to meet you, Viv. I do appreciate you taking care of me the other night. And...the rest..."

Jonah scowled at Viv. "The rest? What rest?"

Viv ignored him and reached up to pat Katherine's cheek. "I already told you it was nothing." She nodded and left the kitchen. Chewie followed at her heels.

Jonah turned to look at Katherine. He should never have left Viv alone with her. Whatever the old woman had told her was bothering her more than she was letting on, and he was going to find out what it was. "I'll be right back," he said to Katherine. He'd find out what had her so upset soon enough. First, he was going to have a chat with his meddlesome aunt.

"What did you say to her?"

"I just read her tea leaves." Viv looked stricken, but Jonah knew better than to fall for it.

"Will you stop it with the tea leaves? I want to know what you said to her." He gestured toward the kitchen. "She looks miserable."

"Maybe you should have told me you weren't entirely honest with the girl."

"What?"

"She didn't know about Marian."

Jonah's stomach clenched. "You told her about Marian?"



Susan Greene

"I guess I assumed you already had. Not my fault you didn't tell the girl the truth."

"What truth?" Jonah lowered his voice. "There is nothing to tell. Good grief, Viv. I didn't tell her because I've only known her for a few days, and it wasn't relevant. Marian and I broke up over six months ago. Why'd you bring that up?"

"I didn't know she didn't know. Besides, the girl has a right to know why you're up here hiding away instead of living your life."

"I am living my life. I'm just living it here instead of in New York. I was due for a sabbatical anyway, and I needed to focus on my writing." He held up her coat.

"Some life. Up here alone, a young, good-looking man like you. Glued all day to a computer, making up stories about romance instead of living it." She shoved her arms into her coat and turned to face him. "It's time someone did something about it, and since you're obviously not—"

"Excuse me, but have you forgotten what you interrupted out there?"

Viv glared at him. "I'm not talking about sex, Jonah. Any two people can have sex. I know what it's like. I'm not so old that I don't remember—"

Jonah cringed. His elderly aunt was talking about sex! He definitely *did not* want to know what she remembered. "For crying out loud, Viv! I certainly hope you weren't in there giving her the idea that she and I are going to live happily ever after, because we're not! That's not what she wants. She made that quite clear."

"But you *are* sleeping with her," Viv countered. His mouth opened, but she cut him off with a wave. "Not my business."

He nodded. "You're right. It's not." He sighed. He hadn't meant to sound so snappish but, for some reason when it came to Katherine, he was feeling a little touchy. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you, Viv. But I am a grown man, and what I do is my concern."

## Snowbound

Viv plucked her cap off the rack beside the door and tugged it over her gray hair. "I don't know what you're playing at here, Jonah. But I'm going to tell you one thing. That's a sweet girl in there, and I don't want you using her to soothe your wounded pride. If you hurt her—"

"Hurt her? How?"

"You seduced her."

"I did not seduce her!" *Geezus*. "If you must know, *she* seduced *me*!" Viv raised one eyebrow skeptically. Jonah's eyes narrowed at the unspoken implication, but he didn't feel compelled to argue the point.

"Look, you're the one who forced this situation. You're the one who—" He stopped abruptly as realization sank in. "Wait a minute. You knew this would happen, didn't you? That's why you left her with me. What, did you read it in your tea leaves?"

"As a matter of fact," Viv said quietly. "But I wasn't going to mention that."

"Well, your damn tea leaves are wrong," Jonah told her, and yanked the door open. "Katherine and I are two consenting adults enjoying each other's company, and that's all there is to it."

Viv smiled and patted his cheek. "Keep telling yourself that." She rubbed Chewie on the head before stepping out the door.

"Quit poking your tea leaves into my life!" Jonah called after her, and shook his head when she turned to flash him a grin and a wave. He stared at the closed door. For the second time in a week, Viv had left him in the lurch where Katherine was concerned, and he was growing tired of it.

Of course he hadn't mentioned Marian. There'd been no reason to. She was a nonentity in his life. Blowing out an exasperated breath, he glanced toward the kitchen. Katherine might have smiled, but she hadn't been happy. What the hell had Viv said to her?

\* \* \* \* \*

Susan Greene

Katherine dropped into a chair and put her head in her hands.

*Poleaxed.* She certainly felt poleaxed, and she wasn't even sure why. Jonah had no obligation to disclose anything regarding his past love life and, as she hadn't asked, she couldn't say he lied. He didn't seem like the type who would lie anyway, but who knew? She'd only known him a few days.

A few days, she reminded herself. A few of the most glorious, wonderful days of her life. That was what mattered, not what some nutty, sweet old lady thought she saw in the dregs of a teacup.

Feeling better, she lifted her head and noticed the tin of tea Viv had left on the counter. She picked it up and headed for the door. As she approached the entry, she could hear the low murmurs of Jonah and Viv's conversation. She started to call out and tell Viv she'd forgotten her tea, but stopped in the doorway, listening to Jonah's voice and wishing she'd stayed in the kitchen.

"For crying out loud, Viv! I certainly hope you weren't in there giving her the idea that she and I are going to live happily ever after, because we're not! That's not what she wants! She made that quite clear!"

Katherine froze. She didn't intend to eavesdrop, but her feet were riveted to the floor, her fingers tightly wrapped around the tin. Their voices were hushed, and then Jonah raised his just slightly, his tone almost defiant.

"Well, your tea leaves are wrong!" Katherine heard the door open. "Katie and I are two consenting adults enjoying each other's company, and that's all there is to it."

She didn't wait to hear more. She couldn't have heard it anyway over the sound of her own blood rushing in her ears. Ducking back into the kitchen, Katherine leaned against the wall and sighed. She couldn't argue, because that was what she said, but hearing Jonah repeat her words stung more than she liked to admit.

## Snowbound

Well, she was the one who laid down the ground rules. Careful what you wish for. The old adage suddenly took on a whole new meaning.

She heard the door close and took a deep breath as Chewie lumbered into the kitchen and poked his nose under her hand. She knelt to run her fingers over his silky ears and wondered how she'd ever gotten through her childhood without a dog. Just his presence made her feel better. How much more tolerable would life with Anne Winstead have been if she'd had this kind of unconditional love to comfort her?

Burying her face in the fur of his neck, she vowed no child of hers would ever be without a dog.

"You know, that's the second time that mutt's made me jealous. This keeps up, I'm taking him back to the pound."

Katherine looked up to see Jonah standing in the doorway, and rose. "Sorry. I'm making up for a lifetime of deprivation." She ruffled Chewie's fur once more. "I think when I get home I'm going to get a dog."

"Yeah, your mother would love that." Jonah leaned on the doorframe. "So, what did Viv say?"

"I told you. She said I was going to be very successful."

"It's just a guess, but I think the Beamer and the Armani suit would indicate you already are."

With a shrug, Katherine picked up the teapot and walked to the sink to empty it. "I suppose it depends on your perspective."

"She told you about Marian."

Katherine shrugged again. "She mentioned it."

"What did she tell you? That I was pining away here all alone in the woods and needed someone to rescue me from my depression?"

The edge in his voice made her turn to face him, but the grim expression on his face made her turn away again. Needing something to do with her hands, she turned on the faucet and

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started rinsing out the teapot. "No. She just told me that you'd been engaged, and it didn't work out."

"That's all?"

"That's all. For Pete's sake, Jonah, she was just being friendly. It's not relevant anyway, is it?" She risked another glance at him. He looked only slightly more relaxed, his hands shoved into his pockets. He did that when he was annoyed about something. Or nervous. He'd done it the first night she was there. How, in just a matter of days, could she know more about this man's quirks than Stephen's, whom she'd known for over a year?

"I guess it's not," he finally said, and she turned back toward the sink, reaching for a sponge to wash out the cups. "So, what upset you?"

"I'm not upset." She hoped it sounded convincing.

"You're a lousy liar." He stepped over to lean against the counter beside the sink. "No wonder you couldn't ever get away with anything as a kid. Your mother could see right through you."

"I don't think honesty is something to scoff at," Katherine snapped back, just a bit more irritated now. It was irrational to be angry with him for not telling her something that was none of her business to begin with. "Just because I didn't pride myself on being able to pull one over on my parents doesn't mean—"

"Look." Jonah cut her off. "I didn't tell you about Marian because I didn't think it was important."

"She was important enough for you to ask her to marry you," Katherine reminded him, and scrubbed furiously at the leaves still stuck in the teacup. *Sometimes it's best not to know*, Viv had said. Viv was right. She wished she didn't know.

"*Was* being the operative word."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you. It's none of my business." She rinsed the cup and picked up another. It slipped from her wet fingers and shattered in the sink. "Oh, hell," she muttered. "I broke your cup." She reached to pick up the broken

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pieces, and sliced her finger on a sliver of porcelain. "Damn it!" She dropped the broken shard back into the sink.

Jonah grabbed a towel from the rack by the sink and gently wrapped it around her hand. "I'm corrupting you."

"Corrupting me?"

"Five days with me and you're cursing like a sailor."

Katherine chuckled. He smiled.

She returned a feeble smile. "Not to mention sleeping with a man I just met and smashing his porcelain."

"I don't care about the cup, but I like the sleeping-with-a-man-you-just- met part." He peeled back the towel to inspect the cut, then covered it again.

"It's not deep. Keep the pressure on it. I'll get a bandage."

He opened a cabinet, pulled out a first-aid kit and came back to her. She watched him peel the wrapper off a bandage, dab a bit of antibiotic cream on the pad and wrap it around her finger. Then he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it before he folded her hand in his. "There, all better." She raised an eyebrow at him, and he shrugged. "That's what my mom always did."

The pressure in her chest suddenly making it hard to breathe. He'd had that kind of comfort all of his life, she realized. Sisters who wore silly flannel pajamas he was sweet enough to buy for them, a nosy aunt who read tea leaves and tried to manipulate his future, a dog who loved him unconditionally and a mother who had kissed his hurts away. What would that have been like?

"You yelled at your aunt," she finally said as she leaned back against the counter and rubbed her throbbing finger.

"That wasn't yelling. That was making myself heard. We're Irish. We're loud. If you want to be heard in a room full of Mastersons, volume is key. Especially if we're drinking. And again, we're Irish. So we're usually drinking."

The image of a house full of dark-haired, half-drunk, smiling Irish gypsies, all yelling affectionately at one another filled her head. Holidays with his family would probably give her a

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headache. Not that she would ever have to worry about that. "She won't be upset?"

"She'd be more upset if I didn't talk back. She'd think there was something wrong with me and start making me drink that god-awful tea again."

"I'm so not getting this." Katherine rubbed her forehead with her undamaged hand. If she'd ever spoken to one of her relatives in that tone, her mother would have keeled over. Jonah yelled at his, and they accepted it as normal. Go figure.

"Viv's fine, at least until I find out what she said to you that upset you so much. Then, I might have to strangle her."

"She didn't upset me," Katherine insisted again. "She just told me I should brace myself for some changes in my life."

Jonah frowned. "What kind of changes?"

"She wouldn't say. She said sometimes it's better not to know."

"I told you not to listen to a word that crazy old woman says. I love her, but she's flat nuts. Don't let her predictions get to you. She's deliberately vague so she can come back later and say 'Aha! I told you so,' when the truth is she never really said anything at all." He moved in front of her and placed his hands on the counter on either side of her waist. "I can make predictions, too, you know," he said in a low voice.

"Can you?"

"Mmm hmm," he murmured, and leaned down to brush his lips against hers. "I predict you're going to feel a lot better in about two minutes."

He caught her hips and boosted her up onto the counter, then slipped one hand beneath her sweatshirt. His hand wasn't cold now. In fact, it was so warm on her skin that she shuddered against him. The fingers of his other hand tugged at the button of her jeans. "In fact, you're going to feel very, very good."

## Snowbound

Katherine let her head fall back as he kissed his way down her neck, tugging the sweatshirt up at the same time, and let him prove just how reliable his prediction was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, with Katherine curled beside him, Jonah lay staring at the ceiling. She was asleep, her breathing was slow and even, and the peaceful rhythm of it matched his.

Five days. He'd known her five days, and somehow she'd managed to wedge herself into his life so tightly he couldn't imagine what he was going to do when she left.

He looked down at her and realized she hadn't forced her way into anything. She just fit. Like a piece of a puzzle, she snapped perfectly into that empty place in his life, filling all the right gaps, completing the picture.

She stirred slightly and rolled over, and Jonah curled himself around her back and put his arm around her. The sound she made reminded him of a contented kitten as she snuggled back against him in her sleep.

*No promises*, she'd said, and he'd agreed. What the hell had he been thinking? He breathed deep, inhaling the soft scent of her hair, and sighed.

*Don't let her go.*

This time it was his heart talking instead of his hormones, and he wasn't inclined to argue.



Susan Greene

## Chapter Thirteen

By Friday morning the weather had warmed some and the roads were clear, but snow still covered much of the ground. They had spent the last few days going over the preliminary artwork for Jonah's book, making changes and tweaks as they saw necessary.

When he'd emailed a copy of the synopsis and a sample of Katherine's drawings to his agent, she had responded enthusiastically and promised to be in touch with the necessary paperwork to get the ball rolling.

Jonah had also introduced Katherine to a new form of entertainment—video games—and they had battled it out in several different forums. That morning she had beaten him in a game of virtual pool but, since he'd staked a long massage on the outcome, she wasn't entirely sure he hadn't thrown it on purpose.

It didn't matter anyway, because they both ended up on the receiving end of a thorough massage, and afterwards, had showered together to wash away the scented oil. Katherine discovered there was a lot more to a shared shower than water conservation. In the bathroom, she pulled on her clothes, while Jonah stood in front of the mirror, wearing only jeans. His long fingers grazed over his beard, and he looked at her in the mirror.

"Should I shave?"

"That's up to you," she said, "but I like the beard."

## Snowbound

"Then the beard stays," he said with finality, and smiled at her.

Their eyes met in the mirror, and Katherine froze in the middle of buttoning her jeans.

*Poleaxed*, Viv had said, and she suddenly realized exactly what that meant. She could love this man. She could love this English professor-slash-mountain-man-slash-knight-in-shining-armor who could chop wood, bandage cuts, cook homemade soup, and make her laugh as often as he made her scream with pleasure. This man who wrote some of the most romantic stories she'd ever read and made her feel things she'd never dreamed possible.

Could, hell. She *was* in love with him. Completely and hopelessly in love with him. *Poleaxed* didn't begin to cover it. She suddenly felt like she'd been hit by a truck. She shook her head, hoping to derail that last train of thought, but it kept right on chugging.

"Katie?" Jonah was looking at her curiously. "Are you all right?"

Composure. Grab that Anne Fitzgerald Winstead breeding and hold on for dear life. She forced a smile. "I'm fine."

"You looked a little pale there for a minute." He lifted her chin with his fingers. She felt her breath catch as she met his eyes. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," she lied, and stepped back to button her jeans. This would not do. She couldn't allow herself to be in love with him. The week had been wonderful, but it was time to get out before she did something drastic, like throwing herself at him.

Oh, yeah. She'd already done that. Well, she wasn't about to let him think it meant any more to her than it had to him. "It's...I need to call Zeke and check on my car."

"He said he'd call when it was ready," Jonah reminded her.

"Yeah, well, my vacation is almost over, and if he's not going to have it finished, I'll need to find out about renting a car, and—"

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Jonah's hand on her face again stopped her in midsentence. He looked down at her, his dark eyes questioning. "Katie, what's this about?"

"It's just..." *I love you*, she wanted to say, and it shocked her. She'd never said that to anyone, not even her parents. "It's about my life, Jonah. I have to get back to it sometime. I have a job, and my mother, and—"

"Stephen," he said quietly.

Katherine swallowed. "Yes. Stephen. I need to deal with that situation, and I'm just—"

She was interrupted by Chewie's frantic barking, followed by a sharp rapping on the front door.

"Viv," Jonah said with a sigh.

Katherine took a step back from him. "I'll go let her in."

"She can wait." He pulled her back into his arms. "Tell me what's bothering you."

She slapped at his chest playfully. "Jonah, that's rude."

"Thanks for the pointer, Miss Manners. Now, what's really wrong?"

"Nothing."

"I told you, you're a lousy liar."

"I just have a lot on my mind. I have a lot to do when I get back and—"

"So don't go back. Let's just run off together, someplace tropical and warm."

"And do what for a living?"

"I'll buy a boat and run fishing charters."

"And what would I do?" she asked, not really hating the thought.

He grinned. "You can sell paintings to the tourists and work on getting a tan with no lines."

"Ha, ha." Katherine smacked him again, although the idea did have merit. "That much sun and I'll have skin like leather before I'm forty."

## Snowbound

"Spoilsport," he muttered as he nuzzled her neck.

The knocking came again, and she pushed out of his arms. "I'll go let Viv in before Chewie tears the door down. You keep working on that fantasy." She grinned and left the bathroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Calm down, Chewie. It's only Viv. Go lie down." She patted him on the head as he lumbered off, and then let her thoughts drift back to Jonah's proposition. No matter how much appeal the idea held, she knew he was joking. The kind of heated passions she'd shared with Jonah couldn't last anyway. She couldn't be in love with him. She'd only known him for a week. It simply wasn't possible. Once she got home, away from him, she'd realize that it was for the best.

*Oh, God,* she thought as she pulled the door open. *I sound just like my—*

The thought stopped dead as she stared at the woman standing on the porch.

"Mother," she said, finishing the thought out loud.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah watched her leave the room. Okay, maybe he hadn't been all that serious about the boat thing, but he was serious about her staying. He had deliberately been putting off any thoughts of her leaving at the end of the week because he didn't wish to mar what time they had with undue concerns.

He turned and frowned at his reflection. What had he thought? That she would be so swept off her feet by his lovemaking that she'd give up the life she had to stay here with him? That she'd fall so completely in love with him that she wouldn't be able to leave? He scowled at himself in the mirror. Well, there was a nice fantasy for you.

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How could he have been so stupid? The woman told him from the beginning where she stood. He knew what she'd said, but she just didn't seem the type to enjoy a week of mind-bending sex, then shake his hand and say 'thanks for the memories'.

No, unless he was completely wrong, Katie felt something for him, too. There was something here that both of them were going to have to face. He couldn't just flat out tell her how he felt because she'd probably run for the hills. Maybe if he could just talk her into staying a little longer, they could take some time to explore the potential.

Yeah, that was a good idea. He wouldn't pressure her; he'd just invite her to stay a little longer, give them both time to see what would develop. He still had another few months on sabbatical. Even if she had to go back to Charlotte to work, they could see each other on weekends until he had to go back to New York in the fall. And maybe by then they'd both know where they stood.

Unless his nosy Aunt Viv got involved again. That could be disastrous. Deciding it best not to leave Katherine alone with her, he walked out to the living room prepared for battle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anne's perfectly made-up face went slack with relief. "Katherine! Are you all right?" She stepped in and, with a manicured hand, touched the fading bruise on her daughter's cheek.

Katherine backed up. "What are you doing here, Mother?"

Anne ignored the question. "You look pale. I've been so worried about you." She leaned forward, placed her hands lightly on Katherine's shoulders and gave the air beside her cheek a kiss. Stepping back, she looked her daughter over. "Oh, Katherine. What are you wearing?"

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Katherine looked down at her own attire. "They're called jeans, Mother."

"What happened? Was your suitcase destroyed? Where are your clothes?"

"My clothes are fine, but they're not very practical for this weather. These are warm."

"So is a mink," her mother chided. Katherine rolled her eyes heavenward. Anne shivered slightly. "Are you going to invite us in? It's dreadfully cold out here, and—"

"Us?" Katherine looked over her mother's shoulder. Coming up the wooden steps behind her was Stephen Shackleford. Her heart stopped. Not because she was glad to see him, but because she suddenly realized he was the last thing she wanted in her life.

He stopped on the top step and looked her up and down with a bemused smile. "Good God, Katherine. What happened to you?"

"Now, now, Stephen," Anne crooned. "The girl has been through quite an ordeal."

"I'll say," he remarked, and stamped the snow off his Ferragamos. His gaze raked over her jeans and sweatshirt, his disdain obvious. "You look terrible, Katherine."

"Why, thank you, Stephen. Good to see you as well." She ushered them in and pushed the door shut.

"Quaint," was Stephen's verbal assessment as he surveyed the large great room.

"I think it's lovely." Katherine folded her arms and met his gaze. "What are you doing here?" she asked again.

Before Anne could answer, Chewie barreled back into the room, his claws scraping on the floor as he skidded to a stop in front of Anne. He poked his nose out cautiously to sniff at Anne's red Prada pumps. Anne looked as if she was going to faint.

Katherine snapped her fingers and pointed to the hearth. "Chewie, no. Go lie down." Obediently, the dog went to his spot in front of the fireplace and slumped to the floor.

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"What *is* that thing?" Anne stiffened her spine and glared at Chewie.

"It's just a dog, Mother." Stephen snorted, and Katherine turned to look at him. "For the third time, what are you doing here?"

He smiled. "We couldn't reach you on your cell. We were concerned when we called the spa and discovered you'd never checked in. So your mother called the local sheriff and found out about your accident. He told us where to find you."

"I see." Katherine made a mental note to find out who the big-mouthed sheriff was. "So you thought you would come rushing up here to rescue me?"

"Katie, if Viv starts again about the tea..." Jonah stepped into the living room, and stopped short. All three blonde heads turned.

He was shirtless, his jeans zipped but unbuttoned, as if he'd dressed in a hurry. His feet were bare, and drops of water still glistened in his beard as he towed off his damp hair.

Anne gasped, and Jonah slowly lowered the towel. His dark eyes narrowed just slightly at the strangers in his house before he looked down and quickly buttoned his jeans.

Katherine slid her tongue across her lower lip and offered Jonah a shaky smile. "Jonah, this is—"

"Your mother," he said, completing the sentence for her. He tossed the towel over his shoulder and moved to stand beside her. "Yes, and I can see beauty and elegance are family traits." He smiled and held out his hand.

Katherine watched her mother lay her delicate hand in his wide palm. "Anne Fitzgerald Winstead." Proper to the last, as always.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Winstead. I'm Jonah Masterson."

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Her mother gave Jonah a once-over, her expression cool, but he didn't seem to notice. He turned to his other unexpected guest and offered his hand. "And you are?" he asked politely.

Stephen drew himself up and squared his shoulders before reaching for Jonah's outstretched hand. "Stephen Shackleford." He grasped Jonah's hand and pumped hard.

Katherine saw the slight quirk of Jonah's lips in response, but Jonah simply squeezed Stephen's hand once before pulling his away. Although Stephen's expression didn't change, she noticed he flexed his fingers as he spoke, and had to stifle a giggle.

"I take it you're our hero," Stephen said.

"I wouldn't go that far," Jonah answered, ignoring Stephen's blatant sarcasm. "Can I take your coats?" He carefully lifted Anne's mink from her shoulders. Stephen shrugged out of his own cashmere overcoat and handed it to Jonah, who hung them on the pegs near the door.

Stephen stepped closer to Katherine and slipped an arm around her waist. "The sheriff told us what happened. I appreciate you helping my Katherine."

She saw Jonah bristle slightly at that, but his smile remained placid. "It was fortunate that she ran off the road so nearby, or I might not have heard the crash. Just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

"Fortunate, yes," Stephen agreed. "I'm just glad she wasn't hurt."

Jonah smiled at Katherine. "Well, she didn't exactly come through unscathed. She had some pretty bad bruises, and she was out cold when I found her."

