

A man wearing a white cowboy hat, a white long-sleeved shirt, and blue jeans is leaning against a stone wall. He is looking down. The background features a mountain range, green hills, and some evergreen trees. In the foreground, there are pink flowers.

*Miniature  
Rose*

Yellow Rose

Donna Marie Rogers

# Golden Opportunity

Golden Opportunity  
*by Donna Marie Rogers*

**The Wild Rose Press**

[www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Golden Opportunity

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Publishing History

First Yellow Rose Edition, 2008

Published in the United States of America

## **Praise for Donna Marie Rogers**

Romantic Times Magazine: \*4 1/2 Stars\*

..."Four related tales told by two very talented authors make this anthology a keeper. With their easy, breezy style and skilled characterizations, Rogers and Netzel have created a town that readers won't want to leave..."

The Romance Studio: \*5 Hearts\*

These characters and stories are marvelous; the two authors worked together impeccably. The people interacted so well, and the stories went together so well, it was if one person did all the writing. All eight of the main characters were so great that I had to fall in love with them and envision them all functioning together in the same town forever.

I loved the book and highly recommend it!

Multi-published, award-winning author Jane Toombs says:

"Welcome to Redemption offers four refreshing and heartwarming stories. These stories bring readers right into the heart of this town, and the lives of its people, with four happy and romantic endings. Reading this book was a real pleasure."

Reviewed by the multi published, award winning Barbara Raffin:

"Stacey Joy Netzel's and Donna Marie Rogers' Welcome to Redemption has turned me into a fan of these two new writers. I can't wait to see what they come up with next."

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## **Dedication**

For my very good friends, Jamie Kersten & Stacey Joy Netzel.  
Thank you both so much for everything!

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## Chapter One

"I'm telling you I bought it fair and square. This deed proves it."

James McMillan glared down at the crazy woman waving a document under his nose. So his fool baby brother had finally done it—he'd gambled away his half of the ranch. James' biggest fear had come true, and she barely reached his shoulder.

He blew out a silent breath and thumbed his Stetson back. "Look, Miss...?"

"Roberts. Angela Roberts."

"It'll take me a few days to raise the funds to buy it back. In the meantime, there are several hotels in downtown Golden—"

"Sorry, Cowboy, but you're not getting rid of me that easily. I'm staying right here at the Double M. Reese said—"

"Reese is an idiot, and I don't give a damn what he said. I'll be dipped if some gold-digging opportunist is gonna set one foot inside the home my great-grandparents built with their own hands. Now, I'll pay for your hotel room if you can't afford one, but either way, you're leaving."

She huffed out a sigh of frustration and crossed her arms over her ample chest. Big blue eyes clear as the Colorado sky gazed up at him, and for a brief moment, James became lost in them. He gave himself a mental shake, ignoring her full pouty lips and shiny auburn hair, which hung in loose waves down to her waist. Lord, did he love long hair on a woman.



*Damn you, Reese.*

"I told you, I'm not going anywhere. I own half this ranch, whether you like it or not. And if you insist on making me leave, I promise you I'll be back with the sheriff."

*Great. Just freakin' great.* Sheriff Martin would pounce like a mountain lion on a chance to make James miserable. And if she got that vindictive old cuss involved, the story of Reese's stupidity would be all over town by nightfall.

His frustration must have shown on his face because a knowing smile curved those luscious lips. James propped his hands on his hips in defeat and took a step back. "Fine. You wanna play house, lady, be my guest. Just don't get too comfortable."

With a toss of her head, she picked up her suitcase, her high heels clicking on the tiled floor of the foyer as she strode past him. It took all James' self-control not to give her denim-clad ass a swat as she passed by.

\* \* \* \*

Angela gazed around the surprisingly modern log ranch house and was nearly overcome by emotion. Her heart swelled with hope as she took in the vaulted ceiling, large stone fireplace, and overall rustic charm. So beautiful ... and by being in the right place at the right time she was now half-owner. Reese had said the place was nothing special. Big brother was right about one thing; Reese was an idiot.

She turned to face Mr. Tall, Dark, and Incredibly Handsome, feeling a sudden pang of insecurity. "I've never

seen a more beautiful home. Reese made it sound ... well, I didn't know what to expect."

"Reese always preferred bright lights and the big city over the hard work of running a horse ranch."

She met his gaze. "I can't imagine why. I'd have done anything to get out of the city."

The hostility in those whiskey-brown eyes returned. "Is that a confession?"

Angela set her suitcase on the foyer. "You can think whatever you want, Cowboy. The fact is, Reese was about to put his half of this place up as collateral with some high rollers who, trust me, you wouldn't have wanted showing up on your doorstep. I had a pretty decent nest-egg saved, so I offered to buy it outright. He got more than he would've as a bet, and I got a ticket out of the city."

"And how did you happen to be at this high rollers card game?"

She understood the resentment and anger that laced his words. Hell, she still couldn't believe Reese had nearly put up his half of this gorgeous paradise to match a sixty-thousand dollar bet, even if the pot had been worth twenty times that. And big brother may not think so now, but Angela was most definitely the lesser of two evils. She could only imagine the look on his face had Vinnie the Butcher showed up at the door with his goons. "I was the dealer."

He lifted his Stetson and raked his hand through thick, dark brown curls. Angela swallowed the urge to sigh like an infatuated schoolgirl. Reese was a hottie in a dimples and suave charm sort of way, but big brother was easily the best-

looking man she'd ever seen. She much preferred his brooding sexuality to Reese's boyish charisma.

"Come on, I'll show you to a *guest* room." He picked up her suitcase and headed toward the winding staircase that led to the second floor. Angela decided to keep her trap shut about the 'guest room' dig. No sense pressing her luck. At least she was in the door.

She followed him upstairs to the last room on the left. When he swung open the door, she sucked in a breath. The room was stunning—and huge—ten times nicer than anything she'd ever imagined. A king-sized sleigh bed sat against the far wall, the rich burgundy bedding and matching curtains looked like they belonged in a queen's room. The dark oak mirrored dresser, chest, and armchair all appeared to be antique.

He set her suitcase down and glanced around the room, as if lost in memories. "Pretty, ain't it? Belonged to my grandmother. She passed last year."

Before Angela could process that bit of news, he strode to the door and said over his shoulder, "Supper'll be served in about half an hour. If you wanna eat, don't be late."

She winced when the door slammed shut behind him. Okay, so he had reason to be upset—he'd just lost half of his ranch to a stranger. And since he didn't know her from Eve she could let the 'gold-digging opportunist' comment slide, too. But dammit, she was a hard worker, willing to do anything necessary to prove she belonged here. If he'd give her half a chance, she could win him over no problem. She'd worked two and three jobs at a time since she was fifteen

years old; no one who knew her would ever accuse her of being lazy. And hell, at least she was here, which was a lot more than could be said about his brother.

Angela did a quick bounce on the bed before hurrying over to look out the window. Miles and miles of lush green hills were dotted with trees and fuchsia wildflowers against a backdrop of the majestic Rocky Mountains and crowned by the bluest skies she'd ever seen. Tears burned her eyes. This was the kind of home she'd always dreamt of having, the kind of home she'd read so many wonderful stories about.

No way in hell would she give it up without a fight.

After trading her pumps for a pair of white tennis shoes, she ran a brush through her hair and headed downstairs, feeling like a little kid on Christmas morning. She was hoping to get a quick look at the horses before supper. Angela had never been on a horse, had never even touched one, but she'd always hoped to learn to ride one day. And thanks to a little thing called kismet, it looked like that day had finally come.

That is if James let her anywhere near them.

The house was fairly quiet, although she could hear faint sounds coming from the back. Probably whoever was making supper. She had no idea whether or not they had servants, but she figured they at least had a cook since James didn't exactly look like the chef type, and Reese had mentioned his brother was single.

She slipped out the front door and followed a stone path that led around back. A fenced in area she believed was called a corral was set maybe a hundred feet behind the house, with

a structure directly to the left which she assumed was the barn. A lone horse trotted inside the enclosure, and Angela's fingers itched to touch its shiny, chestnut brown coat and matching mane. She hurried over and whistled to the beautiful creature, hoping she could tempt it to come her way. Too bad she hadn't thought to buy a box of sugar cubes. She'd read that horses loved them.

The gorgeous creature turned her way and made a snuffling noise. It tossed its head, and then proceeded to saunter over. Angela clapped her hands, just barely holding in a squeal of delight. The horse stuck its muzzle through the fence, and Angela gently rubbed the bridge of its nose. "Well, aren't you just the prettiest thing I've ever seen. Got a name?"

"His name's Lucky."

Angela swung around in surprise; she hadn't heard James approach. He strode up beside her, propped a boot on the bottom rail, and leaned over to pat Lucky's nose. Again, she couldn't help but notice how gorgeous the man was. "I suppose there's a story behind his name?"

He shot her a quick look, then returned his attention to Lucky. She figured he meant to ignore her, but after a few moments he said, "I came across him just as a mountain lion had taken him down. If I'd been a minute later, he'd have needed burying, not saving."

Angela gave a delicate shudder. The thought of this beautiful animal being eaten alive was a horrific one. Something she could barely fathom having grown up in the city. "You're a hero then."

His mouth crooked up at that. "Hardly. Just happened to be in the right place at the right time." He stood up and stepped back, gazing past her as if something more important had caught his eye. "Supper's ready. And trust me when I say Meara doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Is Meara the cook?"

His gaze swung to hers and that coldness she had come to expect returned. "Meara's as close to family as a body can get without being blood related."

"Sor-ry, I was just curious. You know, you really need to do something about that attitude."

"I'll be back to my cheerful ol' self just as soon as you're gone."

Angela made a face at his retreating back. *Good luck with that, Cowboy, 'cause I'm not going anywhere.*

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## Chapter Two

James was halfway through his steak when he heard the front door open and close. He'd been racing to finish his food so he didn't have to spend anymore time with Miss Sweetcheeks than he had to. No telling what he might do if she made him angry enough.

He'd damn near kissed her by the corral.

Thank God his senses had returned before he'd done something so foolish. The last thing he wanted to do was give the little gold digger any power. He'd already learned that lesson the hard way, and James wasn't the type to make the same mistake twice.

He didn't glance up when she took the seat directly across from him, he simply sliced off another bite of his perfectly cooked porterhouse and kept his gaze centered on his plate. She poured a glass of lemonade, drank some, and let out a whopper of a sigh. Damn, he thought, she even swallows sexily.

Which gave him an instant hard-on.

Meara bustled into the room and set a plate in front of Angela. "Well, now, maybe I shoulda brought two plates for you. Why, you're thin as a rail."

"Thank you," Angela cooed in a sweet tone that set his teeth on edge. "Everything looks yummy, but it'll be a miracle if I can finish all this, let alone more."

James peered at her through narrowed eyes. Suck up.

Meara propped her hands on her plentiful hips, her brown eyes lighting up like he hadn't seen since before his grandmother died. James understood Meara's excitement; Angela was beautiful and James had been single for way too long in the old girl's eyes. But the last thing he wanted was her getting attached to little Miss Gold Digger.

Because *that* was never going to happen—regardless of what his lower region seemed to think.

Meara clucked her tongue. "Well, you'd better save room for dessert. I made James' favorite, caramel apple torte."

"Sounds heavenly. I can't wait."

Once Meara left the room, James set his fork down and steepled his fingers over his plate. "I think you and I need to get something straight. You're not a welcome guest in my home. You aren't here by invitation. You're here because you conned my idiot brother out of his inheritance, and just as soon as I figure out how to have the sale nullified, you're out of here."

She stared at him for a brief second then lowered her gaze to her plate. "Boy, you're a real charmer." She picked up her fork and took a bite of Meara's cheesy mashed potatoes.

"Lucky for me I don't give a damn what you think."

Ignoring him, she closed her eyes and let out a hum of satisfaction. Part of him resented having to share Meara's delicious food with the woman who'd bilked his brother out of half the ranch.

And part of him couldn't take his eyes off of her as she licked her lips and did some sort of happy dance in her chair.



"You know, if you eat this well every day, I can't imagine why you're such a crab ass." She sliced into her steak and took a dainty bite. After washing it down with a sip of her lemonade, she added, "Maybe you could find yourself a wife if you cut down on the snarling and insults."

James tossed his napkin down, scooted his chair back, and stormed from the room.

Angela stared after him in complete and utter shock. Geez, after all the nasty things he'd said to her, she couldn't believe such a mild comment had made him that upset. The man was a nut job, no doubt about it. And she'd be damned if she'd let him ruin her appetite. This was easily the best meal she'd ever eaten, and she planned to enjoy every last bite.

Meara reappeared a few minutes later to clear away James' plate. But instead of leaving, the older woman took a seat beside her and patted her hand.

"Don't worry, dear, you couldn't have known."

Angela's curiosity was peaked. "Known what? I mean, he has good reason to not want me here, even if his hatred is a little extreme."

"Believe me, James was hardly surprised by what Reese did."

"So the brothers McMillan don't get along?"

Meara gave her head a sad shake. "Not for some time, although they were thick as thieves as children. But once they hit high school jealousy started to set in, and they both just took different routes, if you know what I mean."

She did, oddly enough, considering she barely knew either one of them. Where Reese was wild and shiftless, James

seemed grounded and stable. A hard worker who cared about hearth and home. The kind of man who would make a great husband and one day an incredible father. Although definitely not for her. Angela preferred a man with a little less vinegar.

"I truly am sorry about what Reese did. But the fact is, if I hadn't bought his half of the ranch, James wouldn't have liked the alternative."

The older woman nodded as if she knew exactly what Angela meant. She gave her gray curls a quick fluff, picked up James' plate, and rose to her feet. Turning back to face Angela, her expression grew solemn. "For the record, I have a good feeling about you, young lady. But if you hurt my boy, you'll answer to me."

Unknown emotions filled Angela's chest, and for a second she didn't think she could speak. "I have no intention of hurting anyone. I just want to belong somewhere."

"Then keep an open mind and, more importantly, be patient." The older woman winked, a small smile curving her lips. "Trust me."

\* \* \* \*

"What the hell do you mean it's legal and binding? It's written on a hotel letterhead, for chrissakes."

"I'm sorry, James," his lawyer said with an audible sigh. "It would be legal if it were written on toilet paper. It's spelled out to the letter, and both parties signed it, as well as two witnesses and a notary republic. I'm afraid Miss Angela Roberts owns forty-nine percent of the Double M Ranch."

James blew out a hard breath. "Thanks, Cal." He tossed the receiver in its cradle and leaned back in his leather armchair. Bitterness ate at his soul until he thought he might choke on it. Reese's resentment of James had been going on for so long he could barely remember how the hell it got started. Over something minor, no doubt. And each year the rift between them had grown wider.

Until Reese had stepped over the line and lost James' respect for good.

He shot to his feet and paced the floor for a few seconds, then headed to the sideboard to pour himself a bourbon. The welcoming burn blazed a path straight to his gut. He downed a second and was about to pour a third when someone knocked on the study door. Shit, the last thing he wanted to do was sit through one of Meara's lectures. He set his glass down with a thunk, stalked over and yanked open the door.