Anne paled. "Goodness, Mr. Masterson, why didn't you call an ambulance?"

"I would have, but the phones were out."

"Don't you have a cell phone?" Stephen asked.

Jonah shook his head. "No. They don't work up here anyway."



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Stephen snorted. "Well, that's just ridiculous. She was injured, and you had no way of calling for help. What if she'd been hurt worse?"

"It was only a few bruises, Stephen. No big deal," Katherine put in. "I'm fine. Besides, an ambulance couldn't have gotten through. The roads were too bad. Viv took care of me." She reached up and fingered the fading bruise on her forehead. "It's almost healed, and I doubt there'll even be a scar."

Anne blinked. "Viv? Who's Viv?"

"Jonah's aunt," Katherine explained.

Anne looked at Jonah. "She's a nurse?"

"Well, no. But she's quite skilled in natural healing."

Anne turned her incredulous gaze on Katherine. "Good Lord, Katherine. You let some crazy mountain woman with no formal medical training treat your injuries?" Katherine could hear the panic in her mother's voice. "When we get home, you're going to have to go to your doctor and—"

"Mother, I'm fine. Viv is not crazy. She's a very sweet lady—" She ignored Jonah's chuckle. "And she knows what she's doing. She came over here in a raging blizzard to treat my injuries, and I'm grateful."

Stephen turned to Katherine. "I did try to warn you about driving yourself."

"And I offered you a driver," her mother reminded her.

"And I refused, which I realize makes the situation completely my fault, Mother. I accept full responsibility for my actions." She brushed a stray wisp of hair out of her face, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"In any case," Jonah put in, "it was an accident. It wasn't Katherine's fault a deer was standing in the middle of an icy road."

"A deer?" her mother asked, her eyes widening. Her fingers fluttered to her throat, toying with the single strand of elegant pearls. "Oh, my."

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"Mother, why don't you and Stephen sit down and let me get you some coffee?" Katherine pulled away from Stephen and ushered her mother, who was looking rather pale, to the sofa.

"I'll get it," Jonah said, offering Katherine a sympathetic look. "Just let me grab a shirt."

The minute he disappeared from the room, Stephen was at her side. "Katherine...did he...harm you in any way?"

Whirling to face him, her mouth dropped open. "What?"

"Did he...make a pass at you?" At her glare, he frowned. "Well, you are a beautiful woman, Katherine. You were here, all alone with him. And he's—"

"A gentleman, Stephen," she snapped back. "Don't even go there!"

Anne's eyes widened at the thought. "Oh, Katherine. I hadn't even thought of that. You, all alone here with...him."

"Mother, for crying out loud, he saved my life! What is with you two?"

Stephen gave her a condescending smile. "Don't be so dramatic, darling. It's just that we've been horribly worried. It isn't like you not to return calls."

Exasperated, she sat down on the sofa beside her mother. "Jonah has not once touched me in any way that I found inappropriate," she said to Stephen. Leaving him to wonder what she meant, she turned to her mother. "I told you I wouldn't be available this week, and I meant it." She glared back at Stephen. "Why did you think it was necessary to drag Mother up here in this cold?"

"I thought you'd like to come home," Stephen said quietly. "When I called about your car—"

Anger flared in her. How presumptuous could he be? "You called about my car?"

"Well, yes. I figured you'd need someone to make sure you weren't being ripped off. The sheriff was kind enough to tell us where it had been towed, so I called this...mechanic. A Mr. Zeke

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Cahill, I believe. I was informed they were still waiting on a part to be delivered, and it might be another week. Your mother suggested we drive up and bring you back. We'll arrange for your car to be delivered when the repairs are done. Really, Katherine, you should have called me."

Why had she never noticed how damn patronizing the man was? Ignoring him, she turned back to her mother. She would not make a scene in front of Jonah. "I'm sorry if I worried you, Mother, but I *am* nearly thirty." She shot a meaningful glance at Stephen. "I told both of you I would be out of reach this week. There was no need for the two of you to drive all the way up here."

Jonah returned, and Katherine was glad he hadn't bothered to tuck in his clean shirt and had only finger-combed his hair. A man with no use for pretenses, she mused and was somehow proud of that fact. "I'll get some coffee," Jonah offered.

"No need, young man. We can't stay," Anne said quickly. "If Katherine will just gather her things, we'll get her out of your way."

Jonah stopped in his tracks, a stunned expression on his face. "She's not in my way."

"We have to get back, but I do appreciate your hospitality. You've been very kind to my Katherine, and you have a lovely home."

"Thank you." He smiled. "You have a lovely daughter."

Katherine bit back a smile at the way Stephen's jaw tensed. It was wrong, she knew, and oh, so juvenile to enjoy his jealousy, but to hell with it. If she was going to end up married to Stephen Shackelford, it might do him just a bit of good to know other men noticed her. Let him wonder about the rest.

"Go and get your things, Katherine," Anne said impatiently, as if she were speaking to a petulant child.

Katherine shot Jonah a desperate look as she fumbled for an excuse. "My car isn't ready, Mother. I can wait for—"

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“Nonsense. Go and gather your things. You’ve imposed on Mr. Masterson quite enough. After all, it simply isn’t appropriate for you to be here. Stephen and I can take you home, and I’ll send for your car when it’s ready.”

Katherine slowly stood, feeling much the same way she had at eight years old when her mother had chastised her for playing with Rosa’s granddaughter. She’d used the same reasoning then. *It simply isn’t appropriate.*

This wasn’t how it was supposed to end. She didn’t know how it was supposed to end, but she knew this wasn’t it. She didn’t want it to end at all. Unable to look at Jonah, she headed down the hallway.

## Chapter Fourteen

Jonah stood by the fireplace and watched Katie disappear down the hallway. He turned back to Anne and Stephen. "Are you sure I can't get you anything?"

Anne smiled politely, but Jonah could tell it was forced. "We're fine. As soon as Katherine gets her things, we'll be on our way." He nodded, and the silence stretched out for a moment before Anne spoke again. "What is it you do, Mr. Masterson?"

"I'm a teacher. And please, call me Jonah."

"A teacher?" Stephen glanced around the cabin. "You mean there's a school around here?"

"Actually, yes, there are several. But I don't teach here. I teach in New York."

"Oh." Stephen's smile was derisive. "So, what are you doing here?"

"I'm on sabbatical. This place belongs to my family. It was my grandparents' home when they were living."

"It's fortunate for all of us that you were here, then," Stephen said again.

Jonah nodded. The man had no idea how fortunate it had been. He suppressed a smile, and met Stephen's gaze.

Stephen shifted his weight uncomfortably, then glanced around the room for a moment before speaking again. "I do

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appreciate everything you've done for Katherine. I'm sure you weren't planning on having a guest for a week."

"Well, no," Jonah admitted. "But I didn't mind the company." He sat down on the raised hearth and reached down to pet Chewie. "It's pretty quiet up here."

"Secluded, too," Stephen remarked. "I hate to think that she was stranded out here in the middle of nowhere with a stranger. She must have been frightened."

Jonah stiffened at the implication, but for Katie's sake he held his tongue. The phones had been working for several days, and the sheriff would have gladly given him Jonah's number. If he'd been so concerned, why hadn't he tried to get in touch with her before today?

"It was a little uncomfortable for both of us, at first. But she's quite easy to talk to, and I've enjoyed her company. She makes an incredible marinara sauce."

Stephen raised an eyebrow skeptically. "She cooked for you?"

Jonah shrugged. "She wanted to."

Stephen grimaced. "And you survived?"

"She's actually quite a good cook."

Anne stared at him. "Where on earth did she learn to...cook?" The last word was almost choked out, as if menial labor were beneath her.

"Who knows?" Stephen said. "Maybe she was watching one of those cooking shows on television and decided to give it a try. You know Katherine, Anne. She's always been flighty."

Jonah bit back the comment he wanted to make and opted for a glare at Stephen instead. *Flighty, hell*. She could run mental circles around this idiot. He took in Stephen's perfectly groomed appearance, from his neatly cut blond hair to his tailored slacks and buffed fingernails.

Pompous sonofabitch. The jerk didn't deserve her, and clearly didn't appreciate her for who she was. Reining in his

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temper, he decided it was best to leave the room before he said something rude, and turned to Anne. "I'll go help Katie with her bags. Excuse me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Katherine stood in Jonah's bedroom, staring at her open suitcase. The laundry she'd bagged to take home had been washed, folded and was now back in her suitcase. She turned to look at Jonah, who stood in the doorway. "You washed my clothes," she said softly.

He shrugged. "I was doing laundry anyway. I line-dried the silky stuff, like the labels said."

"When—"

"While you were sleeping," he answered before she finished.

Katherine started to laugh at the thought of Jonah hand-laundering all of her lingerie and then hanging it to dry. She choked back a sob instead. The man had done her laundry. Her own mother had never done her laundry. She ran her fingers over the folded clothes and pulled out the flannel pajamas. "These aren't mine."

"Leah called the other day. When I told her how sexy you looked in her pajamas, she wanted you to have them."

Katherine pressed her lips together and laid the pajamas on the bed. She didn't want to take them. They would just be a painful reminder of what she'd lost. She removed a sweater and a pair of her own slacks from the suitcase. Her fingers tightened on the familiar fabric in her hands, and she looked up at him. "Jonah..."

"What?"

She stared at him a moment, her throat so constricted she couldn't speak. There was so much to say, and no way to say it. "Never mind," she finally managed. "I'm going to change."

Unable to bring herself to say anything else, she went into the bathroom. She dressed in her own clothes and applied her

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makeup. There was no sense in listening to her mother complain about her appearance the whole way home. She twisted her hair up and pinned it neatly. Then she took a good look at herself in the mirror. She still looked like the same woman who had driven off the road a week ago, but she didn't feel at all like that woman. The Katherine Winstead that had driven her car off the road a week earlier had never felt a man's hands move over her as if she was something to be treasured, or been kissed as if she was something to be savored. She'd never known pleasure could make her scream, or that pleasuring a man would make her feel empowered. She'd never known passion at all, and she certainly had never been in love.

On the outside, she might still be the same Katherine, but on the inside, she was Katie...Jonah's Katie. She wasn't sure how it happened, but somehow, she'd lost control of her heart the same way she'd lost control of her car. It had skidded off the path of her good intentions, and she'd fallen headlong in love with a man she couldn't have.

It wasn't as if she didn't know this day was coming. She just wished it had been on her own terms instead of her mother's. Jonah hadn't offered her any reason to stay. He had given her the most wonderful week of her life, and she wasn't about to ask for more. The best thing she could do was accept that with the grace Anne had taught her, and be grateful that she'd had the experience at all. With a deep breath, she gathered her things and went into the bedroom.

Her suitcase was closed and standing by the door. Jonah sat on the foot of the bed, his elbows resting on his bent knees. He looked up at her. "They seem eager to get you out of here."

"I guess they were concerned," she said, dropping her toiletry bag beside the suitcase. Suddenly, she was furious with herself for making excuses for her mother and Stephen. "Look, I'm sorry they just showed up here. It's my fault. If I'd just called them and—"



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"It's not your fault, Katie."

Their gazes met, held. He stood and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "You don't have to go," he finally said, his voice sounding thick.

Why didn't he just ask her to stay? If he'd just ask... "Yes, I do," she answered. "It's better this way. We agreed—"

"I know. I'm sorry." He stepped toward her. "Can I kiss you goodbye?" Katherine's heart pounded hard against her ribs. Damn it, it wasn't supposed to be like this. Why was it so hard to contemplate saying goodbye to a man she'd just met? Neither of them had made any promises, and that had been her choice. All he was asking for was a goodbye kiss. After what he'd shown her, a kiss was the least she could give him.

She nodded, just barely, and Jonah lifted his hands to cup her face. He tilted her chin up and lowered his mouth to hers. His lips were warm and soft, and so tender her breath caught in her throat.

*This is the last time. The last time I'll feel his lips on mine, the last time I'll feel the warmth of his hands on my skin. The last time...*

Unable to bear the thought, she pushed it from her mind and let herself melt into him. If she had to leave him, she was at least going to take the memory of this kiss with her. His tongue touched hers, the now-familiar heat built inside her, and her hands moved up to grasp his wrists. She clung to him, an almost unendurable ache rising in her chest until she thought her heart would explode from the pressure.

Jonah lifted his head, her face still framed in his broad hands. Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them back so she could focus on his face. She would not cry. This was just an affair. So why did it hurt so much to think that tomorrow morning she wouldn't wake in his arms, with his warmth curled around her?

Oh, God, she loved him. She'd wanted the kind of love she read about in romance novels. How stupid of her to forget that it always came with a price. And her story would have no happily

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ever after. She tore her gaze from his and stepped back. "I'd better go."

Jonah released her and rocked back on his heels, his hands in his pockets, as she reached for her bags. "Wouldn't want to keep Stephen waiting."

He might as well have punched her in the gut. It would have hurt less. Swallowing, she turned to face him. "Jonah..."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. That was out of line." He ran his fingers through his hair, and her fingers itched to do the same. "Look, Katie, I know what you said—"

"What in blue blazes is taking you so long, Katherine?" Stephen appeared in the doorway. He raked a gaze over her and nodded approvingly. "You changed. That's much better. Now, can we get going? I'd like to get back. I'm meeting Frank for dinner at the club tonight to discuss the Bennett merger."

With a long-suffering glance at Jonah, he sighed. "Women. They never understand the importance of these things."

"I think they understand a lot more than most men give them credit for," Jonah replied.

"One can always hope," Stephen shot back. He reached for her suitcase, but Jonah picked it up first. Stephen gave him an irritated look and grabbed Katherine's computer bag. He nodded toward her toiletry case. "You can get that, can't you, sweetheart?"

"I'll get it," Jonah said, picking it up with his other hand. He glanced over his shoulder at Katherine as he left the room.

Stephen rolled his eyes. "So much for women's liberation," he muttered. "Come on, darling. We need to get on the road."

Katherine followed but dared not risk a backward glance at Jonah's bedroom. When she walked into the hallway, she kept her eyes forward and refused to think about that first glorious time he had taken her, right there against the wall.

Her mother was at the door, slipping into her coat as Stephen held it for her. Jonah had gone outside to put the cases in the trunk of Stephen's Mercedes.

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"Are you ready?" Stephen asked.

Who was he kidding? She'd never be ready. "I guess," she answered.

"Get your coat. I'll go warm up the car. Those heated seats come in handy in weather like this. Honest to God, I don't understand why anyone would want to live up here." With that, he turned and walked out the door.

Anne looked up at her daughter. "Is something wrong, dear?"

Katherine stood for a moment, letting her gaze wander over the room. *Yes!* she wanted to scream. *Everything is wrong. You shouldn't have come. I shouldn't be leaving.* Her chest tightened. She couldn't breathe.

"No," she answered quickly. If she didn't go now, she didn't think she'd be able to leave. Without another word, she pushed past her mother and went out the door with Chewie on her heels.

Jonah was closing the trunk, and he looked up as she approached the car. She bent down to hug Chewie, who responded by licking her face.

"Do not let that animal lick you," her mother called out in a horrified tone as she descended the steps.

Katherine sighed and straightened, her fingers still buried in Chewie's soft fur. Stephen shook Jonah's hand again, thanked him politely but coolly for taking care of Katherine and slipped behind the wheel. Anne did the same before taking her place in the front seat.

Katherine looked up at Jonah. "You're all set," he said.

She cast a quick glance at the car and raised her eyes to his again. "I suppose." What was she supposed to say? *Thank you for the most amazing week of my life?* Since she couldn't think of anything else, she nodded. "Thank you," she said anyway, but it sounded so inadequate. "For everything, I mean."

"You're welcome," he answered, and Stephen gunned the engine. Jonah winced. "That thing needs a tune-up," he muttered,

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and Katherine chuckled despite herself. "I'll be in touch," he said, and her heart skipped a beat. "About the book."

"Oh. The book," she repeated, trying not to sound disappointed. "Of course." Stephen revved the engine again, and she lifted a hand, then let it drop limply at her side. "I should—"

Stephen rolled down the window. "Katherine, we really need to get going," he said impatiently.

"I'm just saying goodbye," she snapped back, and he rolled his window up.

She looked up at Jonah. An invisible band tightened around her chest, making breathing difficult. She waved toward the car. "I need to—"

"I know," Jonah said, and smiled as the dog nudged her leg. "It's just...Chewie's going to miss you."

She closed her eyes. "I'll miss him, too." Forcing herself to lift her hand, she reached for the handle of the door.

"Katie." Jonah took a step toward her and put his hands on her shoulders. "You aren't who they think you are."

She let her gaze meet his. "I know."

He nodded. "Good." He released her and opened the door.

Katherine slid over the soft, dove gray leather of the backseat as Jonah shut the door behind her. He waved once, then walked to the porch as Stephen backed the car out of the gravel drive, the tires crunching on the snow and rocks.

When she looked back, he was still standing on the porch, his hands in his pockets, with Chewie beside him. Turning away, Katherine leaned her head against the seat and closed her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah stood on the porch long after the car disappeared around the curve, and cursed himself. He shouldn't have let her leave. He should have told her how he felt and asked her to stay.

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He shouldn't have let himself fall for her to begin with, but it was a little too late for that.

"Coulda, shoulda, woulda," he muttered to himself. Chewie nudged his leg, and Jonah reached down to pet him.

"I've written thousands of words. I'm articulate as hell on paper and couldn't think of a damn thing to say." He sighed. "I know. I'm an idiot. A first class, no-holds-barred fool." The dog whimpered softly, and Jonah sympathized. "I'll miss her too, buddy. But it's better to have loved and lost than never to have...Oh, hell. Let's get drunk," he suggested, and turned to go inside. Chewie followed faithfully.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Katherine, dear? Are you all right?" Her mother's voice chimed from the front seat.

"I'm fine. Just tired."

"You should look at this scenery. It's beautiful."

The scenery would only serve as a reminder, so she kept her eyes closed. "I've seen enough of the mountains, thank you," she murmured.

"I'm sorry, dear. Of course you have, after the way you've been traumatized. I'm sorry for being so insensitive."

"I'm not traumatized, Mother. I'm just tired."

Stephen looked at her in the rear-view mirror. "Why don't you take a nap, darling? I know just the thing to soothe your nerves." He shoved a CD into the player. Strains of opera spilled from the speakers. "There, isn't that better?"

"Peachy," she muttered. Leave it to Stephen never to remember how much she hated opera. She tuned it out and willed herself to sleep.

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### Chapter Fifteen

"What do you mean, gone? Why the hell'd you let her go?"

"I don't want to talk about this," Jonah said to Viv, and tried to shut the door.

Viv shoved it open, and he stepped back, resigned. She glared up at him. "You just let her go, just like that?" She snapped her fingers.

"What was I supposed to do, Viv? Hog tie her? Her mother and fiancé showed up—"

"Fiancé? She's got a fiancé? What the hell was she doing rolling around in the snow with you if she's got a fiancé? God help you, Jonah. You sure can pick 'em." She closed the door behind her and reached down to pet Chewie.

"She told me about him up front, and she's not really engaged. Yet."

"Either she is or she isn't, Jonah. Which is it?" Viv folded her arms and looked at him expectantly.

"He'd asked, but she hadn't accepted. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to be alone."

Viv clucked her tongue. "I warned her company was coming. I told that girl things would get unpleasant."

Jonah closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and finger. "Tell me you didn't."

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"I told her...oh, hell, it don't matter. If you want her, go after her."

Jonah shook his head. "No, she has to come to this decision on her own. I'm not going to tell her how to live her life. She's had enough people doing that."

"Like you weren't going to tell Marian, until you found her in bed with your agent?"

"Please, Viv."

The old woman laughed. "Well, it's the truth." She heaved a sigh and shook her head. "You did it again."

"I don't want to talk about this," he repeated.

"She was the one, you know. It was in the leaves."

"Viv, I really don't want to talk about this. And I really, really don't want to talk about whatever you read in those damned tea leaves." He sighed. "I just want to be alone."

"What are you going to do?"

"Do?"

"About her."

"Jonah smiled, draping an arm around Viv's slim shoulders and guiding her to the door. "I'm going to get drunk. Alone."

"Honey, you'll just hate yourself tomorrow," she warned, as she stepped out the door.

"No more than I hate myself now," he said, and closed the door behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Katherine was standing in her bedroom in her mother's house, staring down at the suitcase on her bed when Anne appeared in the doorway. "Marie will unpack for you later. Why don't you get some rest?"

"I slept all the way home." She hadn't, but it was easier to pretend she was sleeping than to try to converse with her mother and Stephen.

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"Yes, and that was not very polite. You hardly spoke to Stephen, and he went to all that trouble to come and get you."

The anger that had simmered just under the surface for the last several hours flared up. Why was she allowing herself to be treated like a wayward schoolgirl? "I didn't ask him to. I didn't need either of you to come to my rescue."

"Well, that's ungrateful," her mother said.

"When are you going to figure out that I'm not twelve anymore, Mother? I'm twenty-nine, and I'm perfectly capable of—"

"Of wrecking your car and finding yourself at the mercy of a complete stranger? What would you have done if that man had been some kind of axe-murderer?"

The memory of Jonah standing in the hallway in nothing but his boxers flashed into her mind, along with their shared laughter over the axe-murderer joke she'd made, and she felt the tears welling up again. "You're right, Mother. The situation could have been very different, but the fact is, it wasn't."

"You should have let Norbert drive you, as I suggested."

"You should have let me go to the beach, like I wanted to." *Then I never would have met Jonah, and I wouldn't be miserable.*

"Someday you're going to have to let me grow up, Mother."

"You need someone to take care of you, dear. That's why Stephen is so perfect for you." Her mother patted her arm. "I can see you're tired. We'll talk more after you've rested." She didn't look back as she left the room and closed the door quietly.

Katherine sat down on the edge of the bed and tried get a grasp on the emotions roiling inside her. How could it hurt so much to be in love? If this was what you got when you based decisions on emotion, she could do without it. She unzipped the side pocket of her suitcase, took out the romance novel and ran a finger over his name. *J. Kincade*.

"Well, I wanted passion," she said wryly. She hated that her mother was right. There was no such thing as a forever romance.



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She tossed the book into the wastebasket, curled up on the bed and let the tears that she'd held back all afternoon fall.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah sat back on the couch and watched the flames dance in the fireplace. He was nursing his third glass of Jack Daniels over ice. Or maybe it was his fourth. Hell, he wasn't sure. He'd lost count somewhere along the way. He leaned his head back, feeling completely in accord with Keith Urban's lament *Tonight I Wanna Cry*, as it played over the speakers.

When the phone rang, he let the machine pick it up. He grabbed the remote and turned up the volume on the disc player.

His sister Reba's voice echoed from the kitchen. "I know you're there, Jonah. Pick up the phone." She waited a moment. "Jonah, I'm serious. This is the third time I've called today. Pick up the damn phone." Another pause. "Jonah Kincade Masterson, you pick up this phone or else!" She waited a beat. "All right. I'm calling Mother."

"Oh, hell," Jonah groaned, and downed the rest of his drink before staggering to the kitchen to pick up the phone. "Aren't you a little old to be tattling on me?" he asked, his words slurred slightly.

He heard her sigh. "Oh, great. You're drunk. Never mind. I'm on my way."

"No, Reba. I do not need you here. I'm fine."

"Is that music I hear?" Jonah frowned. "Jonah, you're listening to country music. Was it that bad?"

"I'm fine," he insisted again.

"If you're drunk and listening to Keith Urban, you're not fine. Next it'll be George Jones, and all hell will break loose. I'm coming up there."

"No, you're not," he said firmly, or at least he thought it was firmly, but he wasn't exactly sure. He clicked off the music. He was

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sure that the last thing he needed was his big sister worrying over him. "Why are you calling anyway?"

"Viv called Leah, and Leah called me. She told me what happened."

"Shit. Can't a guy have any privacy?" He tried to sound annoyed, but he couldn't help but feel touched that they were concerned about him.

"Jonah, she's just worried about you. I am, too, if you're getting drunk. You didn't even get drunk when you dumped Marian. You just quit writing."

"I may never write again," he muttered, as he poured a bit more Jack Daniel's in the glass. "I've had it with women." He took a sip of his drink.

"Don't talk like that. Talk to me, or Viv calls Mom. It's up to you."

"You don't play fair, you know that?" He leaned on the counter. "Really, Reba. I'm fine. I'm bummed, but I'm fine. Hell, I only knew her a week."

"Nice try, little brother, but I know you. You may have turned off the music, but I'd bet my last dollar you're standing there right now with a glass of JD over ice."

"You're just flat spooky sometimes," he said, setting the glass aside. "Seriously, I'm good. I was thoroughly pissed about her mother and that asshole just showing up here and demanding she go home like a runaway child."

"She didn't have to go," his sister pointed out.

"You don't know her mother. Besides, I think she was just avoiding a scene."

"Viv said 'that asshole', as you call him, is her fiancé. What's up with that?"

"He's not her fiancé. He asked, but she didn't accept. Why do I have to keep repeating this?" He picked up his drink, but before he could take a sip, the ice clinked against the glass.

"Put the glass down, Jonah. Getting drunk isn't the answer."

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He sipped it anyway. "Thank you, Dr. Phil. Is there anything else? If you're done here, I'd like to go get smashed now and move on to the Patsy Cline CDs."

"Oh, dear God in Heaven," Reba murmured.

"Hey," Jonah said.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for calling, Reba. I appreciate it."

"I know. Don't get drunk." Jonah downed the rest of the liquor and set the glass down on the counter.

"Too late. Love you."

He heard her sigh heavily. "I love you, too, Jonah."

He replaced the phone on the hook. His sister was right. Getting drunk was not the answer. He wasn't sure what the answer was, but he was fairly sure that wasn't it. He just needed to figure out what the right answer was. He'd do that, first thing tomorrow or as soon as his brain was working again, whichever came first.

He stumbled back into the living room, turned the CD player on and flopped face-down on the sofa. His mind immediately dredged up memories of things he and Katie had done on those cushions. He closed his eyes, as much to savor the memory as to try to stop the room from spinning, and drifted off to sleep as Patsy wailed about her mental state.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rap on Katherine's door woke her just after dawn. "Miss Winstead? Your mother requests that you join her for breakfast. She has an early meeting this morning, and she wants to speak to you before she leaves."

"Tell her I'm sleeping," Katherine said. She rolled over and pulled the covers over her head.

"She said you'd been sleeping for the better part of two days, and she expressly requested —"

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"Marie, I don't care what she requested. Tell her I'm still sleeping, and I'll talk to her later!"

Katherine heard the gasp from the other side of the door. In all her life, she'd never talked back to any member of her mother's household. Then a thought occurred to her. *What the hell was she still doing living with her mother at twenty-nine?* She sat up, flipped back the covers, stalked to the door and jerked it open. Marie was still standing outside, presumably trying to figure out a way to deliver Katherine's message to her mother without being fired.

"Marie, I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"It's all right, Ms. Winstead. Your mother told me what a traumatic week you've had."

"It wasn't—" She stopped herself and sighed. There was no need to explain it again. She was sick and tired of trying to convince everyone that she was not traumatized by her week with Jonah. And it was high time she explained a few things to her mother. "Tell my mother I'll be down in thirty minutes." She closed the door and went to the bathroom to shower and dress.

A half hour later, Katherine stepped into the sunroom where her mother always took her breakfast. Anne was seated at the table, impeccably groomed in her designer suit, sipping from a porcelain teacup while she perused the morning paper. She looked up and smiled as Katherine seated herself across from her mother at the small glass table.

"You look terrible, dear," Anne chided. "I know you've had quite an ordeal—"

"It wasn't an ordeal, Mother. The wreck was frightening, but thankfully I wasn't seriously hurt."

"But you were alone with that man for an entire week!"

"His name is Jonah, Mother, and he was a perfect gentleman." It wasn't exactly a lie, since she had been the one to jump him. Up until then, he had been a perfect gentleman. Well, there was that one kiss. After that, she hadn't wanted him to be a gentleman.

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"In any case," her mother continued, "it's time for you to get on with your life. We need to start planning your wedding. We've set a tentative date for—" Katherine stared at her mother. "Who set a date?"

"Well, Stephen and I talked about it while you were gone, and with his schedule it looks like the middle of next June will be just perfect. That's only fifteen months away, hardly enough time to plan a wedding appropriately, so we have a lot to do in a short amount of time. I have some invitation samples I wanted to show you. Oh, and I had this made up for the announcement in next week's paper." She slid a folder across the table.

Katherine opened it. Inside was a professionally designed press release announcing her engagement, including a picture of her and Stephen in formal wear, taken at one of her mother's charity functions. She scowled at the picture.

"If you don't like the photo, we can always have a professional one made. Candy Willheart's daughter had a wonderful photographer for her wedding, and I'm certain I can contact him."

There was nothing wrong with the photograph, except that it was a photo of Katherine and Stephen instead of Katherine and Jonah, and it hurt to realize that she didn't have a single picture of him except the images burned in her mind. Jonah wearing nothing but boxers, the look in his eyes just before he kissed her the first time, the way his muscles had moved beneath his shirt as he swung the sledgehammer down....

"We need to confirm the date first, of course, and I need to get started contacting caterers. If we don't book a good one now, we'll never have one in time for the wedding. Oh, and I need to call the club so we can plan your engagement party."

Wedding invitations, announcements, engagement party...her mother's voice broke through her reverie. Katherine closed the folder, braced herself and said the words she knew were going to rain fire and brimstone down on her head.

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"There isn't going to be a wedding, Mother."

Anne simply laughed. "Of course there is, darling. You and Stephen are perfect together. I know you said you needed some time to think about it, but now that you've had it, I'm sure you realize that he's the best match for you. He comes from such a lovely family, and they simply adore you—"

Katherine pulled her hand from beneath her mother's. "I wouldn't be marrying his family. I'd be marrying him. But it's not relevant, because I'm not going to marry him at all."

Anne's perfect composure faltered slightly. "And why not?"

"Because I don't love him."

Anne closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Counting to ten, Katherine realized. That was what her mother did when something annoyed her. She opened her eyes and looked at Katherine. "We've been over this many times. You can't base a decision as important as marriage on nothing but emotion. Stephen is perfect for you. He's well bred, well educated and a partner in his father's firm. He's a handsome young man, too. Why, just the other day at the club I overheard Allison Payton saying how good-looking he is."

"Then let Allison marry him."

"What's gotten into you? You've never been so temperamental."

"How would you know?" Trying to control her anger, Katherine lowered her voice. "You were always far too busy with charity affairs and luncheons at the club to pay any attention to me. The servants in this house raised me, Mother. You don't know anything about me."

Her mother narrowed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "I know that I raised you to treat your mother with more respect and that I'm not going to tolerate this kind of abuse from you."

"Abuse?" Katherine kept her voice level, even though she felt like screaming as the years of pain flooded back. "Do you not think it was abusive to send a maid to comfort a crying four-year-

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old in the middle of the night when all I wanted was my mother? Do you not think it was abusive to leave me at home with one servant after another while you and my father were off globe-trotting? You may not have ever laid a hand on me in anger, Mother, but you never laid one on me in love, either."

Her mother's mouth flew open. "Katherine Wilhelmina Winstead, you will not speak of your father that way. He never abused you."

Katherine flinched slightly. The topic of her father was always a touchy one, because she'd always been closer to him than her mother. His passing fifteen years before had hit both of them hard, but she wasn't letting her mother off the hook that easily. "I know he loved me. At least he bothered to show me, even if he couldn't say the words. That's more than I can say for you."

Anne's eyes narrowed slightly. "You will not speak to me in that tone of voice."

"And that's just the problem, isn't it, Mother?" Katherine asked calmly. "I never have. I've never once challenged you on anything you wanted me to do. I was a good, compliant little girl, went to all the right schools and made all the right friends. I even obeyed when you didn't want me playing hide-and-seek with Rosa's granddaughter, even though I had more fun with her than I ever did with those stuffy, snotty girls at the boarding school."

"She was the child of a servant, Katherine. It wasn't proper—"

"To hell with being proper!" Katherine yelled, then took a deep breath to calm herself. She deliberately softened her tone. "I didn't want to be proper, Mother. I wanted to be *loved*. Don't you see that I did everything you wanted me to so you would love me, but you never did."

Visibly shaken, Anne picked up the folder with trembling hands. "Obviously you're upset. This is not the best time to make a decision. We'll discuss this later, when you've had a chance to—"

"We're not discussing this again. I'm not marrying Stephen."

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Anne drew in an exasperated breath. "What would your father have said?"

Katherine leveled her eyes at her mother. The woman certainly knew which buttons to push. "Anything you would have told him to, and you know it."

"I've given you the best of everything," Anne said, her voice low, "and this is the thanks I get." She tapped the edge of the folder on the table to straighten the papers inside and looked up at Katherine, cool and composed as ever. "You cannot make a decision like this based upon your feelings. It simply is not wise."

Katherine met her mother's gaze. "No, Mother," she said gently, "what isn't wise is letting someone else make all the important decisions in your life for you." Katherine rose from the table. "I've always loved you. You've given me a wonderful life. Now, let me live it." She started for the door.

"Come back and have a cup of tea. We can talk—"

She thought of Viv and the tea leaves and love. "I never want another cup of tea as long as I live."

"Where are you going?" Anne called after her.

"Out," Katherine said, and left her mother staring after her in the sunroom. She had plans to make.



Susan Greene

## Chapters Sixteen

Jonah sat at his desk and stared down at the sealed envelope that lay atop the stack of mail on his blotter. He knew what it contained; he just wasn't ready to open it. Not yet.

He'd stayed in the cabin another week before deciding it was just too damned empty and returning to New York. His publisher loved the idea of him writing a fantasy story, so he'd thrown himself into editing and polishing and had completed the manuscript ahead of schedule. He also agreed, after much consideration, to publish this book under his real name, with the stipulation that his royalties would go to charity. The publisher had convinced him capitalizing on his popularity in other genres would ensure that the book was a bestseller, and therefore raise more money for the charity. He couldn't argue with the logic, but he was still uncertain exactly how he felt about sacrificing his well-guarded anonymity. How that would affect his teaching career remained to be seen.

Although he hadn't spoken to her personally, he knew Katie had signed a contract to do the illustrations, and the first several were now in the envelope on his desk for his approval.

It had been three months since he last saw her. Three months since he'd kissed her goodbye and stood on the porch in the cold and watched her walk out of his life. Over the weeks he'd alternated between being angry with her for leaving and angrier

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still with himself for not asking her to stay. He'd put his pride aside and tried to call her at her mother's house. Instead, he'd reached her mother, and was told "Katherine wishes to put the entire incident behind her" and didn't want to speak to him. And he was told not to call again.

At first he'd been shocked, then hurt, then thoroughly pissed off. After that, it occurred to him that it was entirely possible that Katie had never received his phone messages. So he tried to contact her via the email address she'd given him, but every attempt was returned as undeliverable.

Maybe their affair had meant nothing to her. Maybe it had been just a fling. After all, it had been her stipulation that there be no promises made between the two of them, and although he had agreed on principle, he found it difficult to believe that she could simply go back to her life and forget everything that had happened between them.

He certainly couldn't.

It crossed his mind that she might have accepted Stephen's proposal, and the thought of her married to another man ate at him. The image of Stephen touching her the way he'd touched her wrenched his gut into a knot. Stephen didn't appreciate her. He had no idea what a treasure Katie really was. The jerk didn't deserve her. He'd never love her the way....

*Damn it.* That, he decided, was the crux of the problem. He was in love with her. He'd known it since the day he'd walked into his bedroom and seen her lying naked on his bed with a pencil in her hand.

*So why did you let her go?*

With a deep sigh, he picked up the envelope. Using a letter opener, he carefully broke the seal and slid the contents out onto his desk.

The illustrations were perfect, but he'd expected no less. The heroine, a beautiful young woman in a peasant's dress, stood amongst her flock of sheep in a field of heather, while the dragon,

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perched atop a rock high on the mountain, looked down at her. He flipped to another, and the beauty of it nearly took his breath. It was the hero, the dragon, now in human form. A young man with raven hair and shimmering blue armor knelt before the heroine, her hand in his. The heroine's lips were slightly parted, her eyes wide with surprise as the hero declared his love for her.

Katie had so perfectly captured the moment Jonah could almost feel the hero's desperation, almost hear the maiden's soft catch of breath as she beheld his human form for the first time.

There were other illustrations, but he couldn't bring himself to look at them. He slid the drawings back into the envelope. The story, of course, ended with happily ever after. Fairy tales were supposed to end that way, after all.

*The natural precursor to romantic fiction*, Katie had said. She had also reminded him that fiction reveals truth that reality obscures. Ralph Waldo Emerson, he thought, was no dolt.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm coming!" Katherine yelled at the ringing phone as she struggled to get her keys out of the door while holding her purse, a portfolio and two bags of groceries. She dropped the bags in the entry and closed the door to prevent the over-eager puppy dancing around her heels from running outside, and rushed to grab the ringing phone. "Hello?"

"When are you going to get an answering machine?"

She laughed. "I just bought one, Curtis. Want to hang up and call back in a few minutes?"

He laughed. "Maybe next time, sweetie. I'm pressed for time. Listen, I just wanted to let you know that I sold another of your paintings."

Katherine had cradled the phone on her shoulder as she retrieved her bags from the entry. "Really?"

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"Would I lie to you? Never mind, don't answer that. Yes, really. A woman was in today, an interior designer. She said she was on vacation, down here for an opening at some other gallery, but she just loved your painting of the mountains. She just had to have it for a home she was working on. I told her you might not want to part with that particular piece of work, but she insisted on buying it."

She was silent for a moment. "You sold it?" she finally asked.

"Cash money, precious. Didn't bat a pretty eyelash. She was a looker, too. Like some exotic gypsy." Katherine cringed a little at the pain the reference brought but said nothing.

Curtis sighed. "She had this long, dark curly hair and gorgeous eyes. I'm telling you, some people just have all the good genes."

"How much?" Katherine asked, abruptly bringing him back to the subject at hand.

"You know, if word gets out that your work is in that kind of demand, it could be big business for both of us. You are going to stay exclusive for me when you make it big, aren't you?"

"How much, Curtis?"

"Are you sitting down?"

Katherine sat on a stool beside her kitchen counter. "I am now."

"She paid the asking price."

She was silent again. Curtis' asking price had been far more than Katherine had thought the simple landscape worth, but that just proved there were some people with far more money than sense.

"Wow," she finally said.

"Yeah, wow. Stick with me, kid. I told you I'd make us both famous. I want to showcase your work in a few months. We'll talk dates when you have more paintings. Listen, I have to run. Come

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by tomorrow, and I'll cut you a check. And get busy making us both more money, honey!"

The phone clicked in her ear. She set the receiver down on the counter and reached down to scoop up the little dog scrambling around on the wooden floor at her feet. She had found him at a local adoption fair, a small, brown ball of fur that reminded her so much of a miniature Chewie she knew he was the one for her the minute she saw him.

"Did you hear that?" The puppy licked her face, making her giggle. "A show of my own. We're going to make this work, aren't we?" She cuddled the puppy closer and walked into the entry to get his leash.

\* \* \* \* \*

The puppy trotted along cheerfully in front of her, alternating between straining at his leash and stopping to sniff at every flowerbed and scrap of paper. It was midsummer, and tourists abounded downtown. Katherine had only lived here a short time, but already Charleston seemed more like home to her than Charlotte ever had.

She toed the sidewalk under her feet and thought back to the day she'd told her mother that she wasn't going to marry Stephen and that she was moving to her own place. Anne had been irate, complaining that Katherine's refusal of his marriage proposal would ruin her reputation at the club. Katherine couldn't have cared less about her reputation at her mother's country club and told her so.

Anne had been further mortified when Katherine announced she was also quitting her job at the ad agency to fulfill her dream of becoming an artist. Her mother had scoffed at the idea, but Katherine had held her ground.

Stephen's reaction had been similar. He'd been furious and had all but begged her to reconsider. He even claimed to love her,

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but Katherine knew that wasn't the truth. Stephen had no love for anything except himself.

But that was his problem. Katherine had enough of her own. In the end, moving out of her mother's house wasn't enough. She had to move away.

For her own sanity, she moved three hours south and set up her studio in a two-bedroom condominium she'd rented in the trendy section of downtown Charleston, S.C. It was in a converted warehouse—the plumbing was iffy and the air conditioning temperamental—but the rooms were spacious and well lit, and it was hers. As was her life. She painted when she wanted to and slept when she felt like it, but she'd given up reading romances.

She was painting on the rooftop patio one day when she was interrupted by another tenant, who took an avid interest in her work. He was tall, blond and so amazingly good-looking that at first she'd dismissed his queries as an ill-disguised come-on. Then he commented on her "cute" shoes.

As fortune would have it, her tall, blond, too-good-looking neighbor was Curtis Townsend, the owner of the Townsend Gallery on King Street. The gallery was an old movie theater, complete with a fifties-style marquee, converted into a sleek showplace near Market. He'd pleaded with her until she agreed to let him show her work as she completed it.

She'd sold a few smaller paintings, and along with the money she received as an advance for illustrating Jonah's book, the income had been enough to cover her expenses and keep her from dipping into her trust account.

At the thought of Jonah, she blinked back a tear. After weeks of hearing nothing from him, she'd received a contract package in the mail from his publisher. At first she'd been upset that he didn't contact her personally, but she couldn't blame him. She had made it clear to him that she didn't want any promises, and she *had* left with the man she was supposed to marry. She didn't exactly have grounds to fault him for not calling, no matter how disappointed

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she was that he hadn't. He had given her the most wonderful week of her life. She couldn't have asked him for more.

After she received the contract, she'd called the cabin and got no answer, not even the machine. He'd either left or really didn't want to talk to her. She couldn't blame him for that, either.

But she kept her word. She signed the contract and sent the publisher her forwarding address along with the first sketches of the illustrations. The project hadn't taken long, and within two months, she had sent the last of the requested prints to the publisher for approval.

Halfway through those two months, she realized she had gotten far more than just a beautiful memory of her week with Jonah.

She was pregnant.

She still wasn't entirely sure how she felt about it. At first she'd been too shocked to feel anything. Although the thought of raising a child alone terrified her, she couldn't help but feel elated about the new life growing inside her. Each wave of nausea was a constant reminder of what had passed between her and Jonah. She'd lain awake at night, wondering if the child would be a little boy with dark hair and eyes like his father, or a fair-skinned, blonde little girl. Or some combination of both.

She wondered what Jonah would think, how he would feel, if he knew that their shared passion had resulted in a new life.

Katherine struggled with the decision whether or not to tell him. After all, the child she carried was his, and he did have a right to know. On the other hand, she had specifically stated she wanted no promises from him. She had assured him protection wasn't necessary on his part, since she was on the pill. How could she could go back to him now and tell him that protection had failed?

In the end, she told no one, not even her mother. She would have to eventually, because in her mind there was no alternative but to have the baby and raise it alone. There was no way she would ever terminate the pregnancy, and she was not going to give

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the baby up for adoption. For now, only her dog knew that she threw up every morning upon waking and had strange cravings for Chinese food at two in the morning.

She walked along Bay Street toward Waterfront Park and marveled that so much of the original stonework on the streets had survived being paved over. She had grown to love the sound of hooves on the cobblestones as the horse-drawn carriages lumbered by. Their coachmen described points of interest to the passengers, while the bored-looking steeds dutifully trotted along. In the market, dark-skinned women wove beautiful baskets from sea grasses and hawked their wares to the tourists.

A little boy approached her. After a few moments of patting the puppy, the boy whipped some reeds from his back pocket. "Watch this, Miss," he said. With deft fingers, he folded, twisted and shaped the reeds into a rose.

He grinned and offered it to her. Touched, she gave the boy five dollars, and his grin widened as he scampered off. It wasn't the first time she'd fallen victim to the sweet smile of one of the basketweaver's children. In fact, she now had a collection of the saw grass roses in a bowl on her coffee table, but the boy was so cute she couldn't help herself.

With her rose in one hand and the leash in other, she continued down the sidewalk. She let her gaze wander while her puppy sniffed at her sneakers, and admired again the beautiful new bridge that crossed the Cooper River to Patriot's Point, where the World War II aircraft carrier *Yorkshire* sat permanently docked. Across the river she could see that its deck was alive with families and Boy Scout troops, particularly in the waning light of evening, and she decided she'd bring her easel down at some point to paint it.

\* \* \* \* \*



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Jonah stood on the steps outside his home and frowned at the grinning gargoyle his sister Reba had sent him. It was perched on the short brick wall beside his front door, its ugly face screwed up in a sinister smile. He shook his head. If nothing else, the little bugger might make an interesting addition to a story sometime.

The door was open, and workmen trudged in and out over the plastic-covered hardwood floor of the entry, hefting stacks of the Italian marble tile Leah had chosen for his kitchen floor. Another worker swung a long ladder through the doorway, nearly hitting Jonah in the head.

Jonah ducked. "Hey!"

"Sorry, Doc. I didn't see you," the man called out, and he made his way down the steps.

"No problem," Jonah muttered, and went inside to see what his sister was up to now.

He found Leah in the dining room. She was standing in the middle of the floor, shaking her head at one of the workmen. "No. I said the dark tile is for the powder room under the stairs. The gray is for the kitchen floor." She blew a lock of curly black hair out of her face and looked up. In a flash, her expression changed from exasperation to a delighted grin.

"Jonah!" She crossed the floor, careful to avoid the scattered tools, and grinned at him. "Did you see the upstairs bath?"

"I just walked in the door, Lee." He looked around and scowled. "What the hell is all this?"

"Your decorating job," she said. "I thought you were going to be out of town this weekend. Didn't you have some conference thing to go to?"

"Plans changed." He walked to the kitchen and stopped suddenly in the doorway. It looked like a bomb had gone off. None of the cabinets had doors, the floor had been stripped down to the sub-flooring, and his countertops were covered in some kind of gray mush. He turned to face her. "Tile countertops?"

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Leah beamed. "Not just tile, brother dear. It's going to be mosaic. Blues and grays. Clark, the tile guy, is brilliant with that kind of work. I keep telling him he should go into designing furniture pieces for galleries, but he's not listening." As usual, Leah was rambling so fast Jonah could hardly keep up. "Your counters will be one of a kind, and he's personally doing the tile-setting." She picked up a few tiles of different colors and held them out to Jonah. "What do you think?"

He shook his head. "You know, I could have done most of this work myself."

She cocked her head to one side, and a few strands of her dark curls fell from the mass she had piled on top of her head. "In what spare time? You're already teaching four classes this semester and working on a new book."