Only it was Angela standing there in the dim light of the hallway, gazing up at him with those big blue eyes. She wore an oversized New York Giants T-shirt that hung down to just below her knees, and she'd pulled her thick auburn hair up into a ponytail. She looked vulnerable and uncertain and more beautiful than any woman had a right to.

And the bourbon was suddenly warming more than just his stomach.

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the doorjamb. "Look, I'm not in the mood to spar with you. Whatever it is, can it wait 'til morning?"

Ignoring his question, she padded barefoot past him to the leather sofa. Carefully holding her shirt down, she curled up

in the corner, leaned back against the armrest, and tucked her legs beneath her. He wondered if she was even aware of how sexy she looked in that T-shirt, her painted toes peeking out from under the hem. The pose looked much too natural and relaxed to be staged. On the other hand, James knew better than most just how deceiving a woman could be.

He closed the door, then turned to face her, keeping his expression neutral. "So, am I supposed to play twenty questions, or is there an actual reason for this visit?"

"I have a proposition for you."

James' blood hummed through his veins like liquid fire, scorching a path of awareness to every nerve ending in his body. He doubted she'd meant that the way it came out, but if she did, he was a goner. Right now, he wanted her so bad he was practically shaking with it. He cleared his throat. "This oughta be good."

Her earnest expression puzzled him. She didn't look like she was about to try and seduce her way past his defenses. Hell, she looked solemn. Anxious even.

"I know you think I conned Reese, but the fact is I saved you from having a mobster as your business partner. I guess in a way I expected you to thank me."

He cocked a brow, and she had the good sense to blush.

"Okay, so not thank me, exactly. But I *did* expect you to treat me with respect, not look down your nose at me like I was something you'd scraped off the bottom of your shoe."

"Lady, respect is earned in my world. It isn't given away just because a pretty face shows up at the door."

A smile bowed her lips, and James wished like hell he could call back the words. A small measure of power had just shifted to her side. The little hustler now knew he was attracted to her and would no doubt use that bit of information to her advantage. Any second, she'd lean forward and give him a better shot of cleavage, let the oversized gray T-shirt slide up her thighs a few inches more—

"I want you to teach me everything you know. I want to learn how to ride a horse, care for it, clean the barns and anything else a person would need to know in order to run a horse ranch."

James stared at her in stunned silence. This little bitty female wanted him to teach her how to run a horse ranch? *His* horse ranch? And who was she kidding anyway. She wouldn't be able to muck the stalls let alone saddle her own horse. Of all the crazy, ridiculous ideas—

"After two weeks, if you don't think I have what it takes to help you run this place, I'll sell you my half of the ranch for exactly what I paid for it."

Okay, he definitely hadn't been expecting that. Especially since it could only be a win-win situation for him. "And if I decide you don't have what it takes, how do I know you'll keep your word?"

"We'll put it in writing."

James turned and headed for the door.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"To get a roll of toilet paper."

\* \* \* \*

Angela had serious doubts about the man's mental competence. James McMillan was absolutely, positively nuts. But he was also gorgeous—tall, dark, and oh-so handsome. Never had she felt such a powerful attraction to a man before. Then again, the opposite sex had never been high on her list of priorities. Hard work, saving every single dime she could, getting the heck out of the slums she'd grown up in. Those were the things she'd concentrated on since graduating high school nearly five years ago.

When the study door opened, Meara walked in, James on her heels. And he didn't have a roll of toilet paper, thank God. Must have been a private joke.

He strode over to his desk and pulled a piece of paper out of the bottom right-hand drawer. Angela got to her feet and came around the desk to peer curiously over his shoulder. He was scribbling out a contract on a Double M letterhead, and no doubt Meara would be the witness.

She realized he smelled vaguely like booze, and the thought was a little off-putting. Angela didn't drink and had little respect for people who did. She absently fingered the small scar above her left eyebrow. A souvenir from the last time her mother had come home drunk.

Which also happened to be the last time she'd seen her alive.

"All right," James said handing her the pen. "Sign and date it here."

"Can I read it first?"

He leaned back and made room for her to squeeze in. Her backside was pressed against the arm of his chair, her thigh

resting against his knee. Angela was just about to sign the document when she felt a hand settle on her waist. She turned and met his amused gaze.

"Sorry, but another half inch and you'd have been in my lap."

"And I'm supposed to say thank you, right?"

His gaze dropped to her lips. "Seems like the proper thing to do."

A throat cleared. Angela thought her face would burst into flames as she looked up and met Meara's smiling eyes.

"Don't mean to rush you, dear, but I need to get the coffeepot set for the morning."

Angela gave an embarrassed nod and quickly scrawled her name on the document. She dated it, then extricated herself from James' side of the desk. Meara leaned over, signed and dated it herself, then quietly excused herself from the room.

"I'll have my lawyer stop by tomorrow." James leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. "So tell me, why the proposition?"

She gave a delicate shrug. "Five minutes after meeting you I realized you don't take anything on faith. If I want you to believe I'm serious about this, I'll have to prove it to you."

"I've made it pretty damn clear I don't want you here. What makes you think I won't send you packing no matter how impressed I am?"

She shrugged again. "You're too honorable for that."

"Yeah? Then how come all I can think about right now is kissing you?"

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### **Chapter Three**

Angela gave an owlish blink, completely caught off guard. Was he teasing her? Did he expect her to run from the room screaming in fear? She nearly laughed out loud at the thought. Granted, she was only twenty-two years old and barely looked it, but get real. "Probably because you've got a gutful of whiskey steering your thoughts."

He appeared to think about that, then shot to his feet and came around the desk. Startled, Angela stumbled and, unable to catch her balance, fell backward onto the sofa, feet in the air, her nightie bunched up around her hips.

James chuckled and extended a hand. "Jumpy?"

"You surprised me, that's all."

He pulled her to her feet, but didn't let go of her hand. Instead he gazed down at her, his expression intense, his eyes boring into hers with obvious intent. Holy cow, he was going to kiss her! Her eyes were drawn down to his mouth—he ran his tongue across his bottom lip. Angela swallowed hard.

His head dipped as he slowly closed the distance between them. After a moment of shock, Angela's eyes drifted shut ... in anticipation? Yes. God help her, she wanted him to kiss her. She wanted to feel those sexy lips—

"You'd best go get some sleep. We have a long day ahead of us."

Her eyes sprang open. She stepped back as he released her hand, her face burning with humiliation. Crap, she was



pretty sure she'd started to pucker for the kiss. She crossed her arms and cleared her throat. "What time should I be ready?"

"If you want breakfast, be in the kitchen by five-thirty."

\* \* \* \*

James didn't say one word during breakfast, but wolfed down a mountainous plate of scrambled eggs and toast, and gulped down two cups of black coffee. Not wanting to provoke him since she was fairly certain he had a hangover, Angela kept her mouth shut as he tossed his napkin down and muttered, "Let's go."

She followed him out back and into the barn closest to the house, then all the way down to the last stall. "The first thing you need to learn is how to muck a stall." He grabbed a pitchfork and handed it to her. "Clean out all the old shavings, and replace 'em with new. There's a wheelbarrow outside next to the manure pile, which is where you dump the old. The fresh shavings are in there." He pointed to the stall directly across from the one he wanted her to clean, then turned and strode away.

Angela watched him leave with a sense of panic. She took a couple of deep breaths and forced herself to calm down. Really, it sounded easy enough. And heck, if she could clean bedpans in a nursing home, she could muck out a horse's stall. The smell was pretty bad, but she supposed she'd better get used to it.

She retrieved the wheelbarrow from behind the barn, grabbed the pitchfork, and got to work. Once she had it as full

as she possibly could, she grabbed the handles, lifted it, and started forward, dismayed by how wobbly the stupid thing moved. About ten feet from the pile, she bumped a rock and lost control of the wheelbarrow. The sucker pitched sideways dumping her entire load on the ground.

Cursing a blue streak, she forked everything back into the wheelbarrow, kicked a few more rocks out of her path, and steeled her resolve. She'd get that damn stall cleaned if it killed her—which, she feared, it might. Forty-five minutes later she stood leaning on the pitchfork, a sense of pride swelling her chest. Holy crap, who'd have thought so much work went into cleaning out one freakin' stall?

"Not bad, although you might want to pick up the pace if you plan to finish in time for lunch."

Angela spun around at the sound of that familiar deep voice. She hadn't heard him approach. "Oh, I'm finished. And you might have warned me how hard those things are to steer." She gestured toward the wheelbarrow.

James grinned and propped his hands on his hips. "Sorry, never thought about it." He stepped forward and peered inside the stall. "Good job. When you finish with the other five, let me know and we'll break for lunch."

\* \* \* \*

James whistled a happy tune as he strode away. No doubt about it, little Miss Gold Digger would be begging him to buy her out by the end of the week. Hell, maybe even by the end of the day. The sooner the better, as far as he was concerned. A man could only take so much temptation. And

Miss Angela Roberts was temptation with a capital T. He couldn't get within five feet of her without wanting to pull her into his arms and kiss her breathless.

Christ, there he went again, letting her monopolize his thoughts.

"Hey, there you are. I was afraid I'd have to search every corner of this place, like last time."

James turned to see his lawyer, Calvin Henderson heading his way. The older man watched the ground as he walked, bringing a grin to James' face. "You don't have to worry about stepping in anything back here, Cal."

"Sorry, but last time I had to toss my shoes. And they were Italian loafers."

The two men shook hands and James gave him a thump on the back. "I told you to bill me for 'em."

Cal shrugged that off. "I'd be happy if you just remembered to carry your cell phone."

Before James could respond, Cal's attention was stolen by something behind him. James turned to see Angela maneuvering the wheelbarrow over to the manure pile. Even handling horse shit the woman was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. He swung his gaze back to Cal. Seemed the older man agreed.

"Don't suppose she's single?"

James hated the twinge of jealousy that clenched his gut. "Christ, the ink is barely dry on your divorce papers."

"But it's dry." Cal turned back to James. "Unless, of course, you have dibs?"

James snorted. "What are you, sixteen?"

Cal grinned, his eyes narrowing perceptively. "You want her."

God, yes. "Hell no. I want her shares of the Double M back, and I want her conniving ass gone." With that, James spun around and stalked toward the house. Chuckling, Cal followed.

Once they were seated in his study, James slapped the papers into Cal's hand. "She's got two weeks to play rancher, then her ass is gone."

Cal perused the contract with amused interest. "You know, that's the second time you've mentioned her ass in what, five minutes?"

"And I'm gonna kick yours if you don't get serious here." James swiped a hand through his hair, his frustration mounting. Cal was as perceptive as they came, which was why he ranked as one of the top attorneys in the state.

Cal gave him a quizzical look and tossed the contract on the desk. "It looks fine, James. But if this Angela Roberts is truly nothing more than a gold digger, why would she suggest such a thing," he gestured toward the contract, "let alone make it legal?"

James had been asking himself that very same question since the moment his head hit the pillow last night. But the bottom line was it just didn't matter. The last thing he wanted or needed in his life right now—in any capacity—was a woman. And with this being a busy month for the ranch, he wasn't exactly happy about having to babysit one for the next two weeks.

Golden Opportunity  
by Donna Marie Rogers

Never mind the fact he'd been walking around at half-mast all morning. He just couldn't get the intoxicating smell of her out of his mind. When she'd squeezed in close last night to read the contract, the sweet scent of apples had wrapped around him like a silk scarf, and all he'd wanted to do was lean forward and bury his face in her glorious auburn mane.

Jesus, there he went again. *Focus, you bonehead!*

"Hell, I don't know. Maybe she figures she'll have me wrapped around her little finger by then."

Cal's grin returned. "She'd be wearing me as a diamond necklace by then."

James shook his head, a reluctant smile lifting the corners of his mouth. "Buy yourself a little black sports car, Cal. In the long run, it'll be a whole lot cheaper."

The older man's eyes twinkled. "But not nearly as much fun to ride, my friend."

\* \* \* \*

By the time Angela finished cleaning her fifth and final stall she feared her arms would fall off. No wonder James was so heavily muscled. He'd been working like this his entire life.

Damn, the last thing she wanted to do was think about that man. He ran so hot and cold she never knew what to expect from him. One minute he's insulting her, the next he's caressing her hip, warming her from head to toe—

"You finished?"

Speak of the handsome devil. She scowled and saluted him. "Yessir! What should I do next, sir?"

With an annoyed shake of his head, he strode past her and out the back entrance of the barn. Arms crossed, tongue planted firmly in her cheek, Angela followed. She'd been hoping the slave driver would at least let her break for lunch.

He stood next to the old, sun-faded blue pickup parked right next to the manure pile. "I need these hay bales unloaded and stacked in the empty stall. They're pretty heavy, think you can handle it?"

Ass. "I can handle it."

He looked like he wanted to say something. She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear, and his eyes followed the movement. Hmm, maybe he wasn't as immune to her as he'd like her to think.

Whoa ... what the hell was she thinking? The last thing she wanted was James' attention. The man was forty-nine percent gorgeous, but fifty-one percent nasty, and Angela had already had enough nasty to last a lifetime.

She gestured toward the pickup. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get going so I can take a break before the sun sets."

A frown creased his brow. "You can take a break now, if you'd like. Wouldn't want you keeling over on your first day."

"I'm fine, thanks for the concern."

He had the nerve to grin, stoking her determination to prove herself. "All right then. Give a holler if you need some help."

Angela saluted him again, her back stiffening at his answering chuckle.

It took over an hour for her to transfer the thirty-six hay bales to the barn, and by the time she'd finished, she could

barely lift her arms. But she'd die before letting James know it.

He must have been keeping tabs on her since he appeared inside the barn within minutes of her finishing. He propped his hands on his hips and inspected her work. "Took you a little longer than I expected."

That pissed her off. "Go to hell."

"Lady, I've been in hell since the moment you showed up on my doorstep. Now let's go, Meara has lunch on the table."

Angela threw her hands up in exasperation. "Fine, I'm starved anyway." She tried to storm past him, but he grabbed her elbow and swung her around.

"Let me see your hands."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"You are the most infuriating ... Don't talk to me like I'm a child."

"Then quit acting like one and show me your hands."

Reluctantly, she held them out, palm side up. Both were full of blisters, many opened and bleeding. She'd planned on asking Meara for some bandages after lunch. Damn him and his eagle eye.

His jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed. He gave an angry shake of his head. "Fool woman. Why didn't you tell me? I would have gotten you a pair of gloves."

"It's not like you've given me reason to think you'd care." She snatched her hands back and winced as the quick movement caused a sharp pain in her shoulders. She didn't mean to cry out, but she'd never experienced such pulling

pain before. And when she tried to drop her hands, the pulling started again. Tears sprang to her eyes. Hands held aloft, afraid to move, Angela stood there in abject misery.

"Sonofabitch." James came up behind her and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. "Muscle spasms. I know they hurt like hell, but try to relax." And then his strong fingers curled into her flesh and slowly kneaded the pain away. After a couple of minutes she was able to drop her arms down to her sides.

Mortified beyond words, Angela concentrated on not bursting into tears as he continued to massage her shoulders. The last thing she wanted to do was show this man more weakness than she already had.

"Better?" His deep voice rumbled over her, shooting prickles of awareness to every nerve in her body, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. When she felt her nipples pucker, Angela bit her bottom lip, uncomfortable with the sensation. She hated how responsive she was to his touch. Especially since she planned to make the Double M her permanent home. Like she wanted to go through *that* torture every day.