"Good point," he said, and stepped carefully over the threshold to survey the damage. When he looked back over his shoulder, he saw her disappointed expression. "I'm sorry, Lee. I'm a little distracted lately. It's great, really. I'm sure Carl—"

"Clark," she corrected.

He waved a hand. "Whatever. And you have wonderful taste. That's why I trust you with this." He looked down at the tiles and frowned. "Completely," he added, unsure whether he was trying to convince her or himself.

"As in you don't really care what I do as long as I get it done quickly," she said.

"Bingo." Jonah peered back into the kitchen, then back down the hall. "Where's Chewie?"

"Out back. Last I checked, he was sharing a hamburger with one of the workmen."

"Great." Jonah rolled his eyes. "Just what I need. The dog puking on the new rug you put in the den." He grinned at her. "Great rug, by the way."

Leah smiled again. "Thanks. I knew you'd like it. Oh, that reminds me," she said, tugging on his hand. "I want to show you

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something. I was down in Charleston last week for Reba's opening—she said to thank you for the flowers, by the way, and that she was sorry you couldn't make it—and I just had to stroll through some of the other galleries."

She was pulling him back down the hallway as she talked. "I went into this really neat place right on King Street. It was an old movie theater, you know, the fifties-style with the big marquee outside? The owner is a genius with design, I have to say. And he had some of the most beautiful paintings. Local artists, mostly."

She stopped just outside the den. "Anyway, I found this painting. It was just so perfect for you. It practically leaped off the wall at me. I had to have it for the space above your mantle, because honestly, Jonah, I don't know what Marian was thinking when she put that god-awful painting of that Grecian urn up there, but I really do think this painting was meant for you. It was just delivered today, so I had them hang it right away. Close your eyes."

He sighed. As much as he adored his sister, she could wear on a man. "Lee..."

"Please? I promise you're going to love this."

Resigned, Jonah closed his eyes and let her drag him into the den. She moved behind him, her hands on his shoulders. "Okay, open them."

He did, and stood riveted to the Aubusson rug Leah had chosen for the room. The painting that hung over his fireplace was a gorgeous mountain scene. It was like standing on the back deck of his cabin, looking out across the valley below. Snow-covered trees against a clear, blue sky. Every detail painted in perfect precision, as if each individual snowflake and pine needle had been carefully replicated by the artist's brush.

"What do you think?"

Not quite sure how to answer that, Jonah angled his head. "It looks like the mountains behind the cabin," he said finally.

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"I thought so, too," Leah said. "That's why I knew you'd like it. I know how much you love it there."

"Yeah," Jonah said absently, still studying the painting. It was so clear and precise it could have been a photograph.

"It's an original oil. Isn't it just amazing how the artist captured every detail? Look at the birds in the tree. And the footprints in the snow at the bottom."

"It's beautiful, Lee." He smiled down at her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Consider it a housewarming gift." She rose up on her toes and kissed his cheek.

He slid an arm around her waist and pulled her to his side. His gaze returned to the painting as Leah kept talking. But, then again, Leah was always talking. "It was just different, you know? Most of the paintings were so typical. Flowers, seascapes, that sort of thing. But this...the gallery owner said the artist might not want to part with it, something about how much went into it, but I insisted. I had to pay his asking price to get him to sell it to me, but I just knew you'd love it."

"I do," he said absently, and released her to step a bit closer to the painting. There was something about the footprints that caught his attention. He narrowed his eyes. "There are two sets of footprints. Wait, no. Three. See? Two sets here, human footprints." He ran a finger lightly over the canvas. "And this set here. A dog's." He shook his head. "The detail is incredible. Who's the artist?"

"No one I've heard of. A local, the owner said. He sent this in the mail last week." She pulled a folded flyer from her pocket and shook it out. "It's a list of the artists he's showcasing over the next few months." She scanned the bright pink paper. "Wait, it's on here somewhere. His name is..."

Jonah's fingertip brushed over the signature at the bottom of the painting. "Her name," he said softly.

"Huh?"

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“The artist is a woman.” He turned to face his puzzled sister.  
“K. Winstead. Her name is Katherine Winstead.”

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### Chapter Seventeen

"Katherine Winstead? The Katherine Winstead who illustrated your book?" Leah stared at him, her dark eyes wide.

Jonah's mouth twisted slightly. "Unless there are two incredibly talented women named Katherine Winstead."

Leah was still stunned at the coincidence. "*Your* Katie painted this? The one who broke your heart?"

"She's not my Katie," he said, surprised at the sharpness in his voice. "And she didn't break my heart." *She ripped it in half and stomped on it for good measure*, he thought, and winced.

Leah blew out a breath. "I'm sorry, Jonah. If I'd realized it was the same woman, I'd never have bought it."

"Why not?" "I didn't mean to go dredging that up again. I'm really sorry. I can see if the gallery will let me return it."

"No." He shook his head. "I love it. I really do." He studied the footprints again. Two sets of human prints. His and Katie's. And Chewie's. A lump lodged itself in his throat, and he swallowed. "No. Don't send it back."

"Are you sure you're okay with this? I mean, won't it be a reminder of—"

"Look, I told you. I'm over that. We had a fling, she left, I got drunk, and I'm over it. It wasn't meant to be anything else. I'm just glad to see she's doing what she always wanted to do."

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"If you say so," Leah said, but her tone indicated that she really didn't believe him.

"I do," he said, and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "It's perfect. Thank you."

Leah beamed. "You're welcome. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go make sure they're putting the tile in the right bathroom. You might want to check into a hotel for a day or two, until this is all over. I didn't expect you back this soon. I can stay here and take care of Chewie and make sure you don't end up with red countertops."

"I'd appreciate that," Jonah said dryly. "But I don't think I need to stay in a hotel. I'll just..." He glanced toward the kitchen and frowned. "I'll just order out."

Leah grinned and started to leave the room, stopping at the doorway. She turned and gave Jonah a quizzical look.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"I thought you said your Katie lived in Charlotte."

"She's not my Katie," he said again. "And she does, at least, she did."

"The gallery owner said the artist was a local."

Jonah shrugged. Maybe she'd moved to Charleston with her new husband. That wasn't a thought he wanted to entertain for long.

Leah stood for a moment, watching him. "You sure you're okay with this?"

Jonah looked up at the painting again, then back at his sister. "Yes, I'm sure. It's a great painting, Lee. Thanks."

"Okay. Well, I'll be upstairs if you need me."

He nodded, and she dashed off again. Jonah breathed a sigh. Leah had always been the one who seemed to have boundless energy, and there were times he envied her that. But most of the time she simply exhausted him.

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He turned back to the painting and studied it again. It didn't just *look* like the view behind his cabin. It *was* the view behind his cabin. How Katie had reproduced it in such detail amazed him.

Charleston, Leah had said. What in the world was Katie doing in Charleston? She'd never mentioned wanting to move to Charleston. He hoped she had finally stood up to her interfering mother. Maybe she hadn't married Shackelford and had moved away on her own.

Not that it mattered, of course. Four months had gone by, and she hadn't so much as sent an email. If she'd wanted to find him, she could have. Both his email and his office phone number were listed on the college's website. It wasn't as if he were the one who left without a forwarding address.

Unless she hadn't contacted him because she thought he didn't want her to. He hadn't exactly said anything to make her think he wanted to keep in touch, other than his request for her to illustrate the book. In fact, there was quite a lot he hadn't said that he wished he had.

"Jonah?"

He turned to see Leah standing in the doorway again and crossed the room to her. "I've got to get back over to the university. I have an appointment at two." He looked around the room. "You've done a great job with this."

"Thanks."

He kissed her cheek. "Gotta run." Deliberately not looking back at the painting, he headed for the door, then remembered she'd come back downstairs looking for him. "Did you need something?"

She stood for a moment, watching him, then shook her head. "No," she said. "Go on. I'll try to have these guys out of here by the time you get home."

With a nod, Jonah ducked back out the door and down the steps to where he was parked. He unlocked the door to his SUV, slid behind the wheel and turned on the ignition. The midsummer



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heat radiated in waves off the pavement, and the interior of the SUV was like an oven. He cranked up the air conditioning and loosened his tie as he leaned back against the seat.

What were the odds? Of all the paintings in all the galleries that lined the streets of Charleston, his sister picked one of Katie's. Maybe it was a good sign.

*Of all of the gin joints...* He chuckled, then frowned when he remembered Rick hadn't ended up with Ilsa at the end of *Casablanca*. Ilsa had married someone else. Maybe this wasn't a good sign after all.

He glanced at his watch, sighed and pulled out into the traffic. As if having her illustrations in his book wasn't enough of a reminder of what he'd let walk out of his life, now he had one of her paintings hanging over his fireplace.

Resisting the urge to bang his head against the steering wheel, Jonah forced his thoughts back to the traffic and his impending meeting.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I really appreciate you meeting with me on such short notice, Dr. Masterson."

Jonah looked over his desk at the young woman sitting across from him and suppressed a sigh. When he had reluctantly agreed to take on a grad student as an intern for the following semester, the department head hadn't informed him that Quinn Miller was female.

Not that it mattered, of course. He had seen her résumé and knew she was well qualified for the position. And he needed a teaching assistant. He just hadn't expected the assistance to come in the form of a curvy brunette in a red suit with a very short skirt.

She shifted in the chair, crossing her legs, and the red skirt rode up slightly on her thigh. Jonah's mind flashed back to the night he'd brought Katie to his cabin, and how her red Armani skirt

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slid up her long legs as he laid her on the sofa. Then his treasonous little brain took it upon itself to fast-forward to those same long legs wrapped around his waist in the hallway of the cabin. Quinn cleared her throat, and his head jerked up. He felt the heat in his neck spreading to his face. *Nice going, Doc. First meeting with a new intern and you've already made a complete ass out of yourself, ogling her legs.*

Except it hadn't been Quinn's legs that had distracted him.

"Dr. Masterson?"

Quinn was looking at him now, smiling knowingly as she tugged the skirt down a little. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I'm a little out of sorts today. My sister is completely redecorating my house, and it's a mess. My kitchen looks like a bomb went off." It sounded lame and he knew it, but he had to say something.

"No apology necessary. I'm sure you're a very busy man. I won't take up much of your time. I was just wondering when you wanted me to start." Quinn shifted in her chair, but if the skirt rose again he didn't notice because he deliberately kept his eyes above her shoulders.

Jonah took a deep breath and forced memories of Katie to the background. "The new semester starts next month. I'd like to have you teach the freshman English course and assist me with grading papers. I'll get you a syllabus so you can become familiar with the material before class starts." He stood and walked to one of the wooden file cabinets behind his desk and rifled through it. "I know they're here somewhere. Aha, here it is."

He pulled a set of stapled papers from a file and turned around to find her standing directly behind him, so close that he almost stepped on her toes. Her hands were behind her back, and the position forced the jacket of the suit open at her cleavage, exposing the low-cut lace top she had beneath it. The scent of expensive perfume filled the air around him, and he cleared his throat again. "Oh, sorry."

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Quinn smiled up at him. "If you're too busy right now, we can always meet later and talk. Maybe over a drink or something," she suggested, her voice husky. Jonah tried to step back and gain a little space, not to mention perspective, and bumped into the file cabinet. *Just peachy, you idiot. You were staring at her legs. Now she thinks you're interested.* Was this what his world was coming to? Grad students coming on to him?

He shoved the papers toward her and stepped away. "Here. This is the syllabus for freshman English. We can go over it if you want, but it's pretty self-explanatory."

She stepped forward but made no move to take the syllabus from his hand. "You know, if we're going to be working together, we should get to know each other a little better," Quinn said. "Would you like to grab a bite to eat, and we can go over this?" She indicated the papers in his hand with a nod of her head, and her dark curls bounced.

Was it his imagination, or did she actually arch her back just a little more? Her breasts practically leaped out of the white lace beneath the suit. If he had to, he'd admit they were nice breasts, and being encased in the white lace of his dreams didn't hurt. Unfortunately, they were beneath the wrong face. A very pretty face, he thought, but not Katie's. "I...uh...I can't tonight. I've got to get home. I left my dog outside." Did that sound as stupid to her as it did to him?

Quinn took the papers from his hand, arching one eyebrow. "I could pick up some takeout Chinese and come by later."

Usually he admired persistence in a student, but not when that persistence was blatantly sexual in nature and directed at him. He didn't want to offend her, and it wasn't really her fault that she'd misread him since he'd been staring at her legs. "I'm sorry, Ms. Miller. I have plans this evening." Okay, that wasn't exactly true, but as soon as she left, he'd call Jack to meet him for a drink and then it would be true.

## Snowbound

She took the papers from his hand. "Some other time, then," she said, and turned slowly back to where she'd left her bag beside the chair. She bent over, deliberately, he was certain, and slipped the papers into her bag. The movement caused the skirt to rise dangerously high in the back, and it struck him as odd that as nice as her legs were, he just wasn't interested. Not even if she hadn't been a student.

"We can set up a meeting before classes start if you have any questions," he said, and moved toward the door.

Quinn slung her bag over her shoulder and smiled a smile that said *count on it*. Jonah opened the door and stepped aside so she could leave. She stopped in front of him. "I really appreciate you giving me this position, Dr. Masterson. And please, call me Quinn."

"All right, Quinn," he said, still holding the door open. "Just call and let me know when it's convenient to meet again. To go over the material, I mean."

"I will," she assured him and sashayed out the door.

Jonah closed it behind her, leaned against it, pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. That was the last thing he needed right now, a grad student hitting on him. He had enough problems with his house turned upside down without turning his personal life inside out. He thought about Quinn's long legs and low-cut suit and couldn't help but chuckle. Those poor freshman boys were going to be toast.

He walked to his desk, picked up the phone and punched in Jack's number. He could use a drink about now.

## Chapter Eighteen

The little pub where Jonah and Jack met a couple of times a week was not far from the college, so Jonah walked the few blocks. He'd met Jack a few years earlier when he had been working on a mystery novel. A detective with the New York City Police Department, Jack Conner had proven indispensable when it came to providing Jonah with an insider's look at detective work. Most of the time, as Jonah had found out, detective work was pretty boring. Paperwork and phone calls and leads to dead ends. Jack didn't mind, however, when Jonah embellished a little. He was a pretty flexible kind of guy. Not to mention that he was always up for a couple of beers and a game of pool.

The pub was crowded and loud as Jonah made his way to the bar. Jack was already seated on a stool, engaged in a conversation with a cute blonde Jonah recognized as another grad student from the university. He slid onto the empty barstool on the other side of Jack.

"Hey, Pete," Jack yelled to the bartender. "Bring my buddy here a draft."

Jonah glanced over Jack's shoulder to look at the blonde. "Don't let me interrupt."

"Hello, Dr. Masterson. Don't worry, you're not. I was just leaving. I have a class tonight." She scribbled something on a cocktail napkin and handed it to Jack. "Call me."

## Snowbound

"Top of my to-do list," Jack said, and put the napkin in his pocket. She smiled and rose from the stool, and Jack watched with obvious appreciation as her long, jean-clad legs carried her out the door. He sighed and turned to Jonah.

"She's a student, Jack," Jonah muttered, accepting his beer from the bartender.

"And? She's over twenty-one, so she's not jail-bait. Believe me, I know jail-bait. I'm a cop, remember?"

"You're a leech." Jonah sipped his beer. "She's at least ten years your junior."

"A lot to be said for that, Jonah, my friend." Jack raised his glass in salute. "You should try it sometime. I happen to like young women."

Jonah grinned at him. "That's just because women your own age think you're a jerk."

"It is not. Younger women find older men like me sophisticated."

"You're a cop, not a stockbroker," Jonah reminded him.

"They don't care. They happen to find my line of work interesting. Maybe it's because I have a big gun and I know how to use it." Jonah laughed, and Jack tipped up his own mug. He set his beer down on the bar and reached for the bowl of pretzels. "You should try it sometime, going out with a younger woman."

Jonah leveled a look at him. "Been there, done that."

"Marian wasn't that much younger than you, and she doesn't count anyway because she's a lying, cheating bitch."

"Thanks ever so much for the reminder," Jonah muttered, and snagged a few pretzels.

Jack laughed out loud. "No problem. Seriously, buddy," he said around a mouthful of pretzels, "you should get out more." He cast an appraising glance around the room. "There are probably several eligible young women in here who would love to go home with a good-looking, scholarly-type fellow such as yourself."

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"They're students, Jack," Jonah said, not bothering to follow his friend's gaze.

Jack raised his eyebrows. "And?"

"I can't date students. I'm a professor."

"Oh, yeah. I guess there's that," Jack said, laughing, and rose from the stool. "Come on. Let's play pool."

Jonah followed. As Jack racked the balls, he looked up at Jonah. "So how's it going with the new intern?"

Jonah shrugged. "She'll work out fine, as long as she does her job."

"She?" Jack straightened and pulled a coin from his pocket.

"Yes, she," Jonah answered. Jack held up the coin, and Jonah shrugged. "Tails."

Jack flipped the coin and caught it, slapping it on the back of his other hand. "Is she hot?"

Jonah rolled his eyes. "Jack...I told you..."

"She's hot, isn't she?" When Jonah didn't respond, Jack looked down at the coin and nodded toward the table. "You break."

Jonah leaned against the edge of the table, positioning his cue. "She wears short skirts and has nice legs. My heart breaks for the young men of the freshman class." He took his shot, and neatly broke the triangle of balls. He watched them roll, mentally calculating his next move, then grinned at Jack. Why not humor the guy? "Yeah, she's hot. And she's made it quite clear she's available."

"Oh?"

Jonah bent over the table, lined up his shot and sunk two striped balls. He raised his head and smiled at Jack.

"So, you taking her out?"

Jonah frowned while he studied the balls for his next shot. "Nope."

"Why not?"

## Snowbound

Jonah missed his shot and cursed under his breath. "She's probably a good ten years younger than I am, and I'll be lucky if she doesn't press harassment charges against me for ogling her legs."

Jack stared at Jonah over the rim of his mug. "You were ogling her legs? And she caught you?"

Jonah sighed. "Take your shot," he said. "And it wasn't on purpose. She was wearing this red suit, and I just happened to look down, and it reminded me of the suit Katie was wearing the night she—"

"Katie?" Jack shook his head. "You're still hung up on her, aren't you?" Jonah picked up his beer and scowled down into the mug. "No, I'm not. It just reminded me—"

Jack knocked another striped ball into a corner pocket. "Man, you've got it bad. Why don't you just go find the chick and marry her?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"She knows where to find me."

Jack straightened and leaned on his cue. His blue eyes studied Jonah. "I'm worried about you, man. I've never seen you like this, even after Marian. It's been months since I've seen you even look twice at a woman."

Jonah shrugged. "I haven't seen any that interest me."

"So, what's she like?"

"Who, Katie?"

"No, the intern," Jack said with an impatient shake of his head. "Anyone I'd like to meet?"

Jonah scowled at him. "I will not be a party to your lechery."

Jack moved around to the other side of the table and laughed. "So, you never told me. Did Katie have dimples?" Jonah's glare seemed to be answer enough, and Jack laughed. "You're such a sucker, man." He leaned over the table for his next shot and missed.



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"Will you please stop bringing up women?" Jonah chalked his cue. "I came here to have a drink and shoot some pool, not to discuss my sex life."

"What sex life?" Jack asked, and Jonah scratched his shot while Jack signaled a passing waitress for another beer.

\* \* \* \* \*

"These are amazing," Curtis crooned.

Katherine grinned while he studied the paintings lined against the wall. She had to admit they were good. Over the last few weeks, she had set up her easel at different places around downtown and captured the images on canvas. Battery Park, King Street, the marina at Waterfront Park, and even the old women selling baskets in the market.

Curtis was beaming. "Just wait. The tourists will love these. Look at the detail." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "You're going to make me a very wealthy man."

Katherine looked down at Curtis' expensive attire and shook her head. "You're already a wealthy man, Curtis."

"Right. Well, then you'll make me a happy one." He picked up one canvas and held it against the wall. "This is going to be wonderful. Your opening is going to be the biggest success I've had in a long, long time."

Katherine smiled. She should be thrilled. This was what every artist starved for, the opportunity to show their work and have it appreciated, not to mention purchased. Curtis was giving her a chance to fulfill a lifelong dream, and somehow she could barely muster even lukewarm enthusiasm.

He lowered the painting to the floor and looked over at her.

"What's wrong, precious?"

Katherine pressed her lips together and laid a hand over her tummy.

## Snowbound

She'd noticed this morning that she could no longer button her jeans. Soon enough, she'd be showing. She had to tell someone. She had to have someone to talk to, and Curtis was the closest thing she had to a friend.

Gathering every ounce of courage she could, she licked her bottom lip and met his eyes. Her own brimmed with tears. "I'm pregnant, Curtis."

He blinked, then stared at her. His expression reminded her of the deer that had stood in her headlights that fateful night. The night she'd met Jonah.

"I didn't realize you were seeing someone," he finally said.

"I'm not." She choked back tears. "Not anymore."

Curtis turned and enfolded her in his arms. "What happened?" He shook his head. "Never mind. Come in the back, and let's get some tea."

He led her to his office and seated her on the small loveseat beneath a window, then moved to the small kitchenette to prepare the tea. "So...tell me all about it, honey. What happened? The rat-bastard dumped you after he knocked you up?"

"No." Katherine answered, studying her fingernails. She still had paint beneath them. Anne would have a fit. "He's not a bastard, Curtis. He's a very sweet man. It was my fault. I left him." Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she dropped her head into her hands.

"Oh, honey." Curtis sat down beside her and gathered her into his arms. She leaned into him. It felt so good to have a man's arms around her again, even if it was just Curtis. At least she knew he had ulterior motive. She sobbed against his shoulder, saturating his silk shirt with tears. He let her cry it out, all the while rubbing her back and murmuring comforting words. When she finished, he handed her a tissue. "Better?"

Katherine nodded. It did feel good to finally tell someone other than her dog and the obstetrician she'd found to confirm her suspicions nearly two months ago. Curtis rubbed her shoulder and

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reached up to brush her hair from her face. "How far along are you?"

"A little over four months." She wiped her eyes with the tissue.

"And the daddy? Does he know?" Katherine shook her head, then turned away from Curtis' look of disapproval.

"Don't you think you should tell him?"

"I can't." She felt the tears start again. "You don't understand. It wasn't...I mean, we didn't really have a relationship."

Curtis cocked his head. "Pardon me for saying so, but you don't seem like the one-night-stand type."

Katherine sighed. How was she going to explain this? "It wasn't like that, either. It was...it lasted a week. Then I left."

"What on earth for? Was the guy just a complete dud in bed?"

Chuckling, she dried her eyes again. "No. It wasn't that at all. He was incredible. He was so sweet, and so...." Her voice trailed off.

Curtis ducked his head to look into her face. "Hot?"

"Oh, God, yes."

"Gorgeous?"

"He looks like he belongs on the cover of a romance novel."

"Then why in the hell did you leave him?" Curtis wiggled his eyebrows. "He's not, by chance, a switch-hitter, is he?"

She laughed. It felt good to laugh. She couldn't remember the last time she had. "Sorry. I'm pretty sure he's a strict right-hand player."

"Hmm. Figures. Does he have a brother?"

She shook her head. "Two sisters. Besides, wouldn't Andrew be jealous?"

"Not if I shared."

## Snowbound

Katherine chuckled softly. She knew Curtis was teasing, just trying to make her laugh. He'd never cheat on Andrew. He might be gay, but he was as monogamous as a man could be.

The teakettle began to whistle, and Curtis stood to lift it from the small stove. He poured the boiling water over the bags waiting in the cups and turned to look at her. "So why'd you leave him?"

"It's a long story."

"I've got time." He handed her a cup.

Katherine sighed again and decided she needed a friend more than she needed her privacy. Over tea, she spilled the entire story to Curtis, who sat shaking his head.

"It sounds like a soap opera," he said, "or some dime-store romance novel. I still don't get why you won't tell him."

"I can't. Don't you see? It was just a fling. I told him no strings. I can't just go back to him and say, 'Remember what I said about no strings? Well, Houston, we have a problem'. It wouldn't be fair. I assured him I was on birth control. I was, but it just didn't work."

"What's the worst thing that could happen?"

She set the cup on the table beside her and leaned forward. "Oh, I don't know. He might think that I lied about being on the pill and that I'm trying to trap him into marrying me."

"You think he'd offer to marry you?"

"I know he would. And the last thing I want is him to marry me because I'm pregnant. I narrowly escaped one marriage of convenience, and I'm not about to agree to another one. When I do marry, it'll be for love, not because some guy feels obligated to give his kid a legitimate name."

Curtis nodded. "Okay, I can see that, but don't you think the guy has a right to know his DNA is floating around out there in the universe?"

"I don't want him to think I expect him to support this baby, Curtis. I can do this on my own."

"So tell him that."

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She rubbed her hands over her face, wondering if she had any makeup left at all. "I don't even know where he is. I know he teaches at Columbia—"

Curtis sat up straighter. "He teaches at Columbia?"

"Comparative Literature."

"I'm not getting this. You say the guy is gorgeous and great in bed. He was good to you, and he's obviously got brains if he's teaching at Columbia. What's stopping you from calling him?"

"There's more," she said. "He's an author."

"An author? Anyone I know?"

She shrugged. "Could be. He writes fiction, but he writes under a pseudonym. Several pseudonyms, actually. I illustrated a book for him."

Curtis blinked. "You're published? You didn't tell me you were published."

"Not yet. I'm supposed to be getting an advanced copy of the book soon."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "You've been holding out on me. You didn't tell me you were illustrating books."

"I didn't know it would make a difference."

"Of course it does. You're a published artist. Now we can charge more for your paintings, silly girl." Curtis grinned and patted her lightly on the knee. "Oh, do you think you could have a copy before the opening? It would be fabulous publicity."

Katherine shrugged. "I never thought of that. I can ask."

"I told you, stick with me, kid. I'll make you a star." He bent to kiss her cheek, then walked behind his desk. "But first, we're going to look up your professor." With a few taps of the keys, he brought up the website for Columbia University. "Come here," he said, and Katherine moved behind his desk chair, watching as he clicked on the faculty link.

He pulled up the English department and moved the cursor down the list. "What's his name?"

"Jonah Masterson," Katherine said, scanning the list.

## Snowbound

"Here he is." Curtis highlighted a name. "Dr. Jonah Masterson." He looked up at Katherine with a grin.

"Doctor?" She squinted at the screen, blinked and read it again. "He never mentioned being a Ph.D."

"So he's unassuming, too. I'm liking this guy more and more." Curtis jotted down the phone number and handed it to her. "Call him."

"I'll think about it." She stared at the number.

He stood and put his hands on her shoulders. "Let's go over this again. He's gorgeous and great in bed. He treated you right, has a Ph.D., and he's not cocky about it. And he's a published author who liked your work enough to ask you to illustrate a book for him. Honey, if you don't want him back, I'll take him."

"I told you, he's straight, Curtis."

"So was Andrew." Katherine shot Curtis a surprised look, and he laughed. "I can be very persuasive, love." He grinned. "Call him."

She licked her lips, then blew out a breath. "Okay."

Curtis picked up the phone and held it out to her. "Now."

"Now?"

He plucked the number from her hand and dialed, then shoved the ringing phone into her hand. "Now." Walking to the door, he grinned over his shoulder as Katherine listened to the ring on the other end. "I'll be out there, planning a future for our little Rembrandt," he said, and shut the door behind him.

Hands shaking, Katherine held the phone to her ear and tried not to throw up. A female voice answered the phone. "Dr. Masterson's office."

Katherine swallowed hard. "Is Jo—um...Dr. Masterson available?"

"Dr. Masterson isn't in, but let me put you through to his assistant," the woman on the other end said, and before Katherine could protest, the line was ringing again.

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"Quinn Miller." This time, the female voice was huskier, and sounded far younger. Jonah had a female assistant?

"Hello?" The voice came again, a little annoyed.

"I'm sorry. Hello." Katherine hoped her voice wasn't shaking as much as her hands. "Is Dr. Masterson in?" It sounded so odd to ask for him by his title.

There was a slight hesitation before the woman said, "No, Dr. Masterson is gone for the day. I'm his graduate assistant. Is there something I could help you with?"

*Tell him he's going to be a father by Christmas.* Katherine shook her head to clear it. "No, thank you," she answered, a little more quickly than she intended.

"Would you like to leave a message? I'll be meeting with him later this evening, and I can pass the message along."

Later this evening? Katherine glanced at her watch. It was nearly five. Jonah was meeting a student after hours? Well, maybe it wasn't that unusual. She was his assistant, after all. "Um...no. No message. I'll call him another time."

"He should be in tomorrow morning by eight."

"Thank you." Katherine hung up the phone and slumped into the chair. She was still banging her forehead with the heel of her hand when Curtis popped back in. "Well?"

"He wasn't in," Katherine told him. "I made an idiot out of myself with his assistant, but since I didn't give her my name, I don't think it matters."

"Why didn't you leave a message?"

"What was I going to say? Tell him Katherine Winstead called and said thanks for the great time a few months back, and by the way, you're going to be a father in December?" She dropped her head into her hands, fighting back a fresh onslaught of tears.

Curtis came behind her, kneading her shoulders with his fingers. "It'll work out. Call him back tomorrow."

"I don't know if I can. My hands are still shaking."

## Snowbound

"Well, for now, you and junior need to eat. Let's go down to The Garden and get some dinner," he suggested, naming his partner's restaurant. He rolled the chair back so she could stand, and took her hand in his. "My treat."

"Thanks, Curtis. I really need a friend right now."

"Good. Then you won't mind two. I'll call Andrew and tell him we're coming. He can take a break and eat with us."

"How is Andrew?" she asked, eager to change the subject.

"He's fabulous," Curtis said. "Things are going so well with The Garden that he hired a manager to take over some of the day-to-day stuff. We've been talking about going on vacation together forever, and now it looks like we should be able to in a few weeks. After your opening, of course. He's almost as excited as I am. He loves the painting of yours that we hung in the restaurant, and he said people ask about it all the time."

He hugged her to his side. "It's going to be fine, Kate. You'll see. If your professor isn't interested in being a father, then at least the little munchkin will have Andrew and me."

Katherine grinned. Oh, what would Anne say if she knew her grandchild-to-be had not one but two surrogate fathers?



## Chapter Nineteen

Katherine's opening was a stunning success. Filled to capacity, the gallery was brimming with guests partaking of drinks and hors d'oeuvres, compliments of Andrew's popular restaurant, The Garden. Several of Katherine's original works had sold, and the gallery had orders for prints of many more.

Curtis was ecstatic. Katherine was a wreck.

Standing in a corner, she sipped her seltzer and watched Curtis slip yet another "sold" tag on the corner of a painting. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding and tried to smile at him. In his tuxedo, not a blond hair out of place, he looked like a magazine cover model. His blue eyes were as warm as his smile as he greeted guests and friends.

Katherine sighed and looked down at the black dress she'd chosen for the occasion. It was slightly fitted, and draped over her curves without being too snug. She was just starting to show, and she didn't want to wear anything that emphasized her expanding waistline.

Sidling through the crowd, Curtis plucked a glass of champagne off a waiter's tray. "Look at this place." He waved a hand though the air. "Standing Room Only. And there are more people waiting to come in." He winked at her. "I told you you'd be a success." He tapped his glass to hers in salute. "You should be thrilled. This is the best opening we've ever had."

## Snowbound

"I am thrilled, Curtis. This is what I wanted. It's just...I'm a little nervous."

"What's there to be nervous about? Look at this place," he repeated, gesturing around the room with his glass. "These people love you. Come meet some of them."

Katherine hesitated. "I don't know. I think I'd rather just—"

"Nonsense. They want to meet you. It's the least you can do since they're making us rich." He grasped her hand and tugged her away from the safety of her little corner and into the crowds.

Two hours later, Katherine's feet were killing her, and the muscles of her face ached from smiling. Nearly every painting had sold, and the gallery was still full of people. Katherine slipped out of her high heels for a moment and rolled her neck. Warm hands were suddenly on her shoulders, kneading away the tension. She turned her head to smile up at Curtis.

"You know," he said quietly, "if I weren't gay, I'd ask you to marry me." Katherine laughed and bent forward so he could massage her neck. "If you would give me massages like this, I'd marry you even if you are gay. You could keep Andrew on the side. I wouldn't mind."

"He might not take kindly to playing second fiddle," Curtis joked. "Besides, wouldn't you miss sex?"

Katherine's eyes were closed, and the sudden image of Jonah's warm hands massaging her body flooded her mind. She shook her head. "No."

"Liar." He squeezed her neck lightly. "You're far too passionate a woman not to have a man."

She sighed. "I've lived without one this long."

"For nearly five months, anyway," Curtis teased. From anyone else, the comment would have stung, but coming from him, it made her laugh. He patted her on the shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired." She scrunched her toes against the deep carpet.

"Have you eaten anything?"

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"Not yet. Too much adrenaline."

Curtis draped his arm around her shoulders. "That isn't good for junior. You need to eat something. Try some of those canapés that Andrew brought. They're divine." He led her to a love seat. "You sit. I'm going to bring you something to eat. Can't have my star passing out on me on our big night." With a wink, he started to turn and walk away, then paused, his hand still on her shoulder. "Oh," he whispered.

"What?" Katherine rose up on her toes, peering out over the throng of people.

"There's the woman who bought that first painting of yours. The mountain scene." Curtis pointed to an attractive brunette in a red dress. "Come on, I want you to meet her."

"Okay." She followed him across the gallery. The least she could do was thank the woman. Her purchase had started Katherine on her wave of success.

The woman was beside the buffet, sipping from a glass of champagne. When she smiled, Katherine was struck by an odd sense of familiarity. Since she couldn't remember ever having met the woman, she shrugged it off and pasted on her public smile.

Curtis tapped her on the shoulder and she turned. "Yes?" Her eyes lit up with recognition when she saw Curtis. "Oh, hello, Mr. Townsend."

"Curtis." He took her hand. "Lovely to see you again. I'm glad you could make it."

"I wouldn't miss it," the woman said, and glanced over his shoulder at Katherine.

"How did your client like the painting?" Curtis asked.

"Oh, he loved it." Her answer was directed at Curtis, but her attention was still on Katherine. Odd, Katherine thought, that the woman seemed to be sizing her up, but her smile was friendly and her eyes warm. Where had she seen her before?

## Snowbound

"Good." Curtis grinned. "I thought you might like to meet the artist." He caught Katherine's hand and pulled her alongside him.

The woman's dark eyes brightened. "I'd be honored." She held out her hand to Katherine. "It's such a pleasure to meet you. Your work is incredible."

"Thank you," Katherine said, taking in the woman's features. Her dark hair was pinned up casually, a few strands escaping any attempt to tame them as they curled wildly around her delicate face. Her skin was a dusky gold, her eyes a deep, dark brown framed with thick, black lashes.

"So you're Katherine Winstead," the woman said, releasing Katherine's hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

Surprised, Katherine lifted her eyebrows. "Really? I didn't think my work was that well known yet."

"Excuse me, Mr. Townsend," one of the gallery employees said. "I apologize, but there's a couple over there interested in the Yorktown painting. They have some questions about shipping."

"Be right there." Curtis turned to the ladies beside him. "I'll just let you two chat," he said to Katherine and, with a slight squeeze of her hand, he was off again.

The woman sipped her champagne as she watched him disappear into the crowd, then sighed. "What a loss for our side," she murmured.

Katherine nodded in agreement. "It is a shame, but I have to say there are definite advantages to his friendship."

"Gotta love gay men. They adore shopping, they have great taste in clothes, and they won't hit on you."

Katherine had to laugh. "Definite advantages," she repeated.

"Anyway," the woman said, with a small shake of her head that sent her wavy curls bouncing, "your work is wonderful. It's so real, more like a photograph than a painting. Your attention to detail is incredible. Every time I look at the painting I bought, I see details that I didn't notice before."

## Susan Greene

"So your client was pleased?" Katherine asked, more than pleased herself.

"He was awed."

"Where did you say he lived?" Katherine asked.

"Oh, New York. But he's spent time in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and he really loved the details. Especially the footprints at the bottom, where it looked like two people and a dog had been walking through the snow."

Katherine's heart lurched at the memory of painting those footprints. Hers, Jonah's and Chewie's. She still didn't know why she'd added them to that particular painting, but the details of her work often came without much conscious thought. She simply painted what her mind saw.

"I'm glad he was pleased," she said, and then remembered Curtis hadn't introduced them. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Leah, but people call me Lee. Leah Masterson."

Katherine stared at her. So that was why she looked so familiar. She was a feminine version of her brother. The features that looked so masculine on Jonah were more delicate on his sister, the sensuous mouth, the dark lashes and even darker eyes. They even had the same smile.

Leah raised one eyebrow. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Katherine said quickly, almost too quickly. "I just didn't realize...I mean...you're Jonah's sister."

Smiling now, that same dazzling smile her brother sported, Leah nodded. "He showed me the illustrations you did for his book. They were beautiful."

"Thanks," Katherine said, unsure how she should feel. She smiled at a passing waiter and took a glass of iced mineral water from his tray. "It wasn't very hard. Jonah practically painted them with his words. I just drew what he described."

"He's always had a way with words," Leah agreed.

## Snowbound

"He's a very talented writer," Katherine said, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "The book will be another bestseller, I'm sure."

"Yes, and since he's finally using his real name, coming out of the anonymity closet, so to speak, the publisher is banking on rereleasing some of his other novels to cash in on the publicity from this one. You know he's donating all the royalties from this book to charity, don't you?"

Somehow, Katherine wasn't surprised. "No, I hadn't heard."

"He's donating his share of the royalties to that organization that makes the dreams of terminally ill children come true. They've asked Jonah to go on tour for this one, something he's never done, in hopes of raising more money, so he agreed. It's a good cause. And it's just like Jonah to do something like that. He's always had such a big heart, and he loves kids."

Katherine choked on a sip of water. Leah seemed not to notice as she continued talking. "You should see how he dotes on his nephews. He even keeps those game systems on hand so he can play video games with them whenever they're around." She shook her head, chuckling.

*He loves kids.* Leah's words circled around in Katherine's head. How would Jonah feel if he knew that he was going to be a father? It was entirely different, doting on someone else's kids, than it was being responsible for your own, particularly one that you hadn't intended on conceiving and didn't know existed.

"He's just that way," Leah continued.

*Say something,* her mind urged, but Katherine wasn't sure what all Leah knew about her time with Jonah. She licked her lips. "He was very kind to me when I wrecked my car. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't found me that night."

Leah rolled her eyes. "Jonah has always had a knack for being in the right place at the right time, and he's never been one to ignore a damsel in distress. Mom used to tell him he was born in

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the wrong time period, that he should have been a knight on a white steed."

Katherine didn't find that hard to imagine. In fact, when she had been illustrating his book, she'd pictured Jonah as the hero, and it was his face she'd imagined when she painted the knight in the shining blue armor. She'd made him look different, of course, but in her mind, the knight had been Jonah.

"You know," Leah said, "Our sister Reba has her sculptures in a gallery over on Market. You should go by sometime and check them out."

"I'll do that." Katherine smiled, grateful for the change in subject. Should she ask about Jonah? She was still toying with the idea when Curtis waved her over. "I'm sorry. I've got to run," she said to Leah.

"I understand. It was lovely talking with you." Leah returned her smile with one so similar to Jonah's that a lump formed in Katherine's throat as she turned and walked away. She'd known Jonah's family was close, but meeting his sister face-to-face made her realize exactly what her child would be missing if she kept her secret to herself.

After speaking with Curtis, she moved behind the desk and sipped her water again, watching the slowly diminishing crowd move through the gallery. She hadn't the guts to ask Leah about Jonah, to ask what he'd said, if anything, about her, or to even ask how he was, and Leah hadn't offered. Had their affair meant so little to him that he hadn't mentioned her to his family, beyond their agreement for her to illustrate his book?

Maybe he hadn't said anything simply because their agreement had been that there would be no strings between them. Little did she know when she'd made that stipulation that there would be no need for emotional ties, that the child they had created together would forever bind their lives.

"You look tired, precious."

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Katherine looked up to see Curtis standing beside her. He leaned against the high desk, a stack of receipts in his hand. "I am, a little. Long night."

"Long, fabulous, lots-of-money-made night," he corrected. "I think we sold nearly everything." He laid a hand on her shoulder. "You sure you're okay?"

*No, she wanted to say. I'm not okay. I'm a horrible person, and I'm cheating my child out of a father and a wonderful, loving family.*

"I'm fine. Nothing a good night's sleep won't cure," she said, although she wondered if she'd sleep at all after her encounter with Leah Masterson.

"All right," he said, but his tone made her think he didn't really believe her. "I have to go help Andrew clean up. Why don't you head on home and relax? Junior needs his rest, you know. And I'm sure that little ball of fur you call a dog needs to go out by now. He's probably chewed up half your apartment while you were gone. I still can't believe that little runt ate your Mahalo Blahniks."

"Wicket has good taste," Katherine said with a slight smile. The truth was, when the dog had chewed up the red pumps she'd found it more amusing than annoying, remembering Chewie's fascination with Anne's Prada shoes the day she'd shown up at Jonah's cabin.

"That dog has a taste for anything made of leather," Curtis said with a laugh. "Anyway, go on home and get some rest." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "We'll finish up here. I'll have numbers for you tomorrow."

Katherine nodded. "I'm beat. I can't wait to kick off these heels and take a long, hot bath."

"Do that. I'll call you tomorrow."

Katherine started around the desk toward the office to retrieve her purse, then looked back over her shoulder at Curtis. "Hey," she said, waiting until he lifted his head. "Thanks for everything."



**Susan Greene**

“My pleasure.” He waved a handful of receipts. “Believe me, it was my pleasure. I’ll call you in the morning.” He angled his head. “You sure you’re all right?”

“I’ll be fine.” Yeah, right, she thought as she walked out to her car. She’d be fine as soon as she could figure out a way to tell a man she’d had a “no-strings” affair with that he was about to add “Daddy” to his list of pseudonyms.

## **Snowbound**

### **Chapter Twenty**

Katherine stared out the window of the plane, resting her forehead against the pane of glass. She watched the city below shrink until it disappeared beneath the clouds, then sighed and closed her eyes.

In the bag tucked neatly under the seat in front of her was the itinerary from the publisher of Jonah's book. She'd received the invitation a few weeks after her gallery opening, informing her of Jonah's plans to donate the royalties from the book to a charitable organization and inviting her to attend the annual ball to sign copies of their book. The autographed copies were to be sold at a silent auction, with the proceeds going to the charity. How could she decline such an offer?

Because she was in her third trimester of pregnancy, her doctor had been reluctant to let her travel so far from home. Still, she was barely into her seventh month, and although she was showing now, she was feeling much less tired. Her doctor had agreed to let her travel, but only under the stipulation that she not overdo it. He had given her the name of an obstetrician in New York to call if she had any problems, which was tucked into her computer bag along with the advanced copy of the book she had illustrated but had yet to open.

## Susan Greene

She still hadn't heard from Jonah directly, but she knew from the information she'd been sent that he would be attending the ball as well.

There would be no way to hide her condition from him now, but the point was moot. After her conversation with Leah at the gallery opening, she knew there was no way she could avoid telling him about the baby. Jonah would want to know. And more, he had a right to know. She couldn't deny her child—his child—a chance to know the family that had forged the man she loved.

Her child would have what she never did, an extended family that was warm, loving and supportive. Even if she hadn't already made the decision to tell Jonah, her conversation earlier that week with Anne would have cinched the deal.

Katherine had driven to Charlotte the previous weekend to inform her mother that she was going to be a grandmother, feeling that information was best given in person. Anne had reacted the way Katherine expected. She had ranted, raved and raked Katherine over the coals for the scandal her pregnancy would cause. She bemoaned her daughter's lack of moral fiber and lamented that she hadn't raised her only child to become a single mother.

Anne had pressed her to give her the name of the baby's father, which Katherine had politely and firmly declined to do. She didn't doubt that her mother would do the math and figure out the baby's father was Jonah. Knowing Anne, the minute she put two and two together, she would be on the phone with Jonah immediately, demanding he marry Katherine. No, she wasn't going to put Jonah or herself through that. If Jonah was going to find out, she would tell him herself.

Katherine opened her eyes and looked out the window again, staring at the fluffy clouds in the clear blue sky. She had planned her arrival in New York for the day prior to the ball, hoping to have time to talk to Jonah first. She shifted in her seat, and the movement inside her had her smiling despite herself.

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She'd grown used to the little flutterings over the past few weeks, and they never ceased to delight her, but now they were becoming stronger, and sometimes she could even feel the baby's kicks with her hand if she laid it over her belly. Curtis had been tickled to death the first time he'd felt the baby move under his palm, and she wondered if Jonah would feel the same. She fought the image of Jonah's broad, long-fingered hand spread over her belly, his sexy grin as he felt his child roll and move within her, his mouth meeting hers in a kiss that spoke more than words could say.

She shook her head. No, she couldn't allow herself to indulge in such fantasies. She was not going to set herself up for disappointment by hoping there could ever be more between them than the life they'd created together.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah raked his fingers through his hair and made a mental note to get a haircut before the charity ball the following evening. He pushed the stack of papers he'd been grading aside and glanced at his watch.

It was still only late afternoon, but the autumn sun outside was beginning to fade. The office was practically deserted this late on a Friday, and he often used this quiet time to get some work done without interruption. He'd been trying to grade the first essays of the semester, but his mind refused to focus.

Tomorrow night, he would see Katie. She would be attending the charity ball as well, signing copies of the book and the limited edition lithographs of her illustrations for the auction.

He reached into his pocket, fished out the little box from the jeweler and flipped it open. The emerald-cut diamond winked in the light, as if in on some secret, as he turned the box. Somehow, he'd find a way to convince her that what had happened between them had been far more than just a fling. This time he would not

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fail to say the things he should have said to her seven months before.

He shook his head. Had it really been seven months? Seven months since he'd made love to her on the floor in front of the fireplace, joked with her about running off to the islands, since he'd kissed her goodbye and watched her leave with a man who clearly didn't love or deserve her.

*And neither do you, you big idiot. You're the one who let her walk away.*

He pulled his glasses off and rubbed his tired eyes with his fingertips. Well, it wouldn't happen again. If she walked away this time, it would be with the full knowledge of how he felt about her. He was done playing games.

A knock on his office door startled him from his thoughts, and he snapped the box shut, tucking it away in his pocket. "Yes?" he called out.

"Dr. Masterson? It's Quinn."