"Mm-hm. Can we, uh ... you said ... is lunch ready?" Great, he'd turned her into a mumbling dimwit.

James slid his hands down her arm and continued massaging. "Sure you can walk?"

His warm breath whispered over the back of her neck, and Angela closed her eyes, imagining him pressing his lips to the base of her throat, trailing a path of kisses up to her cheek, around to her waiting mouth ... Hysterical laughter bubbled



up in her chest, but she tamped it down. Now, wasn't that just her luck, to be attracted to the one man who couldn't wait to see the last of her?

"I'll manage, thanks." She stepped forward and his hands dropped away. Angela slowly put one foot in front of the other, praying those debilitating spasms didn't return. She still had several hours work to put in.

As if he'd read her thoughts, he said, "You're done for the day. After lunch, I'll have Meara get you a couple of pain relievers, then rub some liniment into your shoulders."

"That's not necessary, I told you I'm—"

"Fine? Don't be an idiot, you can hardly move."

"Quit calling me names." She rounded on him and immediately regretted it. Another agonizing spasm rippled across her shoulders nearly bringing her to her knees.

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## Chapter Four

James carefully scooped Angela up and carried her into the house, silently cursing himself the entire way. Guilt overwhelmed him for egging her on. Christ, he'd only wanted to change her fool head about staying on at the Double M, not cause her pain and injury.

He hurried up the staircase and into his grandmother's room—a decision he still puzzled over. He'd told her she'd be staying in a guest room, then put her in the most precious room in the house. A move that had earned him unspoken approval from Meara. James knew it had more to do with her desire to see him married and, one day, have babies to bounce on her knee than anything else.

After setting Angela gently on the bed, James shouted for Meara. He was surprised to hear a strained chuckle come from the bed and swung around. "What?"

Her pained smile faded into a grimace. "You hollered so loud she's gonna think I'm at death's door or something."

James stared down at her, torn between wanting to throttle her and kiss her. *Damn*. "How bad's the pain?"

Her cheeks flushed. "I'll live. If I lay still it's not bad at all."  
"Liar."

Heavy footsteps pounded up the stairs before Meara bustled into the room. Her harried gaze went from James to Angela. One hand flew to her mouth. "My God, what happened?" She rushed forward and examined Angela with a critical eye, then straightened and pinned James to the wall

with accusation. "You overworked her, didn't you? James Michael, you should be ashamed of yourself."

"I am."

That took the wind out of Meara's sails. She heaved a sigh and crooked her mouth. "Well? Tell me what happened so we can take care of this poor child."

Angela spoke. "It's my fault, not his. I should've told him my hands were getting chewed up, but I was determined to prove I could handle the work."

"She did too much, just as you suspect, and her arms and shoulders started spasming. She'll need some naproxen and a liniment rub down."

Meara crossed her arms over her ample bosom and quirked a brow. "Then I suggest you run and get both while I help her onto her stomach."

"I'm sorry to be such a bother," he heard Angela say as he hurried down the hall to the bathroom for the meds and liniment.

After a quick trip downstairs for a couple bottles of water, he returned in time to catch a glimpse of Angela's naked breast as Meara helped her onto her stomach, minus her shirt and bra. A punch of lust caught him in the gut, but he ignored it. Christ, what kind of lech was he? Angela lay facing the wall, so he couldn't see her expression, but he could see Meara's. No doubt about it, the old woman was up to something. He strode forward and handed her the liniment before setting the bottled water and pills on the nightstand.

"Well, I'd best get out of here, let you two have some privacy."

"Sorry, James, but you'll have to be the one to rub Angela down." Meara held her suddenly gnarled hands out for inspection. "My arthritis is acting up again. I can barely move my fingers."

"They looked fine a few minutes ago."

"I know. Funny how that happens."

Angela lifted her head off the bed, drawing his attention. "I don't want to put either of you out. I'm sure if I just lie down for a few hours I'll be good as new."

James moved around to the side of the bed, and she dropped her face into the pillow with a squeak. Odd, he would've expected a gold digger worth her salt to give him a little glimpse of the goods, not hide like some schoolgirl.

"Never had muscle spasms before, have you?"

He heard the soft click of the door shutting just as Angela chanced a glance up at him. Meara the matchmaker. For whatever reason, the older women seemed to have taken a liking to Angela. Guess he'd have to set her straight on the chances of a union between himself and Miss Ranch Stealer—slim to none.

He heard a soft sigh and then, "No."

"First things first. Sit up and take a couple of these." He shook two caplets from the bottle and uncapped the water. When she didn't move, he added, "Need help sitting up?"

She turned to gaze at him, and James found himself thinking how incredibly seductive she looked in that pose, bare to the waist, that gorgeous long hair pulled to the side draped across her arm. Hell, maybe she knew what she was doing after all.

"I'm not sitting up with you in the room. Forget it, I'll take them later. And there's no need to rub any nasty-smelling liniment on me either. I'm sure I'll be fine by tomorrow."

"Stubborn woman." He set the water and caplets down and picked up the liniment. "Now, unless you want to be laid up for days, put your arms down to your sides and relax. Unless of course that's your plan, to get out of work?"

"Jerk." And then, "Just hurry then, I'm starving."

James chuckled. He poured a small amount of the clear liquid into his hand and got to work kneading her sore muscles, from the nape of her neck down to the small of her back, paying special attention to her shoulders and upper arms. He'd assumed she'd play it for all it was worth, moaning her heart out with every stroke upon her flesh. But she simply laid there, stiff and tense, her nose turned into the pillow.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No." She turned her head slightly and took a deep breath. "It ... It feels good. I've never had a massage before."

He snorted. "Yeah, right. Beautiful woman like you has never had a massage."

She heaved a sigh. "Whatever. Look, can you just get a move on? I really am starving."

He kneaded his way down to her lower back, smiling when she let out a soft groan. "I'm sure Meara'll be up here with a tray any minute. No way you'll be able to sit up at the table. And as soon as you're done eating, you're taking a nap."

"No arguments here. I could fall asleep right now."

"Well, that's a good sign."

As if on cue, Meara's heavy footsteps pounded up the stairs. The door swung open and she walked in, a tray balanced on one hand.

"Told you," James teased in a near whisper.

Angela met his gaze—their eyes locked for a heat-charged moment, awareness sizzling between them. Then Meara cleared her throat and broke the spell.

"I brought plates for both of you, didn't figure you'd make her eat alone." She eyed James in silent meaning.

"If she can stand my company for a little while longer, I'll stay."

Angela eyed him with uncertainty. Her gaze swung to Meara. "I, uh, need to get dressed first, please."

"Of course, dear. James, give us a few minutes."

Thankful for the interruption, James stepped out into the hallway. He blew out a hard breath and gave his head a rueful shake. Christ, he was falling for her. Harder and faster than he'd ever thought possible. He needed to get her the hell out of his house and soon, before he did something really stupid—like marry her to get Reese's shares back into the family.

Funny how the thought didn't scare him nearly as much as it should. Panic had set in the moment he and Paige got engaged. The only good thing that'd come out of that fiasco was he'd learned his instincts were good—too bad he hadn't listened to them from the start.

After a trip to the bathroom to wash the liniment off his hands, he returned just as Meara was leaving the room. She gave him one of those winks that set his teeth on edge, then

whistled as she lumbered past him and headed downstairs. James gave his head a shake—Meara was so damn transparent. Thank God she didn't read minds or she'd become relentless in her quest as matchmaker. He combed his fingers through his hair, gathered his strength, and opened the door.

"So, you ready to eat?" He pulled the burgundy antique armchair up to the bed, handed her a covered plate, and lifted the dome revealing a bowl of thick ham and potato soup with a hunk of fresh-baked bread.

Angela closed her eyes and took a hearty whiff. She sort of swayed back and forth, smiling, as if in a trance. The woman sure did enjoy her food.

"It's just potato soup, not a religious experience."

Her eyes sprang open, her expression guarded. "When you grow up eating Ramen noodles and peanut butter sandwiches for dinner most nights of the week, believe me, this is as close to heaven as it gets." She fished up a big chunk of potato and scooped it into her mouth. "Mmmm." Her eyes closed in ecstasy. "Cowboy, you don't know how lucky you are."

James had yet to touch his own food. Instead he watched her ... hell, he couldn't take his eyes off of her. "So where are you from? You never did say."

"New Jersey." She dipped her bread into the thick soup and then took a bite. Once she swallowed, she gestured toward his still-covered plate. "You should eat before your soup gets cold."

He leaned back, draping his arm across the top of the chair. "I'm touched by your concern. So where in New Jersey did you say you were from?"

"I didn't."

"Come on, Angela, is it too much to ask that I know a few details about my new partner? Hell, it's not like I asked you your bra size." As if he needed to. She was a full D cup or he'd eat his hat.

Her next spoonful paused midair. With a reluctant grin, she shook her head and rolled those gorgeous eyes, blue as the Colorado sky and just as mesmerizing. James was damn grateful to be seated—her smile alone was enough to get a rise out of him.

"I swear, just when I think you couldn't be less alike, you say something that sounds exactly like Reese."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Chill, Cowboy, I didn't mean that in a bad way. At least, not about you. It's just ... Reese doesn't strike me as the type who cares about anything but himself. And he always had to comment on my..." Her cheeks pinkened, and she dropped her eyes to her plate. "...you know."

Funny, she'd given him the impression she barely knew Reese. And oddly, the thought of baby brother looking at Angela's breasts pissed him off big time. "Reese and I ain't a damn thing alike. That asshole's as self-absorbed as they come."

Angela set her spoon on the tray and lifted her gaze. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine what it feels like to be betrayed by your own sibling."



Golden Opportunity  
*by Donna Marie Rogers*

"Betrayed? That's putting it mildly. I caught the son of a bitch in bed with my fiancée."

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## Chapter Five

Now, what in the Sam Hill had possessed him to share that bit of baggage with her? The most humiliating damn moment of his life? He wouldn't lie to himself and say 'most heartbreaking' since he hadn't been in love with Paige Martin. But he'd never screwed around on her either.

Angela's eyes softened with compassion, and he wished like hell he could call the words back. The last thing he wanted from little Miss Gold Digger was pity. Christ, he should've taken her advice and eaten his damn lunch, kept his big mouth busy.

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be, I'm not. Hell, Reese did me a favor, if you want the truth."

"Don't do that, act like it was nothing." She didn't even pretend to eat, just sat up in that big ol' bed staring at him as if his dog had died.

He shrugged. "Got my pride hurt, so what? Happens to everyone at some point."

"You also lost your brother. I don't have any siblings, but I'm sure that must've hurt pretty bad."

He stared at her, the urge to kiss her so strong, it took all his self-control not to lean across the bed and take that sexy mouth. On the other hand, the urge to spank her was also pretty strong.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you by bringing up bad memories."

James rested his forearms on his knees and leaned forward. Christ, he could drown in those blue eyes. "Forget it. Just finish your lunch so you can take a nap. A couple hours sleep and you'll wake up feeling a lot better."

"What about you? You're not going to let your soup go to waste, are you?"

"I'm not all that hungry. I'll take it downstairs and reheat it after I've finished some chores."

"You mean finish the work I won't be able to do, don't you?"

"Believe it or not, there's a whole lot of work that goes into running a ranch this size, even with my six full-time ranch hands."

"Well, as half-owner I need to pull my weight." The stubborn woman set her tray on the nightstand and threw the covers back.

James shot to his feet and loomed over her. "Don't be a fool. You'll lay back down and rest if I have to hold you down myself. Christ, last thing I need is for you to reinjure yourself, end up at the damn emergency room."

"I told you to quit calling me names. And don't you dare tell me what to do." She narrowed her eyes and glared at him. "You think I don't know your game? Set me up to fail so you can send me packing? And all legal-like thanks to my own stupid sense of honor. I don't know what the hell I was—"

James brought his mouth down on hers with almost brutal force, effectively cutting off her tirade. He'd only meant to shut the infuriating woman up, but as soon as he got a taste of her, his lips softened and he deepened the kiss. Damn, she

tasted as good as he knew she would, a combination of heaven and the thick creamy soup he loved so much. Blood rushed from one head to the other, and he became rock-hard in an instant. James was riding into dangerous territory and he knew it, but was unable to tear his lips from hers.

When a mewling sound penetrated his lust-fogged brain, he somehow managed to break off the kiss. Hell, he hadn't meant to scare her. *Great job, bonehead.* "Christ, I'm sorry, I—"

Angela snaked her arms around his neck and pulled him back down. Once the shock wore off, he crushed her in his arms and kissed her with as much fervor as a starving man devouring a steak. She felt so good in his arms, so ... right. And though he could vaguely smell the liniment, it paled in comparison to the intoxicating scent that was all her, from her fresh-smelling shampoo to the subtle hint of her body soap. Funny, he didn't detect any smell of manure on her, as if her skin had repelled that particular odor.

With another soft sigh, Angela pulled back and slowly opened her eyes. James watched as she licked her lips, as if in wonder, then gazed up and rewarded him with most beatific smile he'd ever seen. His chest swelled with some unknown emotion. Love? Jesus, his knees got weak from just the thought. He needed to get the hell out of this room and fast.

He shot to his feet and took a defensive step back. "I, uh ... You get some sleep. I'll make sure Meara wakes you up before supper." And before Angela could respond, he turned and shagged ass out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Angela could only stare in shame-faced misery as James hurried from the room as if his boots had been on fire. The man couldn't get away from her fast enough. And no wonder. She'd just validated every despicable assumption he'd made about her since the moment she showed up at the door.

Tears threatened to spill when she recalled James painful admission of what Reese had done to him, his own brother. She'd known he was a womanizer, had heard the stories that circulated around the casino. But sleeping with his brother's fiancée?

Sure she wouldn't be able to sleep, Angela decided to close her eyes for just a minute, and was stunned to wake up from a sound sleep and find the room awash in shadows. Careful not to move too fast, she struggled to sit up and was relieved to discover the soreness almost completely gone. She was a little tender, but at least she could move without agonizing pain.

A glance at the clock told her she'd slept for nearly five hours. The thought floored her. She hadn't even been tired when James had left the room. And no one had bothered to wake her for supper, unless they'd decided to hold off 'til she woke up. The thought made her feel even more like a lazy bones.

Well, no sense putting the inevitable off any longer. She'd wanted to prove herself a worthy business partner, someone who could handle the work, be a valuable asset to James and the Double M Ranch. But her inexperience had proved

otherwise, and because she'd been so sure she could win the crab ass over, she'd had him draw up that stupid contract. She'd played right into his hands ... not that she thought he'd intended to take advantage. Angela truly believed James was an honorable man. But she also knew he wanted her gone, and gone bad. Like yesterday.

After freshening up in the bathroom and splashing some cold water on her face, she headed downstairs. Meara came out of the kitchen with a coffee mug, heading toward James' study. She stopped and smiled when she saw Angela. "Well, how good to see you up and about. James will be pleased, he'd hoped to start your riding lessons tomorrow."

Riding lessons? "Really? I'd pretty much expected him to be ready to drive me to the airport."