"Come in," he answered, sliding his chair back under the desk and picking up the top essay on the stack.

Quinn opened the door hesitantly, peeked in and then stepped inside, holding a stack of papers in one hand and a bag of takeout in the other. She held the bag aloft and grinned. "Thought you might be hungry."

Jonah shifted in the seat. From the enticing aroma, he figured she'd brought Chinese. "I brought dinner," she said, in answer to his unasked question. "I had those papers graded, so I thought I'd drop them by. I know you usually work a little later on Fridays."

Jonah forced a polite smile. The working relationship with his teaching assistant had been strained from the beginning, when she'd caught him leering at her legs. Except it hadn't been her legs he was thinking of, but how was he to convince her of that? Ever since, she'd taken little opportunities to ensure that he knew of her availability, opportunities he'd thus far been very careful to avoid.

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Aside from university policy, he had a very strict personal code against dating students, or anyone associated with the university, for that matter, and had no intention of violating that policy. Not even for a pair of legs like the ones Quinn showed off in short skirts and high heels.

"That was kind of you, Quinn, but it wasn't necessary."

"I don't mind," she said, moving to lay the folder of papers on his desk. "Here are the papers I graded, but you're welcome to go back over them."

Jonah picked up the file, flipped through it and nodded as he laid it in his inbox. "I'm sure they're fine."

Quinn nodded and borrowed a corner of his desk to begin unloading the bag of takeout food. "I brought sesame chicken," she said, "and egg rolls. I think there are some spareribs in here."

Jonah rose from the chair, shaking his head. "I appreciate this very much, Quinn, but I should be—"

"Eating," she said, cutting him off. She scooped a bite of the chicken with a pair of chopsticks and held it up for him to bite. "Come on, just try it. This place has the best sesame chicken I've ever had."

"I really don't think—" His words were stifled by the bite of spicy-sweet chicken that Quinn stuck in his mouth. He smiled and chewed, since he had no other choice, and decided that she was right. The chicken was excellent.

"It's just dinner, Jonah. You've gotta eat sometime."

With a resigned sigh, Jonah sat back down at his desk. "All right, but leave the door open if you don't mind. Mary's gone for the day, and I might need to grab the phone."

Quinn glanced toward the empty lobby, visible through the three-inch wide crack in the door, and shrugged. "Okay by me." She pulled out another pair of chopsticks and two Styrofoam cups of soda, handing one to him. When he took it from her, his fingers brushed over hers, and she grinned up at him.

Jonah leaned back. "Thank you. You didn't have to do this."

## Susan Greene

Quinn perched herself on the corner of his desk, crossed her legs at the ankles, and picked up an egg roll. "It was the least I could do, after everything you've done for me this semester." She bit into the egg roll, held his gaze and grinned.

*Uh-oh. Get the legs off the desk. Now.* "Umm...there's a chair over there," he said, and rose from his seat. "Let me get it for you."

"I'm fine here. Really." She swung her crossed legs.

Jonah sat back down, and avoided looking at her. "Suit yourself," he said with what he hoped was a nonchalant shrug, and went back to the chicken.

"I usually do," she answered, reaching across his desk for her cup. As she did, the blouse she was wearing dipped low, and he looked up to see she was watching his reaction.

He cleared his throat and averted his eyes, concentrating on the aluminum container of food in front of him. He would eat, be polite and then run like hell the first chance he got.

\* \* \* \* \*

After checking into her hotel, Katherine opened her laptop and looked up the address of Jonah's campus office. She followed the link to the page that listed his office hours. Today was Friday, and it appeared he worked a little later than most of his associates before taking off for the weekend.

Katherine checked her watch. If she hurried, she might catch him there this evening. She jotted the address down on a slip of paper from a hotel notepad, folded it and stuck it in her pocket. Then she went downstairs to find a cab.

She'd been to New York before on business and had always been amazed at the sheer number of people living in the city. The flashing lights, the crowds and the inevitable traffic were of no concern to her now. She barely noticed the sights as the cabbie steered the bright yellow vehicle through the city. Instead, she

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focused only on what she would say to Jonah when she finally saw him again.

After what seemed like an eternity, the cabbie pulled over in front of a brick building. "This is it," he said, turning to look over his shoulder at her.

Katherine peered out the window at the building. She paid the driver, took a deep breath and slid out of the cab. As she watched him pull away from the curb, she tugged her coat a little tighter around her against the chilly air.

The front door was unlocked, so she stepped into the foyer and read the names listed on the building directory. Jonah's office was on the third floor. Willing her pounding heart to slow, she stepped into the elevator and pushed the button.

The child inside her flipped, and she pressed her palm over the rounded mound of her belly. "I know," she whispered. "I'm scared, too."

All too soon the elevator dinged her arrival on the third floor, and she stepped out into the deserted hallway. She took out the slip of paper and double-checked the office number before she slowly made her way down the corridor. Outside a wooden door marked "English Department", she let out a slow breath, gathered her courage and opened the heavy door.

The lobby of the department appeared empty. The floor was carpeted, a deep, low-pile burgundy. A functional desk with a computer sat in the center of the outer office, its monitor blinking the software company logo as a screensaver.

Most of the office doors were closed, but a thin shaft of light emanated from one nearly closed doorway. Katherine stepped closer to read the plate on the wall beside the door.

*Dr. Jonah Masterson, English/Comparative Literature.*

Her pulse leaped, her heart pounding so hard against her ribs she wondered if he could hear it. She took a deep breath, gripping the slip of paper tightly in her palm.



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She hesitated when she heard Jonah speaking. The sound of his voice, soft and deep, sent an involuntary shiver down her spine. How could just the sound of his voice make her react like that after so many months? She breathed out softly and listened. His voice was low, but she couldn't understand the words, and she wondered if she was interrupting a phone call. She raised her hand to knock, then froze when she heard another voice—a woman's voice. A woman's soft, seductive laughter, to be exact.

Icy fingers wrapped around her insides. Why hadn't it occurred to her before that he might have found someone else in the last seven months? Did she really think a man like Jonah would remain unattached that long? That he would just be here, waiting for her?

She resisted the urge to pound the heel of her hand against her forehead. How stupid could she have been?

The woman giggled again, and she heard Jonah murmuring something, and the sound of papers being shuffled. She stepped back, lowered her shaking hand and leaned just enough to peer into the crack of the door.

He was backed against his own desk. The woman with her lips fused to his was, from what Katherine could see, a tall brunette in a very short skirt. She had one arm around Jonah's neck, and her other hand was fisted around his tie. His hands gripped the desk behind him for balance.

A fist closed over Katherine's heart and squeezed so hard she gasped audibly for a breath. She lurched backward and stumbled into an end table. A stack of magazines slid to the floor with a thud.

\* \* \* \* \*

Of all the things Jonah could have expected from Quinn, the kiss had been a surprise. He had been able to deal with her subtle

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attempts at seduction, to politely dodge her not-so-subtle innuendo in conversation. But this kiss came totally out of the blue.

One moment he was pulling a chair over for her to sit, and the next thing he knew he was being slammed back against his own desk with her mouth sealed over his. He'd taken the required sexual harassment sensitivity courses, but none had covered proper protocol for having the tongue of his twenty-four-year-old teaching assistant down his throat.

And now, as he struggled for balance and tried not to knock a container of duck sauce over on his students' papers, he thought he heard something in the outer office. Great. Just what he needed, to be caught tangling tongues with a student nearly ten years his junior. He regained his footing before he tumbled completely back on the desk.

"Quinn, for God's sake," he mumbled, because it was rather hard to speak with her tongue halfway down his throat.

"Someone's out there!"

"They'll go away," she whispered with a grin and leaned forward again.

"Quinn, I'm flattered, really." He caught her wrist as her hand slid up his thigh, and stepped back. "But I could lose my job." He forced a chuckle, as if he wasn't really taking her seriously.

Jonah pushed Quinn back, gently but firmly, and freed himself from her grip. He had heard something out there, he was sure of it.

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## Twenty-One

Of all the things Katherine had thought to expect at this moment, nothing had prepared her for this. Nothing prepared her for the pain that suddenly knifed through her chest, or the hard lump that formed in her throat and forced her to choke back a sob. She let the slip of paper fall from her limp fingers as she backed away from the door.

How could she tell him now? He was involved with someone else. She bolted from the office, ran down the hall and pounded impatiently on the elevator button. When it didn't arrive fast enough, she kicked at the doors with a frustrated grunt, then opted for the stairs on the opposite side of the hall. She let the door slam hard behind her as she hurried down them, through the foyer and out into the cool evening air.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah pulled open the door to his office and stepped into the darkened outer lobby. The light from his office shone on a stack of magazines that lay scattered on the floor.

So he hadn't been imagining it. He had heard something. He picked them up and tossed them back onto the end table. If there had been someone here, apparently they'd seen him with Quinn and left.

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Great. Someone had walked in and found him in a compromising position with a student. He was probably going to lose his job, or at the very least, his reputation. He raked a hand through his hair and sighed. He'd definitely be getting an earful from the department head first thing Monday morning.

Quinn appeared in the doorway of his office. "Who was it?"

"I don't know. Whoever it was, left."

"Good," Quinn said, and took a step toward him.

Jonah ignored her and looked around the empty lobby. His eyes fell on the slip of paper lying on the floor.

He flicked on the lights and picked it up. It was torn from a Waldorf-Astoria hotel notepad, with only the address of his office scribbled on it in a neat, precise handwriting.

Quinn leaned against the doorframe and crossed her arms. "Whoever it was, they're gone now." She grinned. "Come back in here. We weren't finished."

*Oh, yes, we were,* he thought, and gave her a look that said so before he lowered his eyes to the paper again. The charity's ball was being held at the Waldorf the following night. Olivia Spanning, the charity's fundraising operator, was staying there, as well as several key members of their board of directors.

Had someone from the organization been trying to contact him? In any case, whoever had been trying to find him had left abruptly, most likely because they'd seen him in a lip lock with Quinn. Not that anyone unrelated to the department would know that Quinn was his teaching assistant, but he was certain the impression it would give would be unprofessional at best.

*Damn.*

In the silence of the near-empty building, he heard a door slam shut just before the elevator dinged. Ignoring Quinn, he dashed out into the hallway. Maybe he could catch whoever it was before they left and salvage some part of his reputation. He tucked the paper into his pocket and rounded the corner, only to see the elevator standing empty, doors just closing.

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The elevators in the old building were notoriously slow, so maybe whoever it was had taken the stairs instead. He shoved open the door and darted down them, but the lobby downstairs was just as empty. When he stepped out the doors, all he could see was the taillights of a disappearing cab.

With a long sigh, he headed back inside and up to his office to settle things with Quinn once and for all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Katherine sat back in the cab and stared blankly out the window, her tears blurring the bright neon lights. What had she thought? That Jonah would be pining away for her? Of course he'd moved on with his life. He had no reason not to.

She'd been stupid. This was not one of his books where everything would turn out right in the end. This was life, real and harsh, and as much as she hated it, she'd have to accept it. He'd found someone else.

If he arrived at the ball tomorrow night with his new girlfriend on his arm, how could she tell him that he was going to be a father in less than two months?

At best, he'd offer to pay child support, which she couldn't bear, and at worst, he'd accuse her of lying about birth control. What if he wanted partial custody? Could she stand the thought of another woman raising her child part-time?

No, she couldn't tell him. She laid her hand over her belly. It wasn't like she could hide her pregnancy, but she could avoid Jonah and any questions he might ask.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following evening came far too quickly. With the assistance of Curtis and Andrew, Katherine had found an appropriate maternity dress for the occasion. She took a deep

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breath and looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door.

The halter-style bodice was flattering. It was cut modestly enough that she didn't feel exposed, and with the empire waist and the long, flowing skirt, it almost hid her rounded belly. If she kept her wrap over her shoulders, the dangling ends camouflaged her belly even more. Yes, it could work. If only she'd bought the dress in basic black. But Curtis had insisted on the eye-catching red.

Maybe she should just call Mrs. Spanning and tell her she wasn't feeling well, skip the whole thing. Given her condition, they were sure to understand.

No, they were counting on her to help raise funds for the charity, and she'd come this far. She was not going to chicken out just because Jonah might show up with another woman in tow.

Would he bring the brunette? She had to prepare herself, in any case, to face him. Just the sound of his voice had sent her system rocketing the previous night, but all she had to do was remember the sight of him in another woman's arms, and her resolve firmed. She could do this. She could be polite and professional without letting her personal feelings get in the way. Anne had taught her that much.

Steeling herself, she picked up her evening bag and headed downstairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah entered the ballroom and let his gaze travel over the staff hurrying about, adding final touches to the tables. A long table had been set up to one side, with several stacks of books arranged on one end. Framed lithographs of Katie's illustrations were hung on a wall behind the table.

"You're early."

He spun to face a smiling Olivia Spanning. A tall, elegant woman with skin the color of Godiva milk chocolate and eyes two

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shades darker, she looked regal in the eggplant-colored gown she wore. Her hair was pinned up in an elegant twist, and gold earrings dangled almost to her bare shoulders. The information he'd received on the charity's board said she was fifty-two, but Jonah wouldn't have guessed her to be a day over forty.

"Hello," he said, and offered his hand. "Nice to finally meet you in person, Mrs. Spanning."

"Olivia, please, Dr. Masterson. I'm so glad you could come. It's going to mean a lot of money for the children. I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you're doing." Her hand was firm and cool, her grip strong, and her long nails painted blood red. She had a dazzling smile. It was no wonder they'd put her in charge of publicity. "I'm glad to do it," he said. "I don't have any children of my own, but I do have nephews, and I can't imagine what it must be like to know your child will never grow up." He looked around at the paintings.

"It certainly changes your view of things," she agreed. "My own son was eleven when the cancer finally took him, but in those short years, we lived more than most people do in a lifetime." She smiled, but Jonah could see the pain still buried beneath the professional manners. "Giving these children just a little bit of joy while they're with us...well, it keeps me going."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Jonah said.

"Thank you." Olivia smiled again and looked around the room with a satisfied sigh. "This is going to be a good night, Dr. Masterson."

He glanced up at Katie's paintings, a little surprised at his own nervousness. Very soon, he'd see Katie again. He stuck his hand in his pocket to finger the little velvet box he had tucked inside. If things went according to his plan, it would be a very good night. "Yes, it will be," he agreed.

"The bars are open. Make yourself at home," she told him. "I've got to go make sure the staff puts the place cards on the head table."

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She wandered off, and Jonah looked up at the paintings again. Picking up one of the books, he flipped through the pages, pausing now and then to admire the illustrations. He raised his head and looked up as a few other guests wandered into the ballroom and gathered around the bar.

Soon, Katie would walk through that same door, and he would tell her everything he should have told her seven months ago.

\* \* \* \* \*

Katherine stood outside the doors to the ballroom, silently gathering her courage. The room was already crowded with people, several of whom had introduced themselves to her in the lobby. So far, she'd managed to be both polite and professional, but so far, she hadn't seen Jonah.

"There you are!"

Katherine looked up at the voice. She recognized Olivia Spanning from her photo on the charity's website, and offered her hand. "Mrs. Spanning. I'm sorry if I'm late."

"Don't be silly. The dinner won't actually start for another hour." She graciously shook Katherine's hand and thanked her again for coming. "Why don't we get you a drink?" she asked, gently guiding Katherine into the crowded ballroom. "How about some champagne?"

"I'll just have mineral water, thank you," Katherine replied with a quick glance down at her belly.

Olivia's gaze followed hers, and she smiled. "Of course, dear. I'm sure they have some. I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were expecting. You can't tell unless you look closely. When are you due?"

"December," Katherine said, her eyes scanning the room for any sign of Jonah.



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"Oh, a Christmas baby," Olivia crooned. "How wonderful." She didn't ask about the baby's father, which was a relief to Katherine. She wasn't quite sure how to explain if that question came up in conversation, except to say that the baby's father was no longer in her life.

Olivia took the drink from the bartender and handed it to Katherine. "We already have several bids on your paintings and on the books. We have them stacked on the tables over there, if you'd like to take a look. Dr. Masterson has already done some of the autographs, but we'd like you to sign them as well. He's right over there." She pointed toward a long table against the wall.

Katherine braced herself and looked over at the table. Jonah was seated behind it, his head down, scrawling something inside the cover of one of the books. He closed it and raised his head to greet one of the guests, rising to shake the woman's hand.

In his elegantly cut tuxedo, he looked just as sexy and comfortable as he had in jeans and a sweatshirt. His hair was shorter, but he'd kept the beard, and his wire-framed glasses were perched on his nose. It struck her that he looked much more the studious professor than the rugged mountain man she'd originally thought him to be, but she knew that beneath the polished exterior was the hard body of a man who split logs with the same finesse that he used to avoid splitting infinitives.

Jonah spoke to the woman, then turned his attention to the little girl at her side. She was a tiny girl, slim and pale, wearing a pretty pink party dress and a pink baseball cap on her obviously bald head. The girl smiled shyly as Jonah talked with her, then she nodded and grinned, clearly pleased with whatever he'd told her. Katherine saw the mother wipe a tear from her eyes, and she blinked back her own.

"That's Marie," Olivia said from behind her. "She's just one of the children we're helping."

"Cancer?" Katherine asked around the lump in her throat.

"Leukemia," Olivia said. "She just turned eight."

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"She's so tiny," Katherine said softly.

"She is. The treatments stunt growth. We're sending her family on a vacation to Hawaii. She wants to see real volcanoes." Olivia's voice wavered. "She's had three rounds of chemo, but they don't think there's much more they can do. It's only getting worse, and more chemo would just mean more pain. She probably won't see her ninth birthday."

Katherine nodded and offered a silent prayer for the little girl and her mother. What must it be like, to know that your child could die? She couldn't begin to imagine. A tall man approached and swept Marie up into his arms. She giggled, said something to him and pointed at Jonah.

The man turned and reached out to shake Jonah's hand, and the little girl leaned over in her father's arms to hug Jonah. Jonah took her in his arms.

Seeing her tiny arms around his neck, her little pink ball cap resting on his broad shoulders, Katherine couldn't hold back the tears any longer. She wiped at one with the back of her hand, and Olivia handed her a tissue. "You'll probably need it," she said. "Lord knows, I go through boxes of them."

Katherine took the tissue. "How do you do it? I don't think I could stand seeing these children every day."

Olivia smiled. "How can I not do it?"

She knew Olivia's own son had died of cancer and understood what she meant. Helping other families in the same situation helped the woman deal with her son's untimely death.

"Dr. Masterson is very good with the children," Olivia said, inclining her head toward Jonah. "There are actually several families here tonight, and he's taken the time to speak to each child. I think he's promised them autographed copies of the books."

"I'll sign them, as well," Katherine said, her eyes on Jonah. She wanted to do more. She wanted to find a way, any way, to ease the suffering she saw in Marie's parents, but she knew there was nothing she could do. Their little girl was going to die, and there

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was not a thing anyone could do about it, except make her short life as happy as possible.

"I'll sign as many as you want to give away." It was a small gesture, she knew, but it was all she had at the moment. Then she remembered Jonah had donated his royalties to the charity and resolved to do the same.

"Thank you," Olivia told her. "It means a lot to these children."

"I'll do whatever I can," she promised, and meant it.

The man took Marie back from Jonah, shook his hand again and hugged his daughter close as he made his way to a nearby table. Katherine saw Jonah's gaze follow the family as they seated themselves. He removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He wiped the lenses with a tissue he pulled from his pocket, slid them back on and sat down at the table.

He was obviously distressed by his encounter with little Marie. He cared about these children, not just the publicity. How unfair was she being to keep him from knowing his own child? Not ready to deal with that question, Katherine looked away and sipped her drink.

"Why don't you go ahead and get started on some of the autographs before dinner?" Olivia said.

Katherine suppressed the sudden panic that seized her at the thought of joining Jonah at the table. She was here for the children like Marie, and she would not put her own selfish feelings before their needs.

"All right."

Olivia guided her through the crowded room, and Katherine gripped her glass tightly, suddenly feeling as if it would drop from her numb fingers if she didn't. Jonah was signing books again but looked up as they approached.

He looked somewhat surprised as his gaze flicked over her and lingered momentarily on her left hand before he raised his eyes

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to hers. He didn't seem to notice her belly at all. She hadn't known what she expected to see in those dark eyes, but she hadn't expected them to soften the way they did. It couldn't mean anything, not after what she'd seen the previous night. Perhaps he simply had a basic fondness for all of his past lovers.

He rose to his feet, shoved his hands into his pants pockets and rocked back on his heels. He smiled that adorable, sexy smile she'd fallen so hard for seven months before, and she felt her pulse trip.

She glanced down at his hands in his pockets and remembered the similar gesture the night they'd met. He was nervous, she realized, and wondered why.

"Dr. Masterson." Olivia cut in on Katherine's thoughts. "Ms. Winstead just arrived. I believe you two know each other."

Jonah stared at Katie, his heart pounding in his chest. He felt like a twelve-year-old at his first school dance. She was more beautiful than he remembered. Her hair was swept up in some kind of twist, with little wisps hanging down to frame her face. And that dress. Good Lord, it was red. Just like the suit she'd had on the night he found her unconscious in her car. Even with the wrap around her arms, her shoulders were bare, and her delicate skin glowed in the soft light. When she smiled slightly, those little dimples appeared in her cheeks, and his mouth went dry.

"Yes, we do," Katherine said. Gracefully, she inclined her head. "Dr. Masterson."

Dr. Masterson? What the hell? She'd called out his name in passion seven months before. Why the sudden formality? Then he remembered her mother and the manners that had been ingrained in her. She wasn't going to give any hint that they'd had an intimate relationship. It was completely inappropriate to do so, and he understood that. He held out his hand, and after a moment's hesitation, she placed hers in his. "Ms. Winstead, it's lovely to see you again," he said with an exaggerated show of formality. He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. His eyes met

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hers, and he was pleased with the little jolt of shock he saw pass through them before she schooled her expression.

Good. She hadn't forgotten. If she wanted to play it cool while they were at the dinner, fine. He'd get her alone soon enough.

"Dinner is being served in a little less than an hour. You're both seated at the head table," Olivia told them. "I'll see you there." In an instant, she was absorbed into the throng of people filling the ballroom, and Jonah was alone with Katie for the first time in seven months.

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### **Chapter Twenty-Two**

They stood, two feet apart, behind the table loaded with books. Jonah noted Katherine's left hand still tightly gripping the glass, her knuckles almost white. He had also noted that her hand was as ringless as when he'd pulled her from her wrecked car. Another good thing, he decided. She had obviously ditched Stephen Conrad Shackelford the Fourth. He bit back a triumphant grin and settled for a polite smile instead. He dipped his hands back into his pockets, and his fingers brushed the little box he carried. If things went his way, her hand wouldn't be ringless for much longer.

He had prepared his speech. He would tell her how much he'd missed her and how stupid he'd been to let her walk out of his life. But for a moment, he just wanted to look at her, to convince himself she was really standing in front of him.

Damn, she was beautiful. He thought that his overly active romantic imagination had probably exaggerated his memory somewhat, but he'd been wrong. If anything, she was even lovelier than she'd been seven months before. Her skin was almost luminous in the warm light of the chandeliers. The move away from Anne had clearly been a good one for her. She'd even put on a little weight, and it looked good on her. Her breasts were fuller, rounder than he remembered. He let his gaze wander over her, taking in the subtle flare of her hips beneath the flowing skirt.