Meara frowned. "Why would you think such a thing? James is working in his study, asked me to hold supper 'til you woke up. He went up and checked on you a little while ago."

A river of warmth flowed through her veins, leaving her feeling breathless and ... tingly. James had come up to check on her? She tried not to read too much into it, she really did. But despite her best attempt, hope blossomed in her chest, filling every corner of her heart. All these strange new sensations scared the hell out of her, but in an oddly welcome way.

Good Lord, the man was making her as crazy as he was.

"That was thoughtful of him. And thank you both, I feel so much better. In fact, I'm starving."

Meara's smile was indulgent. "I wish I could take some of the credit, but James is the one who got that liniment worked into your back. That stuff does wonders, eh?"

Praying her face wasn't as red as it felt, Angela nodded.

"Why don't you head into the dining room? I'll go let James know you're ready for supper."

\* \* \* \*

Angela noticed a subtle change in James as soon as he sat down to supper. He met her gaze squarely, even managed to smile a bit. Stunned, she smiled back, thrilled by the transformation in his demeanor. Okay, so after thinking about it, she knew James couldn't have kicked her out yet, even if he'd wanted to. The contract gave her two weeks, so unless she decided to leave on her own, she wasn't going anywhere. But it was nice to see this side of him, even if it was due to a guilty conscience and not because he'd miraculously grown fond of her.

They ate in near silence, with only a few perfunctory comments regarding the meal breaking the silence. Angela made quick work of her grilled pork chop, which had been juicy and flavorful and cooked to perfection. The oven-roasted chive potatoes had been equally delicious, and the chocolate cake she was trying to finish now was absolutely heaven-sent. One thing was for certain, if Angela ended up staying here, she'd need to start doing aerobics on a daily basis or she'd be fat as a pig in no time.

"I wanted to thank you for, you know, the liniment and ... everything. I feel a lot better."

"I'm glad. Thought I'd teach you how to ride tomorrow. Got a mare named Daisy who's gentle as a summer breeze. She belonged to my grandmother."

His gaze grew wistful every time he mentioned the older woman. It was quite obvious James had adored her. "Wish I could've met her. Your grandma, I mean. I never met mine."

James took one last bite of his cake and pushed the plate away. Angela finished every bit of hers and scraped the plate for good measure. He looked up at her, his brow lifted in mild surprise. "You've never met either one of your grandmothers?"

"No. I mean, my mom's mother died when I was like two, so I have no memories of her."

"And your paternal grandmother?"

He took a sip of his coffee, his gaze never leaving her face. Lord, the man was handsome. "I ... I never met my father either."

"Hell, I'm sorry. I honestly didn't mean to pry."

"I know. And it's fine. It is what it is. I did all right for myself. Didn't end up on the streets, doing drugs or ... worse."

"Thank God for that." His gaze grew more intense, and the mood in the room subtly changed. As if all the negative energy had been expelled and replaced with ... warmth.

Angela got the feeling he wanted to say something, but Meara bustled into the room before he had the chance. The older woman sported a mile-wide smile. "Why don't you and Angela go watch the sunset from the back porch? That old



swing sure could use a workout. Wouldn't want the springs to get rusty."

Instead of the exasperated roll of his eyes Angela expected, James winked at her. "Sounds good to me. You?"

"Um, sure. Sounds nice."

The sunset over the mountains was indeed spectacular. Shades of pink, orange, and purple washed across the picturesque scene before disappearing behind the Rockies, leaving behind the peace of nightfall. The thought of being able to watch this gorgeous display every night for the rest of her life was a heady one. "It's stunning."

"I haven't watched the sunset for quite awhile. Glad Meara suggested it."

"Me, too."

They sat side by side on the wooden porch swing, Angela's legs tucked beneath her as James gently rocked them with his feet. A slight breeze ruffled her hair. The weather was perfect for late summer; warm, but not at all humid. Of course, she had no idea if they suffered from the humidity in Colorado. Back home she'd despised summer, especially on the days her air conditioner got ornery.

James cleared his throat and laid his arm across the back of the swing, barely brushing the back of her head. Just that simple contact sent a frisson of awareness straight down to her toes. It scared the hell out of her how attracted she was to him. Particularly considering the circumstances under which they'd met.

"So, how do you like Colorado so far?"

Small talk? "I love it. Beautiful country, fresh air. I mean, I had no idea air could smell so good."

He chuckled. "I know what you mean. I lived in Chicago 'til I was fourteen."

Surprised, she turned to face him. The moonlight hit his gorgeous profile just so, causing an odd ache in her chest. "I assumed you grew up here, on the Double M."

"Nope. Reese and I lived in a skyscraper apartment with our parents. When they weren't traveling Europe." He turned to meet her gaze, the quirk of his eyebrow sardonic. "Which was about eighty percent of the year. But Meara took good care of us, so it was all good."

No wonder Meara was so special to him. The woman had practically raised him. "So then how did you, Reese, and Meara end up here?"

His expression became guarded, as if a shutter closed over the peephole into his soul.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be nosey."

"You're not. Hell, I'm the one who brought it up." He looked back toward the mountains. "My grandmother didn't approve of the way we were being raised, so she gave my parents an ultimatum—either send Reese and I to live with her here on the ranch, or she'd cut them off without a dime. Meara, thank God, offered to come with us. She and my grandmother became best of friends, and needless to say, she has a home here for as long as she likes."

They were silent for a moment while Angela digested that bit of info. She felt privileged that he'd shared something so personal with her. Maybe her cowboy was starting to like her

just a little bit. Without thought, she leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

"What was that for?" His voice had deepened.

"You're a true gentleman, James McMillan."

He blinked. Her pulse leapt as his gaze dropped to her lips. "You have no idea how wrong you are, sweetheart." And then he cupped the back of her head and captured her mouth.

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## Chapter Six

Angela melted in James' arms as if she belonged there. And James was starting to believe she did. He'd known the woman for all of two days, and already he craved the sight of her, the smell of her skin, the feel of her body pressed against his. Christ, he had it bad. And the funny thing was, he didn't even want to fight it anymore.

Maybe ... maybe fate had delivered Angela to his doorstep at just the right time. Meara certainly seemed to think so. And the older woman was rarely wrong. The only real problem he had was how she'd entered his life—through Reese. James had come to learn not to trust anything or anyone associated with his deceitful little brother.

She moaned against his mouth snapping James out of his musings. He pulled back a couple of inches and swiped his thumb across her kiss-swollen bottom lip. "I'm sorry, I—"

She shushed him with a hand across his mouth. "Cowboy, if you apologize every time you kiss me, I'm going to get a complex."

He grinned, and damn did it feel good. Everything about this woman felt good, felt right. And he wanted her something fierce. He was rock-hard and throbbing. It took every bit of self-control he had not to pull her onto his lap, peel her shorts and panties aside, and bury himself deep inside her. Instead, he pulled her close for another kiss.

Angela's response to him was instantaneous. She slanted her mouth across his and practically climbed onto his lap,

throwing one leg over him and wrapping her arms around his neck. James trailed his hands down her back, stroking and massaging his way down to her backside. When he captured the sweet globes in his hands and gave a gentle squeeze, Angela gasped into his mouth and settled herself more comfortably on his lap.

Christ, she was going to be the death of him. He broke off the kiss to whisper, "I want you, sweetheart. Come up to my room with me?"

Looking quite dazed, with her eyelids half mast over those big baby blues, and her mouth slightly open as if missing his, she whispered back, "I want to ... God, I want to, but..."

He tipped her chin up and kissed those luscious lips again. "But what, darlin'? I want you, you want me. What's the problem?"

She closed her eyes and leaned into him, brushing her lips across his, then pulled back and cleared her throat. "I can't. I'm sorry, but I can't."

Disappointment burned in his gut, but he understood. She'd only known him two days for chrissake. "No need to apologize, I understand." He stroked her back, wanting her to know it truly was all right. Hell, he'd never meant to rush her.

"No, you don't. At least, you don't know the reason I can't—"

"Sleep with me?" he finished for her. He traced the edge of her jaw with his knuckles. "I imagine it has something to do with the fact we only met yesterday. It's just ... Christ, Angela, I haven't felt such a strong connection to anyone in a

very long time." His gaze dropped to her lips. "Guess I got lost in the moment."

"Me, too," she admitted. "But that's not the reason. James, I'm ... I've never ... God, this is harder than I thought. I mean, I'm not ashamed or anything, it's just—"

"Sweetheart, whatever it is, just say it and get—"

"I'm a virgin."

"Come again?" He couldn't have heard her right. No way in hell had he heard her right.

"You don't have to sound so damn surprised. I'm only twenty-two, and I've been working my ass off since I was old enough to have a job, saving every extra penny I could. Wasn't a lot of time leftover for dating." She jerked out of his grasp and sat back with her arms crossed, glaring out toward the moonlit mountains.

"I'm not surprised ... okay, I am, but not for the reason you think. You're beautiful, honey. I just figured—"

"That I must be a slut because I'm attractive?"

"Attractive? Hell, you're drop dead gorgeous. Stunning. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen." Ah, shit, did he really just say that? Judging by the sudden smile that lit up her face, he had.

"Thank you. I don't think I've ever gotten a nicer compliment."

James reached out and cupped her cheek. "I've been a real ass, haven't I?"

She nuzzled her face into his caress, and James' blood pressure skyrocketed. "Under the circumstances, who could blame you? You didn't know me from Adam, and there I was

telling you I owned half your ranch. Don't know what made me think you'd welcome me into the fold with open arms."

"Forty-nine percent."

"Huh?"

He leaned in and kissed those sweet lips. Christ, how the hell was he supposed to keep his hands off her tonight, let alone 'til she was ready to let him love her? "Reese owns—owned—forty-nine percent of the Double M. Grandmother was well aware of Reese's bad habits, and made sure I had controlling shares."

"Smart woman."

Her enigmatic expression gave away nothing. Not that he'd expected her to protest. She was a wealthy woman regardless of whether she owned forty-nine or fifty percent of the ranch, and she had to know that.

"That she was. I'm sorry you didn't get to meet her. I think she would've been as over the moon for you as Meara is." James couldn't be sure since her face was mostly hidden in shadow, but he thought she blushed. "Well, as much as I'd like to stay out here all night with you gazing at the stars, I think you'd better hit the hay, make sure you're as rested as possible for your riding lesson tomorrow."

"I can't wait. I've wanted to learn how to ride a horse for as long as I can remember."

He captured her lips for one more kiss, then rose and helped her to her feet. "Sweet dreams."

This time her blush was unmistakable. "They will be now."

\* \* \* \*

Angela had just forked up her last bite of pork sausage when Meara strolled into the dining room with another plateful of fresh waffles. She slid one onto a smiling James' plate, then tilted the platter toward Angela in question.

"Thanks, but I'm stuffed to the gills. I can't believe you made these waffles from scratch, Meara, they're delicious. I swear, if I didn't know any better I'd think you were trying to fatten me up."

The older woman chuckled. "Guilty as charged. But you're barely a twig, so who could blame me?" She snapped her fingers as if she'd just remembered something and turned back to James. "Would you mind running into town for me later, after Angela's riding lesson? I'm going to do some canning tomorrow, and I need salt, jars, and lids."

James looked from Meara to Angela. "Sure, no problem."

"You can show Angela downtown Golden," Meara continued. "Do a little sightseeing, take her out to lunch. Make a day of it."

Angela barely held back a chuckle. Meara was shameless in her desire to hook them up. Funny thing was, they didn't even need her help. "Sounds good to me. I mean, if you don't mind me tagging along?" She batted her eyelashes at James.

He grinned. "Not at all. I can take you to see the Golden Pioneer museum, Coors Brewery. Lookout Mountain," he added with a gleam in his eye.

"That's where Buffalo Bill is buried!"

James quirked a brow. "How the heck did you know that, city girl?"



"I did a little research on Golden before I came. I'd like to see the railroad museum one day, too."

"Since I happen to love the railroad museum, that can certainly be arranged."

Meara picked up Angela's empty plate. "Well, then that's settled. Let me know when you're ready to go, and I'll give you a list for the store."

Once Meara was gone, James polished off his coffee and rose to his feet. "Come on, time for your lesson."

Ten minutes later, Angela watched in awe as James led the most beautiful horse over to her. "Oh, she's gorgeous." With her white face and chestnut brown coat and mane, she truly was a beauty. Angela walked up cautiously and stroked the mare's nose, and though the horse had whiskers, the side felt soft as velvet.

"Angela, I'd like you to meet Daisy. Daisy, this is Angela, the one I told you about."

"You told her about me?"

"Had to give her fair warning to be extra gentle with you."

"Okay, who are you and what have you done with James McMillan?" She grinned at him, truly amazed he was the same man she'd met only days ago.

"Christ, woman, I can't win with you."

"Aw, come on, don't pout. I was just teasing."

His brown knit. "I don't pout. Now, would you like to actually ride her, or do you plan to chatter all morning?"

She rolled her eyes. "He's ba-ack."

With a shake of his head, James patted Daisy's neck and guided her over to the paddock. "I'll show you how to saddle

her up, mount her, and then I'll walk her around the paddock, let you get a feel for it."

She saluted him. He grinned.

"Okay, first we put on the saddle blanket, then the saddle." He did both. "This strap is called the cinch. You secure it behind the front legs, a couple inches back. Make sure it's tight, so you can only slip two fingers beneath it." Once he had that done, he picked up something that looked like strips of leather with pieces of metal attached. "This is the bridle. It goes over the horse's head, and the bit goes in its mouth." Once he had the bridle in place, he held up the two strips of leather attached to the bit. "These are the reins. They're what you use to steer the horse. You with me so far?"

"Yep, got it."

"James?"

They both looked up to see Meara heading their way. She huffed up to them and let out a self-deprecating laugh. "That walk is getting longer and longer. James, Pete called from the field. Said to tell you they'd need more baling twine before the day's out."

James nodded and looked to Angela. "Would you mind if we postponed the riding lesson 'til this afternoon? I need to run into the tack shop anyway, and I know they close early today."

"Nope, I'm fine with that. I could use a few more hours of courage building before I get up on Daisy's back anyway." She grinned.

He frowned. "Your back's not hurting, is it?"

Golden Opportunity  
by Donna Marie Rogers

"I'm fine, honest. Just a little nervous about the whole climbing up there part." She tried another grin, and this time James returned it.

"All right then. Meara, go grab your list. Looks like we're heading into town."

\* \* \* \*

Full of rustic charm and beautiful scenery, Golden, Colorado was everything Angela imagined it would be and more. A contented smile settled on her face as they drove under the arch downtown and pulled up in front of what James called the co-op.

"I just need to buy some baling twine and check on a previous order. I'll be fifteen minutes, tops."

Angela strolled around the store while she waited for James to finish his business. One day when they had more time she'd like to come back, pick up some jeans and flannel shirts. Maybe a pair of boots. She smiled at the thought. Pretty soon she'd look like a regular cowgirl.

James came up from behind and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. Angela spun around and smiled up at him. "I love this place. I could browse around for hours."

He grinned. "Maybe another time. I was thinking I'd take you out for lunch. Sound good? My favorite restaurant is just around the corner; we can walk there."

A date? Angela's heart thumped in her chest, but then she silently admonished herself. *No, not a date, get a grip. He's hungry and you just happen to be tagging along.* "Sounds great, thanks."

James opened the door to a charming little diner called Sunny's Slice of Heaven and led her to a corner booth way in the back, waiting until she'd settled in before sliding in across from her. "Sunny makes the best pies you'll ever taste. Apple's my favorite, but I think I'll have a slice of lemon meringue today."

"You're not eating pie for lunch, are you?"

"Honey, I can eat a double cheeseburger, fries, an order of onion rings, and still have room for pie."

*Honey.* Angela's heart melted a little bit more. Of course, he'd called her 'honey' before, but never with such warmth in his tone. "I had no idea cowboys had such huge appetites."

"Consider yourself warned."

He gave his brow a suggestive lift, and her cheeks blazed. She dropped her gaze to her menu, praying like hell her face only *felt* beet red. "So, how's the hot turkey plate?"

"Never had it. But the hot beef is delicious. Sunny makes everything from scratch here. Reminds me a lot of Meara's cooking."

The waitress walked up, a young woman not much older than Angela, wearing a traditional pink uniform, with shoulder-length blonde hair and big brown eyes. Those eyes went immediately to James and stayed there. A shot of jealousy nailed Angela right between the eyes. She didn't like the feeling one bit.

"Hi, James." The woman's smile lit up the room. Angela glanced at James—his smile was just as wide.

"Hey, Barbie, how've you been?"

*Barbie?* Angela rolled her eyes so hard it was a miracle she didn't bruise her eyelids.

"Not bad. Jake starts school this year. Oh, and I don't know if you've seen Brian lately, but his dad wants to semi-retire, so Brian'll basically be taking over the company. Means I can quit working and stay home with the twins."

"No, I haven't seen him in a couple weeks, but that's fantastic. I know how much you hate having them in daycare."

So, she was just a friend? Angela hated the bubble of relief that popped in her chest.

"That I do." Barbie lifted her tablet and pen. "So what can I get you two?"

"Oh, hey, didn't mean to be rude. Barbie, this is Angela Roberts. Angela, Barbie Mitchell. Barbie, her husband Brian, and I all went to high school together."

"Nice to meet you, Barbie." Angela had to wonder why he didn't mention she owned Reese's half of the ranch. Was it because he didn't expect her to be around that long? Maybe he didn't plan to play fair after all. The thought was enough to steal her appetite.

"Nice to meet you, too. So what would you like? The chicken pot pie is excellent."

Barbie's genuine smile put Angela somewhat back at ease. "Sounds good, I'd love to try it. And a large glass of iced tea, please."

Barbie jotted it down and turned to James. "The usual?"

"Actually, I think I'll try the chicken pot pie as well. And a large root beer."

"I'll be back with your drinks in just a minute." Barbie smiled at both of them before hurrying off.

"She's very nice." *Lame, Angela. Real lame.*

He grinned and reached across the table to grasp her hand, surprising her. "She's a friend. There's never been anything between us, if that's what you're wondering. Barbie and Brian have been together since I met them."

For some reason, his assumption that she'd been jealous irked her, even though he was right on the money. "I wasn't. Wondering, I mean. None of my business who you used to date."

He gave her fingers a squeeze before releasing them. "That's true, but just so we're clear."

Before Angela could respond, a familiar male voice caused the hair on the back of her neck to rise. She looked at James and realized he'd gone stiff, his narrow-eyed gaze trained toward the front of the diner. Angela craned her neck and couldn't believe her eyes.

Reese was back in town.

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## Chapter Seven

The blood boiled in James' veins when he laid eyes on his useless younger brother. And if his appearance in Golden wasn't bad enough, the idiot had Paige with him. Great. Just goddamn great. The last two people in the world he wanted to see, and both were heading his way. James braced himself and forced his temper under control. Last thing he wanted to do was cause a scene.

Paige clung to Reese's arm as they approached, and it was all James could do not to roll his eyes. He reached across the table and grasped Angela's hand again, as much for support as to send both Paige and baby brother a message, albeit different ones. Angela returned the squeeze he'd given her a moment ago.

"Hey, big brother, what a lucky break running into you here. Mind if I join you?"

"Yes."

Reese chuckled and glanced down at Angela. "Scoot over, baby."

Angela heaved a disgusted sigh, but slid over. And Paige, having no shame at all, practically sat on James' lap, forcing him to slide over as well.

Reese draped an arm around Angela's shoulder and pulled her snug against his side. "Miss me, Hot Stuff?" He met James' gaze. "That's Angie's nickname at the casino, 'cause all the men flock to her like moths to a flame." He returned

his gaze to Angela and lowered his voice to a suggestive purr. "But only a select few have felt the burn, right baby?"

"Unless you want to lose a limb, take your damn hands off her." James ignored the skip in his pulse over Reese's insinuation that he and Angela's relationship was more than casual. She'd told him she barely knew Reese, and he believed her. Besides, she'd also told him she was a virgin, and he had no reason to doubt that—even if his first thought had been *yeah, right*. She was only twenty-two years old for chrissakes.

"So it's like that, is it? Gotta give you credit, honey, you work fast." Reese gave Angela a quick thumb across the cheek before dropping his arm.

James' blood pressure spiked. He wanted to kill the bastard for daring to touch her, and even started to rise, but, thankfully, caught himself. *Calm the hell down. You're playing right into his hands, letting him get to you.* "What do you want, Reese?"

"I want my half of the ranch back." Reese turned to face Angela. "I have a cashier's check made out to you for seventy-five Gs." He winked. "A little bonus for your trouble."

Angela stared at Reese as if he'd gone mad. "Sorry, but it's not for sale."

Reese's smile faltered. "What? A fifteen grand profit isn't enough for you? Name your price."

James frowned. "Where the hell did you get the money to buy it back?"

"Where do you think? I won the pot. Over a million bucks, can you believe it?"



James glanced at Angela. "Why didn't you tell me he won?"

"He's *your* brother, I assumed you knew." She turned to scowl at Reese. "And I repeat, it's not for sale. You said you hated Golden, that there was nothing but bad memories here. Why do you suddenly want it all back?"

Paige placed her hand on James' thigh and gave it a squeeze. He flinched, then shot her a look. She blew him a kiss. *Psycho bitch*. As if he'd touch her with a ten-foot pole after catching her screwing his brother. Far as James was concerned, these two deserved each other.

Reese cleared his throat. "I need to speak with you alone, big brother. Outside." He stood up and headed for the door.

"Ah, hell." James scowled and gestured for Paige to let him out, then told Angela, "Don't worry, this won't take long."

Reese was leaning against a silver sports car when James stepped outside. He heaved a sigh and strode forward. The last thing he wanted to do was have a conversation with his vindictive, hateful little brother. But if it would get Reese out of town faster, James would suffer through it. He gestured toward the car. "New?"

"Rental. James, look, I know we've had our differences—"

"Differences?" James snorted. "I caught you fucking my fiancée."

Reese frowned and pushed to his feet. "I did you a favor, and you know it. You didn't love her. Hell, you were desperate for a reason to cancel the wedding, and I gave it to you."

"You really are an idiot." But he was right, too, much as James hated to admit it. The relief he'd felt when he caught

Paige and Reese in bed had been swift and enormous. Only Reese hadn't gone after Paige as some noble gesture like he claimed—he was full of shit and they both knew it. The chance to stick it to James had been riding Reese for years. "The only decent thing you ever did for me was sell Angela your shares. Now I have a partner who actually gives a damn about the ranch."

"Yeah, I'm sure she's looking forward to shoveling horseshit for the rest of her life. Christ, you've known her for like two seconds." With a disgusted shake of his head, Reese pulled a slip of paper from his front pocket and unfolded it. The cashier's check. "I want my half of the ranch back. I heard about your little contract, so just tell her she ain't living up to her end of the bargain, buy her out, and sell me back my shares. It's what Grandma would want."

Meara and her big mouth. Of course, no matter what that ungrateful ass did, Meara still loved him and held out hope that James and Reese would one day patch things up. "Not happening. Forget it. Grandma would understand; I can't gamble with the ranch's future. And you, little brother, are a huge gamble. If things don't work out with Angela, I'll buy her out. Me, not you."

Reese crossed his arms over his chest. "You're just pissed 'cause I nailed her first. Well get over it and see the lying tramp for—"

James sprang forward and slammed Reese against the car, his fist twisted in the front of Reese's shirt. "You say one more goddamn word and you'll be sucking your supper through a straw for the rest of your life."

Reese managed to twist free of James' grip and put some distance between them, his expression incredulous. "Holy shit, she's really got you twisted up. What's the big friggin' deal if I had her first? Not like you have feelings for her. Hell, you barely know her."

"And you do?"

"In every sense of the word."

"You're a damn liar."

Reese raked his fingers through his hair and gazed at him through regret-filled eyes. Or maybe James was just seeing what he wanted to see. "Come on, man, I know she's good, but I thought you were more savvy than that."

James didn't know what the hell to think. *Was* he being conned by a beautiful little scammer? He'd certainly had her pegged as just that from the get-go. But she'd won him over with her earnest sincerity and her infectious love of the ranch. That was one of the many things that had been lacking in his relationship with Paige, she'd had zero interest in ranching.

"How do you think she got me to sell her my half of the ranch?" Reese pressed. "I had a straight flush, no way I could lose with that. But the boys I was playing with wouldn't take my word that my share of the ranch was worth enough to cover the bet. Angie knew, though, 'cause I'd told her all about the Double M and what it was worth. So she offers me the sixty Gs if I sign it over to her and swears she'll swap the deed back for the cash as soon as I win the pot. And you know the rest. I was stupid to trust her, granted, but Angie can be quite persuasive when she wants to be."

James kept his face impassive as he stared at Reese, but on the inside he wanted to put his fist through a goddamn wall. Much as he hated to admit it, Reese's story made perfect sense—James had been a damn fool. His instincts had screamed there was no way a woman as beautiful as Angela could be an innocent, and apparently he'd been right. At least he could enforce that contract before he ended up making the biggest mistake of his life.

\* \* \* \*

Angela picked up her fork and broke off a piece of the chicken pot pie's flaky crust. She sure wished James would hurry up. Not only was his food getting cold, but she'd had enough of Paige's snide comments to last a lifetime.

"James is a cold man. Don't expect cuddling ... although you probably already know that, don't you?"

Angela stared at the acid-tongued woman, trying to figure out what James had ever seen in her. Okay, yeah, she was passably attractive if you liked the bleached-blond type—which James must since he'd actually planned to marry the witch.

Some protective instinct forced her to say, "Guess it depends on who he's sharing his bed with. James is the best lover I've ever had."

Paige flicked her gaze toward the door before replying. "And I'll bet you've had plenty, haven't you?"

"Enough to know the difference between cold and amazing."

"Goodbye, Paige."

Angela swung her head around at the sound of James' voice, surprised to find him standing beside her. Crap, she hadn't heard him enter the restaurant and wondered if he'd heard her last comment. James would no doubt give her a lecture on letting Paige get to her.

After a quick, hateful look at Angela, Paige got up and faced James. "You know where I am if you ever need to talk." She ran a suggestive hand down James' arm. "Or more."

*Sure, Paige, he's so cold. That's why you're flirting your ass off with him.*

James watched her walk away, then without making eye contact with Angela, took his seat and dug into his lunch as if he hadn't had a meal in days.

Angela tried to start a conversation, but whatever words had passed between the brothers had put James in a volatile mood. Suspecting his temper was simmering just below the boiling point, ready to bubble over any minute, she decided to keep quiet and let him work things out in the privacy of his own mind.

By the time they returned home to the ranch, James still hadn't spoken a word to her. He was brooding, and Angela had no idea how to handle the situation. She had very little experience dealing with men in general, and angry men in particular. She could only imagine how badly it must have hurt to see the two people who'd betrayed him in the worst way possible stroll into the restaurant together. And Lord only knew what hurtful things had been said while James and Reese talked privately.

They'd just stepped inside the foyer when James finally spoke. "Why don't you go get ready for that riding lesson? Meet me out back in ten."

She was about to salute him, but he strode away so fast she didn't have time to reply. While she didn't appreciate him taking his anger out on her, Angela decided to let it go. For now. Maybe by the time they finished with her lesson, he'd be back to his normal, semi-crabby self.

\* \* \* \*

Angela sat atop Daisy's back feeling like she could do anything. Of course, she was nervous as hell, but Daisy was such a gentle creature Angela knew she had nothing to worry about. Even James' mood seemed to have improved, if only marginally. At least smoke wasn't blowing out his ears anymore.

He led the mare around the paddock several times until Angela felt fairly comfortable in the saddle. Strong as she was, she knew it'd take quite a bit more muscle building before she'd be ready to saddle Daisy on her own. But that was okay since Angela didn't plan on going anywhere. The Double M was her home now, and she had plenty of time left to prove that to James.

"Think you're ready to take a ride? There's a trail that leads along the northern edge of the property and runs past a stream that used to be my grandmother's favorite spot in the world." He looked off toward the north, no doubt lost in memories. "We'd go swimming while grandma fished, then

we'd have a picnic. And she always caught a mess of trout for supper."

"I'd be honored to see your grandmother's special place. Thank you." Angela's heart swelled with hope. James was opening himself up to her, and his foul mood seemed to have dissipated completely.

He helped her down from Daisy's back.

"James?"

"Yeah?"

"Think we could go fishing?"

He gazed at her for a moment, then a small smile curved his lips. "I'll go grab the poles."

\* \* \* \*

Christ Almighty, James had never been more confused in his life. His need for Angela bordered on desperation. And not just physical need, but emotional as well. Already he craved her presence, her smile, her intoxicating scent. But she was nothing more than a gold-digging opportunist, and if he let her worm her way into his heart, he was a damn fool twice over.

It took them less than an hour to reach the stream, and by the time they got there, James knew he'd made a huge mistake. Watching Angela's expressive face as she took in the beauty of the scene before her did funny things to his libido.

He craved her with an urgency that scared him.

Giving himself a mental shake, James tethered the horses, grabbed the fishing poles and tackle box, and headed toward the bank. Angela was crouched down peering at something in

the water. She looked up when he approached and flashed him a huge smile.

"I've never seen such little fish before! How in the world do we catch them?"

James chuckled. "Those are minnows. We'll be throwing our lines out a bit further, try for some rainbow trout."

"Oh." She stood up and wiped her hands on her jeans. "I had a goldfish when I was younger, but it died when I was at school, so my mom flushed it."

Her tone was nonchalant, but James could hear the sad little girl in her voice. "Sorry. I'd catch you a minnow, but it'd outgrow the fishbowl in no time."

She waved that off. "I'd be just as happy if you taught me how to fish."

"You've never been fishing?"

"Nope. I've always wanted to, though. One of the kids in school used to spend his summers with his grandparents in Arkansas. He would complain about how bored he'd get, and all I could think was how lucky he was."

Unable to stop himself, James reached out and laid a gentle hand on her cheek. Angela closed her eyes and leaned into his palm. God, how he wanted her. His pulse leapt at the thought of making love right there under a canopy of trees in the soft grass, her legs wrapped around his hips as he pumped into her ... Reality hit him square between the eyes in the form of a mental image of her 'riding' Reese.