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Lush was the word that came immediately to his writer's mind. She looked...soft. His eyes went to her breasts again, the curves showing just slightly at the edges of the halter-style top. She shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, and the folds of the long wrap around her shoulders slid from the front of her gown. Instead of the dress hanging straight below her breasts, it curved forward, falling over a gentle mound before tumbling to the floor.

Realization struck Jonah like a fist in the solar plexus as he stared at her rounded belly.

Talk about poleaxed.

His heart lurched to a stop.

He lifted his eyes to hers again, those whiskey-gold eyes that had entranced him from the start, and suddenly couldn't speak. She was pregnant. What the hell was he supposed to say? Thoughts flew through his mind with lightning speed, but his tongue simply couldn't remember *how* to form them into words.

Katherine met his gaze steadily and pulled the edges of her wrap back into place. Her chin lifted almost in defiance, but the expression in her eyes was anything but defiant.

He managed one word. "Katie. . ."

"Dr. Masterson," a voice called, and he turned to see Olivia standing with a group of men and women. "I wanted some of our board to meet you and Ms. Winstead."

Jonah blinked and glanced at Katherine, who was standing placidly beside him, offering her hand to the man beside Olivia. Impeccable manners, he thought, and turned to do the same. This might not be the time or place for answers to his questions, but he'd get them, one way or another, before the night was over. Right now, he had an obligation to fulfill.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grateful for the interruption, Katherine turned away from Jonah. She had hoped he wouldn't notice, but she should have

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known there was no way he wouldn't. And she'd seen his expression change from a pleasant smile to the confused scowl. He knew. And he wondered. And he wouldn't be content until he had all the answers to his questions.

Pushing aside those worries for later, Katherine drew on all the grace Anne had taught her and focused on getting through the evening.

Dinner was a trial, since Olivia had taken it upon herself to seat Jonah and Katherine side by side at the head table. He hadn't brought a date. Although it surprised her, she was glad that she didn't have to face the sight of him with another woman again. As it was, she had to keep her eyes straight ahead or on the socialite beside her to avoid looking at Jonah.

Fortunately, the woman seated on the other side of Katherine was fond of the sound of her own voice. Katherine pretended interest in the socialite's stories of the different nonprofit boards she served on. She smiled, nodded, asked a few polite questions, and accepted the woman's praise of her work. She barely touched her food, pushing it around on her plate with the fork, because her stomach roiled so with nerves that she feared putting anything into it.

Before long they were once again ensconced at the autograph table, busily signing books and stacking them aside for the auction. They'd personalized the ones for the children, but the others required only a signature. She was glad, because she doubted she could focus enough to handle anything more.

Jonah hadn't tried to talk to her again, but she had felt his gaze on her occasionally. Funny that she would know he was looking at her without seeing him, but she knew he was. They were seated at opposite ends of the long table, with plenty of room between them for the stacks of books to be perused by the guests, but she felt his presence as if he were sitting right beside her, and the tension in her body was beginning to take a toll.



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During a lull in the autograph line, she leaned back in the chair and rubbed a hand over her rounded belly beneath the table. Her baby was active this evening, and she wondered if the stress she was under was causing the child's restlessness. She heard Jonah laugh softly at something a guest said, and her stomach flipped as the baby kicked, hard. Did her child hear the sound of its father's laughter? Would it know his voice?

Don't be silly, she told herself. The baby had never heard his voice and certainly wouldn't recognize it among so many.

She picked up a book and flipped it open, then stopped herself. So far, she'd only opened the books up to the inside cover to sign them. She hadn't even looked at her own copy yet, unable to face the memories she knew they would stir. Seeing the dragon on the cover was difficult enough, since she had been naked in Jonah's bed when she sketched the original picture. She flipped a few pages and smiled despite herself at the whimsical illustrations. They really were good, she had to admit, and the success of this book could lead to contract offers for others. She avoided reading the text because she knew it would be too painful. She was about to close the book when something on one of the first pages caught her attention.

It was the dedication.

*To Katie*, she read and closed her eyes. There was more, but she needed a moment to gather herself. She took a few deep breaths and opened her eyes again.

*To Katie, who taught me that the best fantasies are those we share.*

Tears stung her eyes and burned in her throat. Her hands trembled as she closed the book. She slowly raised her eyes to where he sat busily signing autographs, and felt her heart lurch.

How could he still affect her so?

Hormones, she reminded herself again. She was seven months pregnant, after all. Her emotions were a wreck, and it had nothing to do with Jonah Masterson. She just needed a bit of fresh air.

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Excusing herself, she pulled her wrap tighter around her, rose from the table and made her way to a back door. The crisp fall air was all she needed, she told herself, and in a few minutes, she'd be right as rain.

Once she was outside the building, Katherine no longer tried to stop the tears. Seeing him again was more difficult than she could have imagined. She had always heard that pregnancy wreaked havoc on a woman's emotions, but the sheer force with which the feelings hit her left her reeling. If she could just get through the rest of tonight, she'd go back to her hotel room and cry until she was spent, but for now she had to get a grip on herself.

It wasn't fair. Jonah seemed so confident, so in control. But, then again, he wasn't pregnant and full of raging hormones, either. He wasn't the one walking around with a constant reminder of their shared passion squashing his bladder and kicking him in the ribs. She laid a hand over her belly and felt the baby move.

The baby, she thought. *His child.*

A pang of guilt hit her square in the chest, and she fought to shrug it off. She doubted he'd hold off his questions much longer, but she didn't know how on earth she was going to make him understand. It occurred to her to lie, to tell him the child wasn't his, but she rejected the thought almost immediately. He'd know. He'd told her how terrible a liar she was and how people could see right through her. She just didn't have it in her to be that dishonest. Nor did she think she had it in her to deal with the situation tonight. She'd simply have to avoid him the rest of the evening.

The air was cool against her damp cheeks. Pulling the wrap around her, she turned to go back inside and nearly ran headlong into the man she'd just sworn to avoid.

Katherine backed up a step, tugged the wrap closed and swallowed. She knew her eyes were red, her cheeks splotched, and her makeup was probably in ruins, but she could at least hold on to her pride. Chin up, she nodded at him, because try as she might, she couldn't force words out of her throat.

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"Katie," he said quietly. His voice, that silky smooth baritone, swept over her like warm velvet, and she shuddered in response. *Control*, she ordered herself, and her fingers tightened around the ends of the wrap.

"Jonah," she managed. She saw him slowly fist his hands at his sides and uncurl them, spreading his fingers deliberately. Good, she thought. Maybe this is costing him a little, too. She had to force herself not to think about how those hands had made her feel.

He stuffed them into his pockets impatiently and cleared his throat. "I think we need to talk."

*Walk past him. Just get past him, go inside and don't look back.* "I'm sorry. I don't have time to chat." *Go*, she ordered her rebellious feet, but they were glued to the concrete. "I've got to get back inside." She hoped verbalizing her intentions would loosen the grip the sidewalk seemed to have on the soles of her strappy sandals.

His eyes darkened. "What I have to say won't take but a minute." Katherine took another step back. Her chest tightened painfully at the hurt in his eyes, but she wasn't going to let it get to her. She couldn't afford to.

"Odd that you haven't had anything to say to me for over six months and now suddenly whatever you have to say can't wait. Sorry, Jonah. I have to get back inside." When she tried to shove past him, he caught her arm. Not roughly, but enough to stop her in her tracks. His touch was like fire branding her skin, searing her to her toes, but there was not a snowball's chance in hell of her admitting it.

"Katie, please—"

The sound of her name, so softly spoken, yanked her pounding heart up into her throat, threatening to cut off what little air she was managing to suck in. She felt dizzy. *Breathe*. She just needed to breathe, and she had to get away from him to do it.

*But he has a right to know*, the annoying little voice of her conscience spoke up.

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*And let him think for one minute I'm trying to trap him into something he clearly doesn't want?*

"No," she managed out loud, shaking her head. "Not now, Jonah." Jerking her arm free of his grasp, she whirled and all but ran back into the building.

Jonah turned to watch her go. He wouldn't push it, not here. But he would talk to her, one way or another. He would tell her exactly how he felt. He'd tell her what an idiot he'd been to let her leave. And he'd offer her the ring he carried in his pocket.

Leaning against the brick wall, hands shoved in his pockets, he looked up at the night sky. No stars were visible in the black, the city lights obscuring them from view. He'd never really noticed the lack of stars in New York City. Of course, he'd never really paid the stars much attention at all until that night in the hot tub with Katherine. Now he seemed to notice them whether he wanted to or not.

No, she wasn't leaving again until she heard what he had to say. But tonight, they both had an obligation to the children. Slowly blowing out a breath, he headed back inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the crowd slowly diminished, Jonah helped Olivia pack up the remaining books for shipment to the winners of the auctions. As far as the charity was concerned, the night had been a tremendous success, and they had raised far more than the projected amount of money.

Olivia was thrilled. She was standing at the display of Katie's illustrations, fawning over the framed and autographed lithographs of her work.

"This is amazing," she said, holding a gold-framed copy of the book's cover.

"She's very talented," he agreed.

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She turned to Jonah and smiled. "I heard you're the one who discovered her," Olivia said with a wink that made him wonder exactly what speculation was out there about Katie and him.

"Sort of." He shrugged and tried to look nonchalant. "By the way, have you seen Ms. Winstead? She seems to have disappeared."

"Oh, she had to leave early. Not feeling well, apparently." Olivia carefully placed the picture on the bubble wrap she had laid out on the table. "She was very tired. Not unusual, really, considering her condition."

Jonah's brows drew down. "Condition?"

Olivia laughed, her dark, almond-shaped eyes twinkling as she deftly taped the bubble wrap around the picture. "She's pregnant."

Jonah was glad she had turned away because he felt the blood drain from his face. Although his brain had registered that when he'd seen her, it was startling to hear it spoken out loud.

"Pregnant," he echoed, realizing how stupid it sounded to repeat it but not being able to help it. He'd pondered the situation all night, the random thoughts rifling through his mind with no order whatsoever. Was the child she carried his, or had she married Shackelford, after all? He remembered that his sister Reba hadn't been able to wear her wedding rings for the last five months of her pregnancy. The thought churned in his gut. His Katie, married and carrying another man's child. If he were to imagine a worst case scenario, that would be it.

He looked up and realized Olivia was watching him with an odd expression. Struggling for something to say that wouldn't sound stupid, he laughed a little. "I remember how sick my sister was the first few months of her pregnancy. Couldn't even look at food for weeks, and it wasn't just in the mornings."

Olivia chuckled and placed the wrapped picture in a box. "It can be brutal," she agreed. "I was sick every day with my boy." She picked up a stack of books and placed them in another box.

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Jonah nodded a response, but his mind worked furiously. If Katie had married during the summer, he supposed it was possible for her to be pregnant already. Damn it, he should go find her right now. He should go straight to her hotel room and find out what the hell was going on. But Olivia was struggling to lift a box full of books in a dress and high heels, and Jonah couldn't leave a damsel in distress.

"Can I help you with those?" he asked, reaching for the box.

"I'd appreciate it," she said, and handed the box to him. He carried it to the waiting cart and stacked it with the others.

Still beaming, Olivia followed. "You know, tonight was a big success, Dr. Masterson. We raised enough money in one night to cover the budget for the next six months." She laid a hand on his arm as he picked up a box containing the signed lithographs.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he told her. "Money's like manure. It's not worth a thing unless it's spread around encouraging young things to grow." She raised one elegantly arched eyebrow as he grinned and continued. "Thornton Wilder. From *The Matchmaker*."

Olivia laughed. "You're a good New Yorker. You know your Broadway."

"I know my writers," he replied as he carried the last of the boxes toward the cart. He wondered how much Olivia knew about Katie's pregnancy. Maybe if he steered the conversation back into that direction, she could help clear some things up for him. "I hope Ms. Winstead will be all right."

"Oh, she'll be fine. It's easy to get overtired when you're pregnant. Shouldn't be much longer for her, though. She's due sometime around Christmas."

Christmas, he mused, something suddenly clicking in his brain. Katie's baby was due at Christmas? He frantically did the math in his head. *If she was due at Christmas...*

He nearly dropped the box he held. His heart stopped beating, he was certain, for a full five seconds. Olivia was speaking,

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but he couldn't understand the words. He shook his head to clear it, hoping his knees would keep working long enough to get him to Katherine's hotel room. How could he have assumed it wasn't his child? She'd flat out told him she'd never slept with Stephen, and unless she'd changed that fact shortly after returning home, the baby was his. So why hadn't she told him?

Her voice echoed in his head. *No strings, no promises.*

Damn.

"Thank you again, Dr. Masterson," Olivia was saying. "The staff will get these to the truck. Just leave them on the cart. I didn't trust them to wrap them up properly, and as much as they were auctioned for, I don't want them broken."

"Understood. And please, call me Jonah," he told her, then added casually, "Oh, would you happen to know where Ms. Winstead is staying?" Olivia angled her head. "She's here, at the Waldorf. Why?"

"Just wanted to get her to sign a copy of the book for my nephew before I leave. He loves her dragon."

"Your dragon," Olivia corrected him.

"Not as far as Nate's concerned," Jonah said with a grin. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Jonah," he heard her call after him, but he was already on his way out the door.

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### Chapter Twenty-Three

The pretty young clerk smiled at Jonah as he approached the front desk of the hotel. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I hope so," he said, returning her smile and trying not to appear too desperate. "Can you tell me if there is a Katherine Winstead registered?"

"Just a moment, please." She pressed her lips together as she typed on the keyboard, peering at the flat-screen monitor in front of her. Frowning, she tapped a few more keys and shook her head.

"I'm sorry, sir. Ms. Winstead has already checked out of her room."

"Checked out?" Jonah felt as if a fist were tightening around his heart. "When?"

"Just a short while ago."

"Thank you." Turning stiffly, he walked toward the revolving door, where a uniformed bellman stood. "Excuse me," he called out.

The bellman, an elderly gentleman, turned to face Jonah. His nametag bore the name Melvin, written in gold script. "May I be of assistance, sir?"

"Perhaps. A friend of mine was staying here, and I was told she checked out a short while ago. A young woman, tall and blonde. Her name is Katherine Winstead."

The older man smiled. "Ms. Winstead. Yes, she did check out tonight. Said something about a change in plans or something."



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Needed to get to the airport for a flight tonight, so I hailed her a cab."

Jonah blinked, unable to grasp what the man said. "She left tonight?"

Melvin nodded. "She's a lovely young woman. Talked to me for quite a while yesterday. She came back and gave me an autographed copy of a book for my new grandbaby. She left here around, oh, nine thirty or so, said she had a flight out at eleven. She seemed a little upset." He glanced at his watch, as Jonah did the same. It was nearly ten thirty.

"Which airport?"

The bellman looked Jonah over and lifted his eyebrows. "How do I know you're not some crazy stalker? I can't give out that kind of information, not knowing who you are and all."

Closing his eyes briefly, Jonah sighed. "I'm Jonah Masterson. I wrote the book she gave you."

"Now, how do I know that's the truth?" "Because I dedicated the book to her," Jonah said. "Where's your copy? I'll show you."

Giving him a puzzled look, Melvin walked over to the lobby desk, spoke to the clerk and came back carrying a copy of the book. Jonah took it from him and flipped to the dedication page. "See?"

The old man read over the dedication and smiled a little, then raised his eyes to Jonah's. "That's real nice and all, but it don't prove you are you who say you are. Anyone could say they wrote that."

Blowing out a breath, Jonah pulled out his wallet and showed the bellman his ID. Melvin examined the license, nodded and leaned back on his heels. But he said nothing.

Nearing exasperation, Jonah tucked his wallet back inside his jacket. "I understand your need to protect the hotel's clientele, but this is extremely important. Please. Which airport?"

Melvin smiled knowingly. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

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Jonah sighed. "Yes. Look, I've been stupid. Stupid doesn't begin to cover what a moron I am. I can't let her go again."

The old man looked down at the book in his hand, then up at Jonah. "I always was a sucker for a good love story."

Jonah closed his eyes tightly for a moment, then opened them again. "Good love stories need a happy ending, don't you think? Please, what airport?"

Melvin chuckled. "She's headed for Kennedy. Said she was flying Allied." His lips curved, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepening.

"Thank you." Jonah started for the door.

"Hey, would you mind...?" Melvin held out the book.

Jonah smiled, took it from him and hastily signed the inside before handing it back. The bellman smiled down at the autograph, then pushed open the glass door and nodded toward the cab waiting at the curb. "Don't let her go, boy."

"I don't intend to," Jonah replied, and darted outside. With a quick two-fingered salute to the bellman, he ducked into the backseat of the cab.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonah slipped the cabbie an extra twenty dollars to defy the laws of physics, and arrived at the airport with five minutes to spare. He stalked through the terminal, muttering oaths under his breath. There was no way to get through the security gate without being a ticketed passenger, he was told. Damn it, he'd buy a ticket if that's what it took to stop her from leaving. Desperate, he approached the ticket counter and asked the agent on duty if tickets were still available for the Allied flight to Charleston.

Shaking her head, the agent gave him a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry, sir. The flight is full."

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Jonah noted her nametag and forced himself to be polite. "Doris," he said, "is there any way to contact a passenger who's on the flight?"

She eyed him warily. "Is it an emergency?"

*Yes! The love of my life is leaving, and taking our child with her!*

At his hesitation, she frowned. "We can only contact a passenger in an emergency."

As much as he wanted to say it was an emergency, he didn't want to have to deal with airport security over the issue. "Fine. Is there another flight to Charleston tonight?"

She clicked a few keys on her terminal, and shook her head again. "Not until tomorrow morning. Want me to book that for you?"

"Yes, please," he said, handing over his credit card.

Ticket in hand, Jonah walked over to the window. For a long time, he watched, long after the lights of the plane had disappeared in the darkness. Then he cursed himself silently, turned and wandered back out to catch a cab home. There was nothing more he could do until morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pulling his keys from his pocket, Jonah scowled at the grinning gargoyle perched on the corner of the concrete porch railing. When his sister had first sent it, he'd found it amusing. Tonight, it was just annoying, mocking him with its wide, toothy smile.

*You shouldn't have let her go.*

He twisted the key in the lock and stepped inside, locking the irritating gargoyle outside. Not bothering with the lights, he shrugged out of his overcoat and hung it on one of the hooks beside the door. The planked flooring of the entry creaked slightly beneath his weight as he crossed the hall, untying his bow tie as he walked. The scents of sawdust and plaster tinged the air.

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He paused at the doorway to the den, a sense of unease settling on him when he realized Chewie hadn't greeted him at the door. "Chewie?" he called out.

"I let him out back."

The soft voice from the darkened den had his heart leaping into his throat. Slapping at the light switch, he froze in the arched doorway. Katie rose from the sofa, momentarily narrowing her eyes at the insult of the bright light. She'd changed into a pair of slacks and a sweater, and her hands were tucked into the pockets of her coat.

"He needed to go out," she explained, her voice slightly shaky. "So I let him out the back door. It was fenced, so I thought it would be all right."

Jonah blinked hard, then opened his eyes wide. He looked as if he wanted to speak, but he didn't. He simply stared, transfixed. It wasn't exactly the reaction she'd hoped for, and she began to think she'd made a huge mistake.

She had forgotten just how potent the man could be. He looked so sexy, standing there with his collar unbuttoned and his tie undone and dangling loose around his neck, those dark eyes confused. Tension coiled deep inside her, and she felt her pulse kick up a notch. Her breathing hitched.

She licked her lips and glanced toward the door. "I used the spare key, the one in the gargoyles. You told me about it. Remember? You said you wanted to talk, and I thought..." She pulled the key from her pocket, her eyes meeting his, and pressed her lips together. What had she thought? She shook her head, turned away and noticed the painting that hung above his fireplace. "You have one of my paintings."

"My sister bought it for me."

Katherine turned to look at him. "Leah," she said, and he nodded. "I met her at my opening. She told me she'd bought it for a client, but I had no idea it was you. She never said—" She stopped short. The look of shock hadn't faded from Jonah's face. Coming

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here had been a mistake. She could see that now. "I'm sorry. I should have called first, but..." Her words trailed off as her throat constricted, and tears stung her eyes. *God, why didn't he say something?*

"Never mind. It was presumptuous of me to just show up like this. I shouldn't have come." She laid the key on a nearby table. "I'll just...get a cab," she said, her voice quivering, and moved past him, into the entry hall. Before she could open the door more than a crack, it slammed shut, wrenching the doorknob from her fingers.

"Like hell you will."

Katherine jumped and turned to face him. Jonah's hand was above her head, flat against the wood. He didn't touch her, but she felt trapped between his body and the door. She looked up into his eyes. Even with the den light on, the entry was dimly lit, and his dark eyes looked almost black as he stared down into hers.

"When were you planning on telling me about the baby, Katherine?"

She averted her eyes. The fact that he'd used her full name hurt. She didn't know why, but it did. "I wasn't planning on telling you at all," she admitted.

"You weren't going to tell me?"

Shaking her head, she swallowed. She could hear the barely banked fury in the tone of his voice, but it was the pain in it that surprised her. She forced herself to raise her head and meet his gaze.

Immediately, she wished she hadn't. His voice may have alluded to pain, but it was etched on his face as clearly as if he'd written it in red. He pushed away from the door, took a few steps back and rubbed a hand over his face. "Is it mine?"

She wanted to be insulted by the question but couldn't find a rationalization for it. Was he really afraid she was carrying another man's child? Is that what this was about?

"Yes."

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He was quiet for several moments, rubbing his hand over his jaw. "How?" he finally asked. "How did this happen?"

Katherine raised one eyebrow. "You were there. I think you know how."

"I thought you were on the pill. You said—"

"The pill is only ninety-nine percent effective. I guess I fell into that one percent." Shrugging, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly, watching the emotions play across his face.

This time he was silent for so long she began to think she should leave after all, give him some time to sort it out. She leaned against the door, needing the support of something solid. "I'm sorry. I don't want you to...I mean, I don't expect...." *Oh, good Lord. What the hell am I supposed to say?* "I don't expect anything from you, Jonah. I wasn't going to tell you because I didn't want you to feel trapped. Then I met your sister, and she was so wonderful, and I thought of Viv, and everything you'd told me about your family, and I couldn't bear for this baby to grow up not knowing them. I was afraid, and I was wrong." She paused to take a breath. "You have a right to know."

His brows drew together as he slowly turned to face her. "Damn right, I have a right to know. Would you ever have told me, had we not run into each other tonight?"

The words, sharply spoken, sliced through her and put her on the defensive. "I came to your office last night with every intention of telling you. Then I saw you with your girlfriend, and...." She stopped, the pain in her chest so intense that she had to rub the heel of her hand against it.

"My girlfriend? I don't have a—" His shoulders dropped. "Oh, God. That was you I heard last night outside my office, wasn't it?" She nodded weakly, and he raked his fingers through his hair. "Damn it. I'm sorry you walked in on that. I—"

"Don't apologize. You have a right to get on with your life," she said. "No promises, remember?" The words came easily

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enough to her lips, but the pain behind them was almost unbearable.

"She's not my girlfriend, Katie. She's my teaching assistant."

Katherine stared at him, confused. Not his girlfriend?

"But...you were kissing her."

"She was kissing me," he corrected. "I was trying to explain to her that I don't have affairs with students. She wasn't getting the message." He rubbed his forehead with his fingers. "Why didn't you say something?"

Relief flooded her. He wasn't involved with someone else. Apparently she'd misread the situation, but who could blame her when it was obvious the other woman practically had her tongue down Jonah's throat? "I didn't...I thought...the way we left things...and we said no promises, Jonah. I saw you with her, and I just assumed...." She waved her hand and let it drop limply to her side.

"I didn't want you to think I was trying to use this to manipulate you, especially if you'd found someone else." With her arms folded across her chest, she looked away. "I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to feel obligated. You obviously didn't want—"

"Don't you think that should have been *my* choice?" He hit the hallway light switch, and she had to blink against the sudden bright glare as he stepped toward her. "How do you know what I want or don't want?"

"I don't," she snapped, her own ire rising. "I don't know what you feel *or* what you want. I didn't know then, how the hell should I know now? You never told me how you felt." Katherine closed her eyes. She wished she'd had the sense to get on that plane. What had she been thinking, coming here?

His voice softened. "I wanted *you*."

Her eyes shot up to meet his. "You *had* me."

He winced. "That's not what I meant. I wanted you to stay. *With me.*"

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"So why didn't you ask? Why didn't you ask me to stay?" Her voice shook, and she hated herself for it. The last thing she needed was to go hormonal now. Blinking back the tears, she sucked in another breath to steady herself.

Jonah stared at her. "I did."

"You were joking," she said. "Running away to the islands wasn't exactly a viable option, Jonah."

He sighed. "Okay. I didn't ask because you made it clear you didn't want anything else. I wanted you to stay, but only if you wanted to."

Katherine swiped at the stray tear. "You never called. You never even sent so much as an email the whole time we worked on the book."

"I *did* call. Several times, in fact. Until your mother told me not to call again because you wanted to put the whole thing behind you."

Katherine closed her eyes again. Damn her interfering mother. Why hadn't it occurred to her that Anne would prevent him from contacting her? She clenched her fists at her sides as he continued.

"And I did try to email you, but the only email address I could find for you didn't work."

Katherine let her head fall back against the door. Damn, damn, *damn!* She hadn't even thought of that. She'd just assumed he would call, not try to email her. "That was my work email address. When I quit, they canceled that account."

She looked up. Jonah was shaking his head. "I quit trying to find you because I thought that was how you wanted it."

"That *was* how I wanted it!" She knew she was raising her voice and didn't care that it wasn't ladylike. "At least, I thought I did. I thought I could have an affair with you and just walk away from it. Then things changed between us. It wasn't just a fling anymore. I didn't know how to handle that. I was the one who said no strings, remember?"



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"Then why are you yelling at me? How was I to know you changed your mind? Why didn't you contact me? Why did you wait seven months to tell me you were pregnant?"

Katherine closed her eyes, rubbing her arms with her hands, and lowered her voice. She was not going to get into a totally unproductive shouting match. "I was wrong. I'm sorry, Jonah. I should have told you about the baby sooner. I just didn't want you to feel obligated to me. I don't want anything from you, I want you to understand that."

She straightened her spine and took a deep breath. "I'll agree to shared custody, if that's what you want. I want this baby to know you, Jonah, and be a part of your family. I want this child to have what I never did."

Jonah shook his head. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Sharing custody. Of course, it'll be difficult, living in two different cities, once the baby's old enough for school, but we can work something out for summers and holidays, and —"

"No," he snapped.

Katherine jumped at the sharpness of his rejection. "You don't want —"

"I won't have my child bouncing back and forth between families. I knew kids like that in school, always going from 'mom's house' to 'dad's house', never calling anyplace home. No." He shook his head vehemently. "I won't raise a child like that."

Panic gripped her stomach with icy claws. Would he sue her for sole custody? "I'm not asking for any financial support from you. I came here to let you know you were going to be a father and give you an opportunity to be a part of your child's life, but I'm not about to give this baby up. So if you have any ideas of suing me for custody, you'd better think again."

Jonah stared at her. "Do you really think I would do that to you?"

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Hesitantly, Katherine shook her head. No, he wouldn't. That was just her newly developed mothering instinct kicking into overdrive. She clenched her fists and slowly uncurled them, trying to release a little tension. "I didn't mean for this to happen, but since it has, we have to deal with it. We had an affair, Jonah, and —"

Jonah had been pacing the narrow entry as she talked, but he spun on his heel and glared at her. "An affair? Is that all you think it was?"

"That's what it was," she said flatly. "We had an affair. One incredible week. You made me feel things I never knew existed. I'll never forget that." Her voice broke, and she stopped a moment to gather her thoughts. "But it was over."

"It wasn't over." Temper flared in his eyes as he crossed the floor and stopped in front of her. His hands grasped her shoulders. "It still isn't over. Not for me. I can't shake it. Damn it, I've tried. God knows, I've tried to get you out of my system, but I can't. You were the one who said no promises, remember?"

She did. All too clearly. She figured since she couldn't possibly hurt more than she already did, she might as well say it. "I didn't know it would be so hard to feel so much."

His grip on her shoulders loosened slightly, his expression softening. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't know what to say or how to say it. I told you, I'd never been in love with anyone before."

"So you thought it was better not to say anything at all?"

Katherine shrugged. "It seemed logical, at the time."

"Love has absolutely nothing to do with logic."

"Who said that?" she asked, knowing his penchant for quoting from literature.

His lips curved. "I did."

Heart racing, Katherine put a hand over her mouth. *Love?* Did he really love her? A single tear leaked from the corner of her eye and trailed down her cheek. Jonah reached up and pulled her

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hand away, then wiped the dampness away with his thumb. His hand was warm, his palm gentle against her skin.

"I'm sorry, Jonah." She glanced down at her belly. "I just didn't want you to feel trapped."

He cupped her face in both hands. "Too late."

"For what?"

"I'm already trapped. You know when I realized it?" She shook her head. "You were lying on my bed, naked, sketching that dragon, and you looked up and smiled at me. It was then I knew for sure I was a goner."

"I didn't expect to—" She cut herself off, stepping back. "I didn't expect to feel what I did for you."

His brows rose slightly. "Did? As in past tense?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, not past tense. Jonah...I don't understand..."

"I do. I love you, Katie."

Her head jerked up. "What did you say?"

He smiled. "I said I love you."

"I...I don't know what to say, or..."

He chuckled softly. "Yes, you do. Just say the words. Repeat after me. I love you, Jonah."

She let out a slow breath. "I love you, Jonah."

He slid her coat off and let it fall to the floor, then cradled her face in his hands. His weight pinned her to the door as he brushed her lips with his, then changed the angle and deepened the kiss. Katherine felt her insides melt, her bones going soft as heat coursed through her body. How could she have forgotten exactly what kind of magic the man could work with that mouth?

When she lifted her arms and entwined them around his neck, he slid his own around her and held her against him, burying his face in her neck. He pressed his lips to the side of her neck.

"God, I missed you," he murmured and raised his head to take her mouth again.

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His hands were on her back, molding her against him when she felt the baby kick. Jonah pushed back slightly, looked down and let his hands follow his eyes. Gingerly, he laid his palms over the curve of her rounded belly and felt the baby move again. His eyes met hers. The depth of the emotion she saw welling up in his dark eyes made her heart ache.

"Katie..." The raw quality of his voice startled her. "I don't want shared custody, unless it involves both of us living under the same roof, raising this baby together. You said you left because I didn't ask you to stay. So I'm asking now. Will you stay with me?"

"Stay with you?" He wanted her to live with him? She pressed her lips together, considering, and shook her head slowly. She wanted him to be a part of his child's life, wanted a life with him. But living together? She wasn't sure that was the answer, either. "I don't know."

His hands moved up to her shoulders. "We can live here, or in Charleston. It doesn't matter to me."

He was willing to relocate? Just to be with her? "Jonah, I—"

"Marry me, Katie."

She backed up slightly, her eyes wide. "Jonah, I can't. I don't want you to marry me just because—"

He pulled the velvet box from his pocket and held it out to her. "Marry me, Katie," he said again, to cut off her protest. "We can have a real wedding in the spring if you want, but I want to make this legal as soon as possible. I'll get down on my knees and ask again, if you want. Just stay with me. Marry me."

He opened the box and held it out to her. "I was hoping to get you alone tonight long enough to ask, but you disappeared. I nearly panicked. I practically had to bribe the bellman at the Waldorf to tell me where you'd gone."

She stared at the ring in stunned silence. The elegant, emerald-cut diamond flashed in the light. He had been planning to ask her to marry him? Before he even knew about the baby?

"Say something," he pled.

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"I don't know what to say," she said, still staring at the box in his hand. "You had this in your pocket? All night?"

He nodded. "I bought it a few weeks after I got home. I'd planned to find you, then your mother—" He waved off the thought. "I'd all but given up. Then when I found out you were coming to New York, I thought I'd take my chances. When you left tonight, I followed you to the airport, but I was too late."

He pulled the plane ticket from the inside pocket of his jacket and held it out to her. "I was going to fly to Charleston tomorrow and find you. I was damn stupid to let you walk out of my life before. I figure if you walk out this time, it won't be because I didn't tell you how I feel."

Katherine looked down at the plane ticket in his hand, no longer trying to stop the tears. "You were planning on asking me to marry you even before you knew...." Her voice trailed off, and she raised her eyes to his.

"Yes. I love you, Katie. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I'd want that even if you weren't carrying my child, though the fact that you are just makes me love you that much more. I want you. *Both* of you." He took the ring from the box. "If the ring isn't what you want, we can get a different one. Just say yes."

Katherine closed her eyes as the tidal wave of emotion washed over her. He wanted her. He wanted his child. He wanted both of them, the whole package, marriage vows and all. It was more than she'd allowed herself to imagine. She opened her eyes, stunned completely speechless, and stared at the ring the man she loved was offering her, contemplating all that it represented.

"Katie?" Jonah took a tentative step toward her.

Ignoring the tears that streamed down her cheeks, she met his gaze. "Oh, God, Jonah, yes," she whispered.

Jonah grinned. He took her hand and slipped the ring on her finger. Katherine giggled when it stuck only halfway on, unable to slide over her swollen finger.

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"Oh, hell," Jonah muttered. He pulled it off and slid it on her pinky instead. "We'll have it sized."

"No, it'll fit after the baby is born," she assured him. "My fingers are just swollen."

"Then we'll get you another one to wear until then." He pulled her to him, kissed her again. "Our baby," he said. The sound of his words squeezed her heart like a fist. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

His hand splayed across her belly, just as she'd imagined on the plane. She swallowed hard and then smiled up at him. "I don't know. I didn't ask. I wanted to be surprised."

"Then I guess we'll be surprised." He kissed her nose. "Stay with me tonight."

"I don't have any clothes," she murmured against his mouth. "I was at the airport, ready to board, and I just couldn't go. My luggage was already on the plane."

Jonah laughed. "I think I still have a pair of flannel pajamas that belong to you, but you won't need clothes. In fact, you're wearing too much right now." He took her mouth with his again and lightly nipped her bottom lip as his hand crept beneath her sweater. "God, I need to touch you, Katie." He leaned his head back and looked down at her. "Can we still...I mean, it won't hurt the baby..." Katherine laughed. "No, it won't hurt the baby. But I'm a lot bigger now than I was seven months ago. It might take a little creativity."

"You'll be happy to know I come from a long line of very creative people," he murmured against her neck, moving his hand up the smooth skin of her back. "I'm sure we'll think of something."

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### Epilogue

"Wicket, no!" Katherine scrambled off the sofa to grab the overeager puppy as he dragged another shoe into the living room. She yanked the shoe from his mouth. "Pay attention," she said, holding up the shoe. "This is not a chew toy." She kicked the green rubber bone lying on the floor in his direction. "This is a chew toy. Note the differences."

The dog merely stared at her, tongue lolling out, looking for all the world as if he were grinning at her. "Little imp," she fussed, and put the shoe out of reach. Deprived of his latest acquisition, the pup leaped on a sleeping Chewie instead, a move which prompted delighted giggles from Jonah's young nephews.

Chewie growled a warning without much heat, rolled over and ignored him. Katherine heaved a sigh when the puppy headed for the huge Christmas tree that dominated one corner of the den in the cabin. "I'll never be able to handle a toddler," she complained.

Jonah looked up from the video game he was playing with his nephews. He reached out as the dog darted by and plucked the wriggling ball of fur from the floor. He held the squirming dog up in front of his face and angled his head. "Are you sure this is a dog?" He glanced at Katherine. "It looks like an overgrown rat."

"No. It's not a dog. It's Satan in disguise. I swear, that's the tenth shoe I've taken from him today, and he's already eaten three candy canes and several ornaments off the tree."

Jonah laughed and gently jiggled the dog in the air. "Quit giving your mom a hard time," he said, then cuddled it in his lap. He picked up the rubber bone and dropped it beside the pup, which immediately settled down and began chewing.

"How do you do that?" she asked, shaking her head. Jonah grinned at her over his shoulder, shrugged and went back to the noisy game.

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Katherine dropped onto the sofa, leaned back and sighed. She decided her initial impression had been more correct than she thought. Christmas with Jonah's wonderful, loud family did give her a headache. But it didn't matter, because she'd never been happier in her life.

The cabin was packed to capacity with Mastersons. Jonah sat on the floor in front of the big television, controller in hand, fighting the latest virtual battle with his two nephews. His mother was in the kitchen with Aunt Viv, cooking an Irish stew. Reba and Leah had crept off to a bedroom to wrap gifts, while Reba's husband Jim snored in the recliner.

How the man slept through such ruckus amazed Katherine, but then, he was probably used to it. Or it could have been the eggnog Aunt Viv had made, heavily laced with Jameson's.

Jonah's father sat across from the fireplace and gently rocked the tiny bundle in his arms. The antique wooden rocker had been a gift from Aunt Viv. She told Katherine the rocker had been brought over from Ireland with her grandfather, and that all the Masterson babies had been rocked in it for more than five generations.

She looked over at her father-in-law, who was completely entranced by the baby in his arms. Colin Masterson was speaking softly to her, so Katherine knew the baby had awakened. She could see the soft tuft of dark hair curled against the pink blanket. A tiny fist waved, and the little bundle let out a blood-curdling yell. A huge grin, so much like his son's, split Colin's face as he looked up at Katherine.

"Katie, lass, I think it's you she's wanting now," he said, his voice soft and deep like Jonah's, with a faint trace of an Irish lilt. He rose from the chair. Katherine met him halfway across the floor, stepping carefully over the tangle of boys, husband, dogs and cords and took the baby from him. He whispered something in Gaelic and kissed the baby's forehead before he turned her over to her mother.



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The baby's little nose was scrunched up, her face red, as she let out another howl. "Want me to take her?" Jonah asked, not looking up from the game.

"I don't think you have what she wants," Katherine assured him. "You boys enjoy your game."

Jonah watched her disappear down the hallway, and sighed. He knew she needed the few moments of retreat as much as the baby needed to be fed. Katie had fallen right into place with his family, and they all adored her as much as she loved them. But having them all together was a new experience for her. From what she'd told him, her family holidays were quiet and sedate, very formal, completely unlike the chaos that reigned supreme whenever his clan got together.

"Back in a minute," he said to his nephews. He put the puppy aside on the thick rug and rose to his feet.

"Aww, don't quit now!" Nate, the oldest, looked at him with pleading eyes. "You're gonna lose if you quit now."

"That's what you think, bucko," Jonah said, "I'm so far ahead it'll take you until New Year's to catch up." He flicked his fingers against the bill of Nate's New York Yankees ball cap and knocked it off his head. "Didn't your grandma tell you not to wear hats in the house?"

"But it's a cool cap, Uncle Jonah," Nate insisted. "And you gave it to me."

Jonah retrieved the fallen cap, plopped it backwards on Nate's head, then lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I won't tell."

"Don't quit, Uncle Jonah," Tyler, the younger one, begged. "Nate will beat me."

Jonah laughed. "He'll beat you anyway."

"Yeah, but you'll beat him, so it won't be as bad."

Jonah shook his head at the five-year-old's logic. "I want to check on Aunt Katie and Jessie."

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"You just wanna kiss her again," Tyler groaned, and rolled his eyes. The little boy laid back on the floor and looked up at Jonah. "Kissing's gross."

"Your mom kisses you," Jonah reminded him.

"Yeah, but babies are smelly. And you're gonna kiss Aunt Katie, too."

"Yeah, so?" Jonah nudged him gently with his foot. "There's gonna come a day when you'll sneak off to kiss girls, too."

"Eww!" Nate howled, then fell onto his back and held his hands at his throat, making appropriate choking noises.

"No way!" Tyler insisted.

"You say that now. We'll talk in ten years."

"Jonah used to say the same thing when he was a lad," Colin put in. "Look at him now. Kissing every chance he gets." He winked at Jonah. "And if he's like his old man, I'm betting that's not all."

Jonah rolled his own eyes at his father. "I'll be right back," he told them all, and followed his wife down the hall.

He had been serious when he asked her to marry him as soon as possible, but by the time they applied for a marriage license and did the necessary paperwork, it had actually been the following weekend that they said their vows in front of a magistrate in downtown New York.

A formal church wedding was planned for spring, more to appease Katie's highly annoyed mother than anything else, but Jonah considered it a small price to pay. Curtis had been thrilled beyond measure and insisted on planning the entire wedding. Andrew's restaurant would be catering, of course. Jonah couldn't wait to see Anne's face when she met her grandchild's honorary godparents.

He had invited Katie's mother to the cabin for Christmas, but she had politely declined. Anne had made a brief visit to Jonah and Katherine's new home in New York just before the holidays to see her new grandchild, and then jetted off for warmer climes to

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spend the holidays with friends in the Caymans. Katie hadn't seemed to mind.

Jonah found her in their bedroom. She leaned against the headboard of the bed while she nursed the baby. He stood in the doorway and watched her cradle the newborn against her breast. A little fist flailed, and Jonah felt his heart swell in his chest.

He tiptoed into the room and moved to sit beside Katie on the bed. She smiled when he shifted so she could lean back against him, and he looked down over her shoulder at the baby in her arms.

He'd never given much thought to women nursing their babies. He hadn't really wanted to think of breasts as utilitarian in any way, but there was something about watching the process with his own wife and child that touched him deeply, and there was nothing sexual about it.

"She's so beautiful," he said softly. He traced a finger over the baby's soft hair. The nurses at the hospital had been so fascinated with the newborn's thick hair, they'd put pink satin bows in it while she was in the nursery.

"You're biased," Katie pointed out.

"I'm completely, totally and inescapably biased," he said, "but that doesn't make it any less true. She is beautiful. Just like her mother." He reached around Katie's shoulders to touch the tiny, waving hand, and the little fingers instinctively gripped his finger. He tugged lightly, amazed at how strong she was. "Kid's got a grip."

"You think she can grip with her fingers?" Katie raised an eyebrow at him, and he chuckled. "What was that your father said when he handed her to me?"

"What did he say?" "He whispered something. It sounded like mo-kwishla."

"*Mo chuisle*," Jonah told her, and smiled at the endearment his father had always used for his mother.

"What does it mean?"

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"It's Gaelic. Literally, it means 'my pulse' or more liberally, 'my heart.'"

He hadn't really thought about the Gaelic words in years, but for some reason, now they took on new meaning. He smiled at Katie. "*A chuisle mo chroí*," he said softly in Gaelic. "The pulse of my heart."

Katie lifted her head to look at him. "That's beautiful."

Jonah cupped Katie's face in his other hand. "That's what you both are," he said, and lowered his mouth to hers.

THE END

## Susan Greene

### Author Bio

Susan learned to read at age four, when she mastered the prose of "Chicken Soup with Rice." Since then, she has rarely been without a book. Her love of romance began with Grimm's Fairy Tales at age seven. At thirteen, she fell in love with fantasy stories, namely the Lord of the Rings trilogy and the Star Wars novels. As an adult, she enjoys most fiction, but romance has always been her favorite.

After writing a few stories for the entertainment of her friends, she decided to try publishing her work. Snowbound is her first complete novel, but several more are in the works, including a fantasy romance and a romantic suspense series.

Susan lives in North Carolina with her three children, two dogs, a noisy but amusing parrot, a cat, and her very, very patient husband, who makes every day of her life romantic.

Susan loves to hear from readers. Contact her at [SGreene@bardtales.com](mailto:SGreene@bardtales.com). Check out her Web site, [www.susangreene.net](http://www.susangreene.net), for information on upcoming books.

## **Snowbound**

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**A Thin Line by Lyric James © 2006**

### **Chapter One**

Sam closed his laptop, stood, and stretched his aching joints. Four hours. He'd been crouched over the damn electronic monster for four long hours.

He opened the white French doors of his suite and walked out on the balcony. Since arriving in Aruba five days ago, he'd ignored the clear, turquoise water and bright blue sky. But today, it beckoned him.

He'd arranged and paid for a romantic getaway to celebrate his wedding anniversary. Before his wife had walked out on him. Before the divorce, he thought bitterly. Instead of canceling, he'd decided to go anyway. But when he walked through the doors of the suite, he regretted his decision. The king-sized bed, the hot tub made for two. The room was meant for lovers. And he was missing a lover. It had been one lonely year of writing, editing, and nothing else. His libido all but forgotten.

This trip was more than a vacation. It was a chance to pick himself up off of the dateless-no-sex floor and move on with his social life. The disintegration of his marriage had showed him that

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he wasn't a one-woman man. He'd tried that with Shelia, and it hadn't worked. He'd devoted himself to her. Gave her everything she'd wanted. She didn't even work. But a three-thousand-square-foot house and a Mercedes hadn't been enough to satisfy his wife. She said he worked too much. That he loved the characters in his books more than he loved her, which was ridiculous. The characters in his books paid for everything she owned.

But it still hadn't kept her from walking out on him, or stopping her from finding someone else to give her the kind of attention he hadn't. What he needed now was a no-strings-attached partner for the week, an in-it-just-for-the-sex woman. Nothing more, nothing less. All he needed was someone to help him get his rocks off. But unless he left his room, the only friend his dick would know was his right hand. And they had already grown way too friendly as it was.

Rubbing a hand through his short, curly, black hair, he slipped on his worn sandals and picked up his room key. It was time to escape the confines of his room and see what attractions this high-priced resort had to offer.

Downstairs the lobby bustled like an airport's international terminal. Every nationality he could think of seemed represented—African American, Caucasian, Asian, and Hispanic. As he rounded a corner, he heard raised voices.

"I asked for a six-o'clock wake-up call. My husband and I paid fifty bucks for that breakfast cruise. We missed it because of you."

His attention was drawn to a couple standing at the desk to his right.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry."

"You bet your ass you're sorry. I want my damn money back," the angry woman demanded, ignoring her husband when he gave her arm a squeeze.

The desk clerk looked as if she was ready to loose it when another female approached the upset couple. She began to speak

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softly with the couple, so he couldn't make out her words. He watched her lips move. Her lips were beautiful, luscious, and full. He could write a book about this woman's beauty, and it would definitely be erotica. Flawless, milk chocolate skin, long sable hair, and a body any man would drool over. Hell, he was drooling. He wiped the side of his mouth.

She wore a coral, two-piece bathing suit, and one of those flowing sarong-type skirts. The long legs peeking out from underneath her skirt sent a shock right to his groin. A vision of them wrapped around his neck had his eyes glazing over. She looked his way briefly, but returned her attention to the couple, not missing a beat.

If she were willing, maybe he had found his companion for the week.