He dropped his hand, and she gave him a curious look before taking a step back. James knelt down and opened the tackle box, disgusted with himself for letting her get to him.



He put a Little Cleo on her pole, and a Mepp's Spinner on his own, then handed hers over, careful to make sure she didn't touch the hooks.

"Okay, first lesson is how to cast. Hold the rod like this, then press and hold the button. Now, bring the pole back and toss it forward, releasing the button." James demonstrated for her, flipping his lure into the middle of the stream. "Now you just reel it in nice and easy."

It took Angela four tries before she got a good cast off, but as beginner's luck would have it, she hooked a fish right away. "What do I do? What do I do?" she shrieked in comical dismay.

Laughing, James set his pole down and wrapped his arms around her from behind, grasping the pole in case she lost the battle with the fish. "Easy, now, don't panic. Just reel him in nice and slow. That's it, let him take some drag, then reel—"

The fish jumped out of the water, and Angela squealed with delight. "Oh, my gosh, did you see that?"

James let out a whistle. "You've got yourself one beautiful rainbow trout on the line. Meara could do amazing things with a fish like that."

With James' help, Angela reeled in her very first fish. Beaming, she danced from one foot to the other as James grabbed a pair of pliers from the tackle box. "Honey, I need you to stand still or you'll be getting a quick lesson on how to remove a hook from a thumb."

He hid a grin as her eyes grew as round as the fish's.

Over the next hour, Angela caught three more rainbow trout, while James snagged two. Once he secured the last fish on a stringer, he washed his hands in the stream.

Angela walked up behind him. "Thank you for teaching me how to fish. I can't remember the last time I had so much fun."

James stood and shook the excess water from his hands before drying them on his jeans. Angela's eyes were lit up like Christmas, her expression so genuinely grateful, James had a hard time reconciling the Angela he knew with the woman Reese described.

Granted, James' instincts weren't always exactly spot on, but he'd discovered who and what Paige was long before the wedding date. He just hadn't known how to get out of the relationship without ruining a long-standing friendship—his grandmother and Paige's maternal grandmother had been as close as sisters since they were children.

"Glad you enjoyed yourself. Now we'd best get these fish to the house so Meara has time to—"

He sucked in a breath as Angela moved forward and plastered herself against him. She reached up on tiptoe and slipped her arms around his neck. "I'd like to kiss you, but since you're so damn tall I'm going to need a little cooperation."

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. She lowered her gaze to his lips and licked her own.

"Jesus." Without a moment's hesitation, he crushed her in his arms and swooped down to claim her luscious mouth.

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## Chapter Eight

Angela's head swam with all sorts of naughty thoughts as James kissed her with a passion she'd only ever read about. He lifted her off her feet as he plundered her mouth, his tongue tracing the seam of her lips before dipping inside for a taste.

She couldn't get enough of him, and it frightened her how strong her feelings had become in such a short time. She wanted him to make love to her. Today. Right now. Without thinking about the consequences, she arched against him, pressing herself to the hard length straining the front of his jeans.

James groaned and broke off the kiss. "Sweetheart ... Christ, unless you're telling me what I think you are, we need to put a stop to this. I want you so bad I'm about to go up in smoke."

Nuzzling into his chest, she said, "I want you, James. I want you to be my first ... my only."

He stiffened, and she peered up at him, hoping to God she hadn't said the wrong thing. "I didn't mean to put you on the spot, it's just—"

"No, you didn't, I..." He cleared his throat and pulled back, putting a couple inches between them. Running a gentle hand through her hair, he met her gaze. "I want you, too. You have no friggin' idea how much. But I don't have protection on me, or even a blanket. And if this is your first time, it should be special."

If? Angela recognized the doubt in his voice, and it broke her heart. Despite his assurances to the contrary, James still believed she was some slut opportunist who'd duped his baby brother out of his inheritance. Disappointment swelled in her chest, making it hard to breathe. Tears burned the backs of her eyes, although she'd die before letting them fall.

Angela wrenched free of his hold and stepped back, crossing her arms protectively as she spun around.

James gently grasped her shoulders. "What is it, what did I say?"

"I ... My back hurts. Could we head back now?"

His lips worked, as if he'd wanted to say something. Instead, he dropped his arms and gave a curt nod. He looked so genuinely confused by her reaction Angela had to wonder if she'd overreacted.

The ride home was long and excruciatingly quiet. Angela silently berated herself the entire way as she replayed his words over and over again in her mind. Cripes, the more she thought about it, the more she feared she'd made a huge mistake, reading something into his comment that wasn't there. He'd probably meant to be kind and thoughtful, and she'd made a complete and utter fool of herself over nothing.

Crap, did he have her twisted in knots or what? More than likely she'd just chased him away, mentally if not physically, and she'd so wanted tonight to be *the* night.

She owed him an apology, plain and simple. Not something she'd had a lot of practice at, but if ever there was a time to swallow her pride, now was that time.

As soon as James approached to help her off Daisy's back, she placed her hand on his arm and said, "James, I'm truly sorry. I have no idea why I took what you said the wrong way." She lowered her voice. "I know you believe me about being a virgin. I guess it's just a touchier subject for me than I thought."

James studied her for a moment, his enigmatic expression making her a tad uncomfortable. Finally, he said, "I suppose seeing Reese didn't help."

"No, it didn't. I mean, he's your brother, so I knew I'd see him eventually. But I have to admit, I wasn't looking forward to it."

He stared at her, as if trying to work something out in his mind. Finally, he dipped his head toward the house and said, "Let's go see if Meara's up to cooking those fish for us."

Well, at least he hadn't told her to go pack her bags. That was a good sign. "I can't even remember the last time I ate fish—and it was probably fish sticks to boot."

"You'll never eat another fish stick once you've tasted Meara's pan-fried trout." A smile lifted the corners of his mouth. That sexy, tempting mouth. More than anything she wanted to kiss him again. And she'd probably be in his arms right now if she'd just learn to think before jumping to conclusions.

She followed him inside and ran upstairs to use the bathroom while he carried the fish into the kitchen. She washed her hands and face, and even brushed her teeth before heading back down. She found James standing in the living room reading a slip of paper.

He looked up with a rueful smile. "Looks like we'll have to wait on the fish. Meara's visiting with her friend, June, who moved to Denver last week. Said she's gonna spend the night, and she'll be home in time to cook breakfast."

"Oh."

"Don't suppose you can cook...?"

"Sure." Angela grinned. "Got any Ramen noodles? Ooh, and I make killer toast, too."

James chuckled. "As tempting as that sounds, I'm starving. I need something a little more substantial."

"Well, you must have leftovers in the fridge. I can't imagine Meara would leave you with nothing for supper."

"Maybe. Otherwise, I'm sure there's a couple of frozen pizzas in the freezer. Meara loves 'em."

James grinned, and Angela's heart melted into a puddle.

They headed into the kitchen, and a quick sweep of the fridge produced leftover potato soup and enough deli ham for sandwiches, plus a loaf of sourdough bread on the counter.

She grinned. "Looks like you're in luck. Reheating is one of my special talents. And I do make a mean ham sandwich."

James plopped down on a kitchen chair and linked his fingers over his stomach. Those gorgeous brown eyes watched her as she scooped the thick soup into a pot, and then got started on the sandwiches. For the first time in her life, Angela felt self-conscious about her lack of culinary skills. "I wish I could make you a big supper. Maybe one day Meara could teach me how to cook."

"I'm sure she'd be thrilled."

Okay, so he wasn't very talkative. She could hardly blame him. He was probably afraid to say anything for fear she'd take it the wrong way. Hell, even *she* wasn't sure why she was so touchy today, especially over her lack of sexual experience. Certainly, it was nothing to be ashamed of. Remaining a virgin hadn't been a conscious decision as far as saving herself for Mr. Right. She hadn't dated much over the years, had done a little kissing and fondling, but that's it. Maybe her lack of experience was the reason she'd gotten so sensitive earlier.

"So what did you and Paige talk about?"

Angela glanced up, his question taking her by surprise. "Nothing much. She did a lot of glaring mostly. Made a snide comment or two."

James didn't reply, and in fact remained quiet while she served him a bowl of soup and a sky-high ham sandwich. They ate in silence, but Angela took it as a good sign since he 'mmed' his way through his sandwich and two bowls of soup.

While she cleaned up after supper, James got out all the fixings for ice cream sundaes. By the time she dried the last dish, he had one humongous sundae built.

"Ready for dessert?"

She laughed. "Holy cow, you don't honestly think we can finish that, do you?" She sat down at the table and eyed the mountain of ice cream and toppings with extreme doubt.

He shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. But it'll be fun trying." He handed her a spoon, they clacked them together, and then dug in.

Ten minutes later, Angela dropped her spoon and blew out a sigh of repletion. The mountain was now a very small hill, and James was still going strong. She giggled and gave her head a shake. "Where in the world do you put it, Cowboy?"

He stuffed one last huge bite in his mouth, then dropped the spoon and leaned back in the chair, his hands resting on his stomach. "I can eat a lot."

She laughed again. "Talk about understatement of the century. So can you move, or should I bring you a pillow and a blanket?"

"I'll let you in on a little secret—I'm still hungry." He moved so fast she squawked in surprise. "Just not for food." James had her draped across his lap before she had a chance to protest—not that she would have. Angela was exactly where she wanted to be. She smiled up at him, then rested a hesitant hand against his hard chest. The look in his eyes made her tingle from her head to her toes.

"I plan to sleep in my own bed tonight." He traced one finger down her face, her throat, ending at the swell of her breasts. "And I was hoping I wouldn't be alone."

The air was sucked from her lungs as if by vacuum. This was exactly what she wanted, but now that it was out on the table, her nerves kicked into overdrive. "I ... I want that, too. So much."

James leaned down and kissed her, his soft lips warm and coaxing, becoming more demanding as she yielded to him. Angela couldn't remember the last time she'd kissed a man before James, and even as she gave him everything she had,



she couldn't help but worry that he'd find her inexperience a turn off.

He slid his tongue into her mouth, teasing and tasting, seducing her, driving her absolutely wild. Her nipples tingled and a slow throb started between her legs. Angela turned into him, needing to be as close to him as she could possibly get.

He groaned deep in his chest and tunneled his fingers into her hair, holding her steady for his sensual assault. Angela was drowning in new and exciting sensations. She wrapped her arms around his neck like a life preserver, holding on for dear life.

He tore his lips from her, and said, his voice thick, "I want you, Angela. I need you. God, how I need you."

"I need you, too. Make love to me, James. Please. I want you so much."

With a softly muttered "Thank God", James shot to his feet with her cradled against his broad chest and headed for the stairs.

Angela smiled so wide her jaws hurt. She was in love with this wonderful man, crazy as it seemed. She'd only know him for a few days, but Angela knew without a doubt he was the only man for her. He'd be the gentle, caring lover she'd waited all these years for.

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## **Chapter Nine**

James had never wanted a woman more in his life. Even knowing she wasn't the little innocent she portrayed herself to be, he still ached for her in a way he'd never known before. His need strained the front of his jeans, begging to be released.

With Angela clutched tightly in his arms, he managed to get his bedroom door opened and carried her inside. He collapsed with her onto the bed and growled his approval as she wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him down for another kiss. Yep, no way in hell this sexy woman was a virgin. James had no clue why she wanted him to think she was, and frankly, he didn't much care anymore. James believed in his heart Angela was genuine and real in every way that counted. Whatever reasons she had for the 'I'm a virgin' story were no longer important. He needed her in his life—period.

Angela slid her tongue into his mouth with a sexy little moan while he worked her shirt loose from the waistband of her jeans. She wore a short-sleeved, button down blouse, and he had it open in record time. Her ice-blue bra was front-clasping, much to his relief, and he undid the hooks as if he were opening a much anticipated present—which he was. Angela had big, beautiful breasts, and his mouth watered with the need to taste those luscious pink nipples.

He broke off the kiss and whispered, "You're perfect, absolutely stunning." His eyes never left those gorgeous globes.

She put one finger under his chin and lifted until he met her gaze. "Thank you." She grinned before taking his lips again.

God, she tasted sweet, like ice cream and chocolate sauce, and James couldn't get enough of her. He worked her blouse and bra off her shoulders as their mouths consumed each other. It seemed as if he'd been dreaming of this moment forever. His need for her, his desire, was stronger than anything he'd ever known before.

With a soft groan, Angela slid her hands between them to unbutton his shirt. James broke off the kiss and leaned back to strip it off.

Her eyelids lowered as she reached up to caress his chest. "You're as amazing as I knew you'd be," she said, her tone reverent. "Muscular and strong, yet so gentle."

He reached out and cupped her cheek. "You can't even imagine how much I want you."

She licked her lips, a gesture so provocative his sex grew hard as stone. Jesus, he'd be lucky to make it inside her at this rate. You'd think *he* was the virgin for all the control he had over his body.

Or supposed virgin. Damn, he wished she'd just tell him the truth before he found out for himself.

"I'm yours, James. Only yours."

Damn right, she was his. James would've never believed he could feel this way about a woman he'd just met, not to

mention one who'd been less than honest with him. But strangely, he just didn't give a damn, though he'd make sure she understood he wouldn't tolerate any more lies. Because he wanted her—in his life and in his bed. He wanted her to stay and help him run the ranch, marry him, have his children.

Jesus, the admission, even if only in his own mind, made him light-headed.

Not wanting to think about anything anymore but her, James reached for the button of her jeans, holding her heavy-lidded gaze as he unfastened it. Angela lifted her hips as he worked the snug-fitting denim down her legs and then tossed them aside. She arched like a lazy feline, clad in only an ice-blue pair of panties, which James quickly divested her of as well. When she lay naked before him, he could barely catch his breath. God, she was exquisite, with her nipples pebbled, just begging to be sucked. James' mouth watered even as he leaned down and took one into his mouth.

Angela arched off the bed with a groan that bordered on shock. She must be as turned on as he was; a good thing, too, since he was damn close to incinerating. He cupped her other breast and proceeded to lavish both with single-minded focus. James had never known such all-consuming desire before. Only Angela had ever made him feel this way. He needed her with an intensity that scared him.

She tunneled her fingers into his hair as she arched into his mouth, caressing him while he licked and sucked her silky flesh. Her moans of pleasure filled the room, her body twisting slowly, restlessly beneath him. He released her nipple

to claim the other, tracing a path with his free hand down her belly to the thatch of curls at the apex of her thighs. He felt more than heard her sharp intake of breath.

"You all right?" he whispered.

"Never better."

She reached for his belt buckle and flipped it boldly open, cementing his belief that she was no more a virgin than he was. James gave her thigh a playful squeeze, then stood up and removed his jeans, loving the eager way she rolled to the side and propped her head up to watch. When his stiff sex sprang free, Angela's eyes widened in comical dismay, and he wasn't quite sure if it was for show or for real—James knew he was hung like a horse, for lack of a better analogy.

He lay down beside her and gathered her into his arms. After a quick kiss, he said, "I have protection, just so you know." Although he hadn't had need for one in over a year, he had a box of condoms in his nightstand drawer. The last woman he'd slept with had been Paige, and that was one memory he'd be happy to erase from his mind.

Angela cleared her throat and rested one hand on his hip. "You're, uh ... not small, I see."

"That's not usually a problem," he teased.

"Oh, no problem," she assured him. "I'm just hoping it'll ... you know..."

He arched a brow. "Fit?"

Her cheeks flushed and she nodded.

"I promise you, we'll be a perfect fit."

She held his gaze for one heat-charged moment, then twined her arms around his neck and offered her mouth for

another kiss. James didn't waste a second. He took what she offered, his hands molding her soft curves against his hard frame. She moaned sweetly, the sound shooting sparks of electricity to every nerve ending in his body.

He gently coaxed her onto her back, and then gazed at her gorgeous curves in awe. She was absolute perfection, and James wanted to touch her, taste her everywhere. He slid one hand down her quivering belly, returning to those sexy, dark auburn curls. He felt her sharp intake of breath as he gently caressed his way down, slipping one finger between her wet folds, the proof of her desire drenching his finger. He drew a circle on the hard little nubbin and watched as Angela's neck arched and her hands clenched the sheets in a death grip.

Hanging on to his sanity by a thread, James sank his finger into her slick passage, mildly surprised by the tight fit. Her inner core contracted, milking his finger as she moaned—a deep, raw sound—and spread her thighs a bit, inviting him to explore further. He stroked her, slowly, the feel of her silken sheath like a hot spark to dry kindling, turning him to ash within seconds. Nearly drunk with desire, he slid down so he could taste her sweet nectar.

"J-James? What are you ... I mean, why ... I'm not sure I'm ready for—"

"Shhh." He lifted his head and met her panicky gaze.  
"Relax, sweetheart."

Her throat worked as she swallowed, and she gave him a quick nod before laying her head back on the pillow.

James slid his finger from her hot channel, and all the blood rushed to his erection as the scent of her filled his

nostrils. Jesus, he needed to get a grip and fast, before he humiliated himself completely. He cleared his throat, spread her thighs even further, then leaned in and ran his tongue across her swollen pearl.

Angela cried out as her body bowed off the bed, and as much as James wanted to bring her to orgasm using his mouth, it would have to wait for another time. Both of them were too far gone to last more than a few strokes.

He drew himself up and blanketed her with his body, positioning himself between her legs, which she immediately wrapped around his hips. She hummed sexy sounds of pleasure as she nuzzled his neck, and James couldn't take it another second. The need to bury himself deep inside her was too strong to deny any longer. He lifted up, guided his engorged head to her slick opening, and drove home with one powerful thrust.

James froze in shock as Angela's guttural cry filled the room. The realization of what he'd just done plowed through him like a freight train—just as he'd plowed through her virginal barrier. Red-hot shame burned his face. Christ, what had he done—

"I'm sorry, I—can you just give me a minute?" she whispered.

He kissed her closed eyelids, her forehead, her cheeks. "Sweetheart, I'm the one who's sorry. I just wanted you so damn much..." Being ever so careful, James gathered her in his arms and proceeded to kiss her breathless, desperate to erase the pain he'd caused her. Their bodies still joined, he stroked her legs, her back, the soft curve of her belly.

Angela moaned softly, sweetly, her hips moving restlessly beneath him. Thank God she still wanted him to make love to her after his careless idiocy. He worked his hand between them and stroked her slick little bud, wanting her feverish with need when he started to move inside her. The thought of bringing her to orgasm her first time making love was a heady one.

He broke off the kiss and whispered against her cheek, "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

Angela slowly brought her knees up, cradling him with her thighs, opening herself up to him even more. "I'm fine. Can you ... you know, move now? That would be good."

James chuckled, but the sound came out more of a growl. Christ, he was a hair's breadth away from orgasm. Slowly, reverently, he drew his hips back until only his swollen head remained inside her. Angela lifted up and met his gentle thrust with a soft groan. Jesus ... the sounds of her pleasure were nearly enough to spiral him over the edge. But he needed to make this good for her, needed to erase the hurt he'd caused her and replace it with a mind-shattering bliss.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and gazed up at him, her eyelids heavy, a trusting smile curving that delectable mouth. It took every ounce of his self-control not to let his base instincts take over and pound her into the mattress. Instead, he set a slow pace, holding her gaze while he loved her thoroughly, completely. Angela lifted her hips, meeting each thrust with a soft moan, her hands moving over his back and shoulders with desperate urgency.



Suddenly, she dropped her head to the pillow and arched her neck. "Oh, my God ... James, I think ... I think..."

"It's okay, baby, let it happen. Wrap your legs around me." He slid his hands beneath her and crushed her in his arms, his face buried in the crook of her neck. His heart hammered against his ribs as he pumped his hips, making love to Angela with everything inside him. Emotions coursed through him—ones he'd never known existed until he'd met her.

They reached the stars at the exact same moment. Angela cried out, her back arched like a tightly strung bow as her incredibly tight sheath milked him like a fist. James had never felt such ecstasy, and his hoarse shout of satisfaction nearly brought down the roof.

Once their bodies were sated and cooled, James rolled to the side and cuddled her in his arms, his heart near to bursting. Christ, he was in love. There was just no other explanation for the myriad of feelings coursing through him.

Angela's long, drawn out sigh made him chuckle. She pressed a kiss to his collar bone and whispered, "That was amazing. Everything I'd hoped for and more. Thank you, James."

He kissed her on the top of the head and proceeded to stroke her neck, her back, her shoulders. "I just wish I'd been more gentle. If I'd known you were a virgin I would have taken—"

"If you'd known I was a virgin?" she repeated, wriggling out of his arms. She sat up and gazed down at him, her eyes burning with disillusionment. "Oh, my God. You never believed me, did you?"

James sat up with a heavy sigh and swiped his fingers through his hair. "Look, I'm sorry, but you have to admit I had reason to doubt your story. I mean—"

She rolled off the bed in a fury of limbs, yanking the sheet with her. Her eyes blazed with fire, and James became oddly turned on by her display of righteous indignation. "Damn you! I've been nothing but honest with you since the moment I arrived on your doorstep. Where the hell is my bra?"

"Nothing but honest? Are you kidding me?" Fully naked and not giving a damn, James shot from the bed. She was on her hands and knees searching around for her clothing, the fluffy white sheet wrapped around her like a cloud of protection. "I heard you telling Paige how good I am in bed. What the hell was honest about that?"

She found her bra and panties and climbed back to her feet. "I was sticking up for you, you moron. She'd insulted you, said you were cold. Although it looks like she knew what she was talking about after all, huh, Cowboy?"

*Paige, that bitch.* "Well, how the hell was I supposed to know that? And still, you work in a casino, you're beautiful and sexy as hell, and you know my playboy brother well enough that he sold you his half of a multi-million dollar ranch for sixty-grand."

Her brows shot up and she gawked at him, looking truly surprised by that last bit of news.

"Don't tell me you didn't know what this place is worth. You're too damn smart to not know it's worth a lot more than a hundred and twenty grand."

Her face screwed up with a scowl. "You know what? You can go straight to hell, and take this ranch with you." With that, she swung around as regal as a queen and stormed from the room, the sheet trailing behind her.

James puffed up his cheeks and blew out a hard breath. *Shit*. He yanked on his jeans as fast as he could, pulling up his zipper as he ran after her. She threw open the door to grandma's room and turned to shoot him an icy stare before shutting it with a decisive slam.

He reached it and stood there, feeling like an idiot. Should he bang on the door and plead for forgiveness, or give her a few minutes to cool down?

Hell, who was he kidding? Mad as she was, he didn't stand a chance of her letting him explain anything tonight. And really, what explanation did he have? He hadn't believed her. Worse yet, he'd taken Reese's word over hers, of all people.

No, the best thing to do would be to let her go to bed and sleep on it. After breakfast, he'd get down on his knees if he had to and beg her forgiveness.

And shit, he'd forgotten to use protection.

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## Chapter Ten

James squinted into the early morning sun as he watched his foreman hurry toward him from the direction of the house. He wondered if Meara had finally arrived home and needed him for something, then groaned at the thought that Angela might have confided in the older woman. Lord knew whose side Meara would fall on. They were probably commiserating over banana pancakes right now.

"Hey, boss. Thought you might like to know a cab just left the house. Looked like your houseguest might've been sitting in the back."

"You sure?" James frowned, a bad feeling mushrooming in his gut.

His foreman gave a curt nod.

*Dammit.* "Thanks, Dan."

James hurried to the house and entered through the kitchen. He didn't smell anything cooking, so he assumed Meara hadn't arrived home yet. "Angela?" he called out, praying like hell Dan had been mistaken. His pulse started racing when he got no response.

He ran upstairs and swung open the door to his grandmother's room. A quick look around confirmed his suspicions. Her bags were missing and the bed was made. Angela was gone.

Fear gripped him in its icy talons. What the hell was he going to do? He had no idea where she'd gone or if she planned to return. Had she simply headed into town to rent a

hotel room, or hopped on a plane to fly back east? He propped his hands on his hips and muttered a violent curse. Christ, she wouldn't have left Colorado without at least discussing what she planned to do with her half of the ranch, would she?

He stormed from the room, raced down the stairs, and came face-to-face with Reese, who lay sprawled out in the leather recliner, his cat-that-ate-the-canary expression enough to cause James' pulse to thunder through his veins. "What the hell do you want?"

"Hey, big brother, why so glum?"

James stalked over and grabbed Reese by the front of the shirt, lifting him off the chair and tossing him onto the hardwood floor.

"What the fuck?" Reese leapt to his feet and straightened his shirt collar, a mile wide scowl on his face.

"Get the hell outta my house. You don't belong here anymore."

"Now, that's where you're wrong. Angie promised to sell me back my half of the ranch just before she jumped in a cab and blew out of here." He frowned. "So what happened? She decide to move on to the next poor schmuck who—"

With a growl, James launched himself at Reese. They went down with a crash as the end table kicked over and the lamp smashed against the wall. James drew his fist back, ready to beat the little bastard into the next century, when the front door opened. James swung around and groaned as Meara filled the doorway.

"Good Lord!" she breathed, a hand clutched to her chest. She hurried toward them, and it took every ounce of self-restraint James had to drop his arm. "What in all that's holy is going on here? James Michael, you get off your brother this instant."

"He's no brother of mine," James muttered as he climbed to his feet and swiped his fingers through his hair. He glared down at Reese, who had the good sense to stay put, and snarled, "Where the hell is she? Tell me right now or I swear I'll tear your fucking limbs apart."

Meara set her bag down on the floor and offered Reese a hand. James loved the old woman dearly, but she'd always had blind spot where baby brother was concerned.

"Will one of you boys please tell me what's going on? Where's Angela?"

"She's gone," Reese stated. And good riddance if you ask me."

"All right, you sonofabitch, I warned you."

Meara gasped as James started forward.

Reese held up his hands as if in defeat. "Use your brain, man. Where the hell do you think she is? On her way back to Atlantic City, where she belongs. You wanna chase after the slut, be my guest."

"She was a virgin, you asshole!" James hadn't meant to announce that particular fact, and immediately wished he could call the words back. Angela's sexual experience, or lack thereof, was no one's business but hers. And his, damn it. Angela belonged to him, and as soon as he caught up with her, he'd make sure she understood that.

Meara's eye's rounded. "Oh, my ... did you say 'was'?"

James felt his cheeks flame, which only made him angrier. "Look, it's personal and I don't plan to go into details, but she's pissed at me for not believing in her. I took this idiot's word over hers and—"

"Bullshit." Reese scoffed as he climbed to his feet, his face screwed up in disbelief. "Angie a virgin? No goddamn way."

"I don't give a shit what you believe. I know the truth, and that's all that matters. And I'll tell you this, no way in hell will she be selling you back your half of the ranch. Angela loves this place; you never gave a damn about it." He turned to face Meara. "I'm sorry, but you know it's true. And who's to stop him from selling it again next time he decides he's got the winning hand?"

"I *did* have the winning hand. Or have you forgotten that fact?"

"I haven't forgotten a damn thing, little brother. Not a damn thing."

Reese sighed and shot Meara a quick look. "So this is about Paige then. I should've known. You've never gotten over that, have you?"

James took a step forward, but Meara placed a placating hand on his arm. "Please, James. My old heart can't take another fight."

He gave her hand a consoling pat, then propped his hands on his hips. "What I never got over was your betrayal. You're right about Paige. I wasn't in love with her, though Lord knows I tried to be, for Grandma's sake. But she was my

fiancée, damn it. You seduced her just to hurt me. That's as lowdown as it gets."

Some raw emotion flickered in Reese's eyes before he cleared his throat and stuck his hands in his pockets, his back hunched, his whole demeanor changing right before James' eyes. "Believe it or not, I'm not proud of what I did. But ... hell, maybe it's time I told you the truth. The whole truth. And someone right here in this room can back up what I say."

He glanced at Meara whose eyes grew suspiciously bright. She met James' gaze and bobbed her head in reluctant agreement. With a sigh of resignation, James scrubbed a hand over his face, then muttered, "Okay, talk."

Reese's expression became uncharacteristically sober as he sat down on the recliner and propped his elbows on his knees, linking his fingers together. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before meeting James' gaze. "I, uh—used to have a drug problem. Cocaine. Lasted about a year and got pretty bad. The guy I used to buy from is Paige's brother, Mark."

James' brow beetled. "Mark a drug dealer? No friggin' way. That kid was a bookworm. Straight as a goddamn arrow."

"He was a punk who sold blow. Even Meara knows it's true."

The older woman gave a weary nod. "His mother once caught him in the act, but kept it quiet for obvious reasons. I heard about it from your grandmother."

"I can't believe you never told me," James said to her, frustrated by this whole damn mess. "Maybe I could've done something."



"Don't blame Meara, I begged her not to tell you," Reese admitted. "I was afraid to trust you, and that's on me, not her."

Jesus, this was nuts; absolutely crazy. How could Reese have been doing drugs for over a year and James not know about it? And Mark? James massaged the back of his neck as a tension headache settled in. "Fine. Let's hear the rest."

"I headed to the club one night looking for Mark so I could score. Found him in the backroom doing lines ... with Paige. Until that moment, I had no clue Paige was into the shit, too. She freaked out, begged me not to tell you. Said she'd have her daddy throw me in jail if I did. Hell, I knew it was an empty threat; if I got thrown in the slam, I sure as hell wasn't going alone."

James shook his head, this nightmare of a story starting to have a ring of truth to it.

Even before he'd caught Reese and Paige in bed together, he and Reese had barely spoken to each other, or spent any time together. They'd kept different hours, so while James was out working the ranch, Reese had been sleeping off his night of clubbing. But with Paige the signs had been there, like her perpetual runny nose, the weight loss, the lack of interest in pretty much anything other than hanging out with her friends. James just hadn't realized it at the time.

Reese blew out a hard breath and continued. "We ended up commiserating over a bottle of Jack and an eight-ball. The next thing I remember is you swinging the door open and looking at me like ... hell, like I was the scum of the earth. I swear, James, that's the last time I touched the shit. And I

know you're going to find this hard to believe, but I've never been more ashamed of myself than I was at that moment—and that's saying something. The way you looked at me ... I knew there wasn't a chance in hell you'd ever forgive me, no matter the reason."

Heart hammering in his chest, James stared at his younger brother, torn between wanting to throttle his ass for making so many extraordinarily bad choices, and pull him into a bear hug.

Christ, what a fucking mess. The fact that Reese hadn't felt he could confide in James about the drug use was partially his own fault, and he knew it. James had been so busy with the ranch the last few years; and of course, they hadn't been getting along much before then. "I want to knock you into tomorrow for having such little faith in me, yet ... I understand your reluctance. What I don't understand is why you lied about Angela. And why the hell you brought Paige to the diner? Care to explain?"

Reese scowled. "Hell, I didn't bring that witch with me. She was in the shop next door and came running out when she saw me. I told her to get lost, but she followed me inside the diner and you know the rest.

"As for Angie, I honestly meant to buy the deed back from her that night and come home with a decent-sized nest egg, start earning back your trust, maybe even your respect. Only I got caught up with a hot little filly who invited me back to her suite for a celebration feast." He had the balls to flash a quick grin. "When I found out Angie had quit her job and hopped on a plane to Golden, I panicked. But then Meara

mentioned the contract, and I knew I still had a chance. I mean, hell, she's a city girl. I figured two days of smelling horseshit would be plenty to send her racing back home."

James scowled. "She worked so hard the first day she ended up with muscle spasms."

Reese looked genuinely surprised by that news. "Guess she's a lot tougher than she looks."

"Damn right." James couldn't ask for a better woman to run the ranch with him. She had a whole lot to learn, granted, but James had no doubt she was up for the challenge.

"Look," Reese continued, his tone earnest. "I know I've never measured up when it comes to the ranch. You ride better than me, you learn faster, the hands respect you. Grandma always doted on you, bragged about how much you reminded her of Grandpa. So, I don't know, I guess I was jealous. Figured what was the point in trying if I'd never measure up to the almighty James. But the truth is I love this place, I love to ride, and I want to stay. If you think, maybe, you could give me another chance to prove myself, I sure would like to try."

James stared at his baby brother, the truth of his words evident in the quaver of his voice. And he was right. Grandma *had* always doted on James, so he could easily understand Reese's frustration. And hell, who wouldn't start to feel some resentment? But cocaine? *Jesus H. Christ*, James wanted to brain him.

All that would have to wait, however. There was only one thing James cared about at the moment—finding Angela and bringing her back home.

Golden Opportunity  
*by Donna Marie Rogers*

"We'll talk when I get back, promise. Right now I want you to write me down the address for that casino."

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## Chapter Eleven

"I'll take two. And kiss 'em for luck, honey."

With a wink, Angela gave the top card a kiss before dealing the older gentlemen the two he'd asked for.

She'd taken a cab straight from the airport to the casino, praying like hell she could get her job back. She hadn't left on bad terms, although she had quit with no notice, but she certainly hadn't expected the enthusiastic welcome she'd received. When Mr. Lighton wrapped an arm around her shoulders and asked if she could start back to work immediately, Angela had breathed a huge sigh of relief.

She glanced up at the clock, anxious for her shift to end so she could hurry to her apartment and make sure her sleazy landlord hadn't sublet it out in her absence. Just what she needed, to find a hooker taking up residence on her sleeper sofa.

A shout of triumph popped her from her reverie, and she realized the man whose card she kissed had won the hand. He reached over and tucked a folded bill into the neckline of her shirt. "For you, darlin'. Keep those bullets coming."

Angela winked at him again and retrieved the crisp Benjamin from her cleavage. Hotel money, should she need it.

"Touch her again and I'll break both your hands."

At the sound of that deceptively soft, aching familiar voice, Angela looked up and went numb. *James*. The way her heart leapt you'd think it had been weeks rather than a mere

twenty-four hours since she'd seen him. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I'm taking you home. Gather your things and let's go."

Angela bristled, her every nerve ending crackling with unleashed anger. What egotistical nerve! "I'm not going anywhere with you," she hissed, holding onto her composure by a very tenuous thread. "Now, get out before I call security."

He scrubbed a hand over the lower half of his face, his frustration evident. "Christ, honey, I'm sorry. It's just..." He glanced around the table at the raptly attentive faces and muttered a curse before meeting her gaze again. "Can we go talk somewhere private? I have so much to say to you—"

"And I have nothing to say to you. If this is about me telling Reese I'd sell him back his half of the ranch, don't worry, I only agreed so he'd let me go."

"I don't give a damn about Reese right now. We need to talk. And I ain't going anywhere until you hear me out."

Bull-headed. Those were the only words she could think to describe him. She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "Fine. Talk. You have sixty seconds."

As he glanced around the table again, Angela fought back a snicker. Here was a man not used to being told which way's up. But she didn't give a damn about his shattered ego. She wanted him to say whatever it is he had to say, and then get the hell out.

Before she made an absolute fool of herself and launched into his arms.

"You'll never know how sorry I am for not believing you. I have trust issues, as I'm sure you've figured out, and as much as I wanted to trust you, my head kept screaming you were too good to be true. Mix that with the fact you met my brother during a poker game, and I couldn't help but think the worst. I know it's not what you want to hear, but it's the truth."

Before Angela could comment, Maddy, one of the other dealers, strolled up to the table and smiled. "Lighton sent me to relieve you. Go on, sugar, head home and get some sleep. We'll see you tomorrow."

Angela gave the busty redhead an appreciative nod and, without sparing James a glance, headed for the employee lounge at the back of the building. James, of course, followed along, his hand resting possessively at the curve of her back. And as much as she wanted to jerk away, she craved his touch, the comfort of it, the sense of security his protectiveness gave her.

Once she'd retrieved her purse and suitcases from the storage room, James said, "Come on, I rented a car, I'll give you a ride home. It'll give me a chance to finish what I came eighteen hundred miles to say."

Since Angela wasn't exactly excited by the prospect of lugging her two suitcases home on a jitney, she gratefully, if not graciously, accepted his offer.

As soon as James pulled away from the curb, he reached over and grasped her thigh. "You're not going to cut me a bit of slack, are you?"

Her chest ached with the need to throw her arms around him and declare her true feelings. Instead, she curled her hands into fists and stared stoically ahead. She'd fallen for him so hard and fast it was no wonder she'd ended up crash landing on her heart.

With a 'this-is-going-to-be-a-long-ride' sigh, James removed his hand from her thigh and asked her for directions to her apartment. By the time they reached it, Angela's nerves were completely raw and her brave façade was fading fast. She wanted James to hold her, love her, even if only this one last time.

He carried her suitcases into the building and followed her to the end of the hall. Her apartment was the last door on the left, and as she turned the key in the lock, she happened to catch a look of distaste cross his face.

"It may not be pretty, but it's cheap, clean, and suits me just fine."

She swung the door open and breathed a sigh of relief when all she heard was blessed silence. James hurried her inside and dropped her suitcases before spinning around to lock the door with yet another muttered curse. "I don't like the thought of you living here; sleeping here. Does this hellhole even have a bedroom?"

Ignoring his insulting question, she said, "Thanks for seeing me home. Have a safe flight home and a nice life."

He surprised her with a chuckle. "If you want me to have a nice life, then grab whatever you'd like to take with you, and let's go. It's an eight-hour flight home at best, and I—"



"I'm not going anywhere with you. Thought I made that clear."

His anger resurfaced. "And I thought I made it clear you damn well belong to me."

She gasped, infuriated by his monumental arrogance ... and a bit turned on, too, she reluctantly admitted to herself. Damn him for being so irresistibly sexy. "Just because you were my first doesn't give you owner's rights, you jackass. And if this is about forgetting to use protection, don't worry. It's the wrong time of the month. Now get the hell out of my—mmm!"

He'd hauled her into his arms and took her mouth in a searing kiss. And just like that Angela melted into a puddle of need. She groaned her frustration even as she wound her arms around his neck and plastered herself against his hard chest. God, it felt so good to be in his arms, so right. She tried to deny her feelings, deny there was anything between them except last night, but her brain wouldn't allow such a lie to form. Every inch of her ached for him, burned for his touch, and the thought of denying herself this one last time in his arms was inconceivable.

James walked her backward until her thighs bumped the arm of the sofa. They tumbled together, landing in a tangle of limbs, never breaking the kiss. Giving her no quarter, he burrowed his hand beneath her shirt and cupped her breast, teasing her nipple into a needy little bud. She arched against him with a low moan, her every nerve ending on high alert, tingling with awareness.

She pulled his shirt free and started working it up his chest. Their lips parted only long enough for her to pull it over his head, their mouths meshing hungrily again as she tossed it on the floor. James reclaimed her breast, much to her delight, and thumbed her areola until she was fairly burning up with desire. With a growl of impatience, James leaned back and made quick work of stripping off her clothes. Within seconds she lay naked and vulnerable beneath him. He gazed down at her, his eyes dark with desire.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered. "I've never wanted anyone as much as I want you. You *are* mine, sweetheart. And there's no way in hell I'm letting you go."

Before she could respond—not that she expected anything intelligible to come out of her mouth—James captured her nipple with his hot lips, swirling his tongue around the tight bead, suckling gently. She grasped his hair with both hands and held him to her aching flesh. Flickers of raw sexual awareness traveled to every pulse point in her body, burning her from the inside out. He lavished her other nipple as well, careful to give each one equal attention, caressing, stroking, driving her insane with need.

After one last suck, he released her aching breast, then dropped down on his knees before her. He positioned her so she was sitting on the sofa facing him, her legs spread wide, her face hot with embarrassment. "James, I—"

"Shhh," he whispered, holding her gaze. "You're mine, and if I have to fight dirty, I will." His heavy-lidded eyes smoldered with the promise of mind-blowing pleasure.

Angela's core wept with the knowledge of just what that promise meant.

She watched him, her breath sawing from her lungs in anticipation while fighting the urge to close her legs. She'd never felt more vulnerable and open in her life. He stroked the tender flesh of her thighs, his hands moving closer and closer to her heat, like flames licking her, consuming her. She trembled as he slid one finger between her wet folds. *Oh, God* ... Her head fell back on her neck as he opened her, his other hand slipping beneath her bottom as he leaned in. She felt his hot breath against her, and then his tongue flicked the sensitive bud at the apex of her thighs.

A long, drawn out groan reverberated in her chest as her hands clenched the cushions beside her. James slid his other hand beneath her bottom and lifted her off the sofa, pleasuring her with his mouth, tongue, and lips, driving her closer to the sun with every stroke upon her throbbing flesh. Angela cried out, her hips lifting to meet his mouth as she came so hard she thought she might die from the pleasure. James didn't ease up, his lips and tongue wringing every last moan from her until she went limp in his hands.

He stood up and unbuttoned his jeans, making quick work of stripping them off along with his boxer briefs and socks. He stood before her fully naked, his enormous sex stiff and hard and ... hers. Angela smiled shyly up at him, the thought of taking him into her mouth enough to start a slow throbbing between her legs. Tender as she was, she couldn't wait to feel him inside her again.

Angela held his gaze as she wrapped her fingers around him and gave a gentle squeeze. He was rock-solid and pulsing in her hand, and wow, did she like the feel of him. She stroked his hot flesh, slowly, reverently, anxious to pleasure him as he had her.

"You're so big and hard, yet silky soft to the touch," she said in wonderment. She flicked a glance up at him. "Can I ... you know?"

"I think I'll die if you don't."

She laughed softly as she got down on her knees before him and traced her tongue around the head of his sex. When he muttered a shaky curse, she risked a peek up at him. His lazy smile was reassuring, giving her the boost of confidence she needed. Angela closed her eyes and took him into her mouth, sucking gently, tasting him with every bit as much fervor as he had her.

He brought one hand up to cup the back of her head as he moved his hips in slow rhythm with her mouth. After only a few moments, he stepped back, forcing her to release him. Feeling oddly empty, she gazed up at him in question.

"Sorry, sweetheart, but my control is shot where you're concerned." He grasped her hand and sat down on the sofa, coaxing her to straddle his hips, her knees on either side of his thighs. "Brace your hands on the back of the couch," he said, his voice thick. She did as instructed, and he leaned in to lavish and caress her breasts, while opening her slick folds to find her swollen nubbin. With a soft cry, Angela arched her back and tightened her grip on the couch.

He stroked her, bringing her right back to the brink of ecstasy. She swallowed hard as ripples of pleasure raced from her nipples to her core, setting her ablaze. Never would she have believed such incredible pleasure existed, although she knew in her heart only James could make her feel this way. She was in love with him, and so very glad he'd been her first. She truly couldn't imagine making love with any other man. The thought was inconceivable.

He caressed her ribs, her lower back, her bottom. Finally, he held his erection with one hand while guiding her down with the other. Angela could barely hold his gaze as she slowly sank onto his thick sex.

"Ride me, Angela," he whispered, his eyes burning with smoldering intensity.

"Another riding lesson?" she dared to tease in a soft purr. God, he felt so good. Such a perfect fit, just as he'd promised.

He gripped her backside with both hands and squeezed gently. "Feeling sassy, are we?"

With a brazen smile, she shimmied sexily, working her way slowly down until she'd taken as much of him as she could. Her smile faded into a mask of pure need. They both groaned, the sensations indescribable, nearly overwhelming her. Angela felt stretched to the limit as his hard length pulsed deep inside her.

Not content to take it slow, James showed her how to ride him, meeting her every plunge with a lift of his hips. He cupped her tender breasts, gently squeezing, rolling her aching nipples with his fingertips. Angela tunneled both hands into his hair and brought his mouth to hers with a hunger

she'd only ever imagined. Their breathing grew labored as their pace quickened. A slowly building pressure started in her core, and she clung to him for dear life as the pressure reached a screaming crescendo.

Angela cried out, her release swift and earth-shattering. She continued to ride him until a hoarse shout tore from his own throat. Their bodies strained together as they crested each and every sweet wave. Angela collapsed against him, her breath heaving from her chest as she fought the urge to cry. Damn it, she'd just had mind-numbing sex, and here she was close to tears? What the hell was wrong with her?

*You're still planning to let him walk out of your life, stupid. That's what's wrong. Better get over your hurt pride before he leaves and takes your heart with him.*

God, she'd been such a fool. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, James had been absolutely justified in his initial mistrust of her after the unconventional way they'd met. And no matter how close they'd become, the stunning fact was, they hadn't even known each other a week. The thought was staggering. In just a few short days she'd lost her virginity and fallen completely and hopelessly in love. With a cowboy.

Her cowboy.

Burrowing into the crook of his neck, Angela realized there was no way she could let this man walk out of her life. Come what may, Colorado was her home now—and there wasn't anywhere else on earth she'd rather be.

"I want you to sell my brother back his half of the ranch."

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## Chapter Twelve

Angela's heart dropped into her stomach with a sickening splash. With as much dignity as possible, she climbed off his lap and hurried to the closet for her worn, pink fleece blanket. She opened it with a hard shake and wrapped it around herself, suddenly feeling very small and very ... used. Had he followed her all the way to Jersey for a goodbye screw? The thought made her nauseous.

"I ... I don't understand. I thought you ... you said—"

"I said I want you to sell Reese back his half of the ranch. We got into a bit of a brawl this morning after I found out you'd left, but Meara showed up before it got out of hand. Reese and I ended up talking and, believe it or not, I think he's ready to start running the ranch with me."

"So ... what brought on this change of heart?" Fear surged through her in great waves. If James was planning to run the ranch with his brother, where exactly did that leave her? More importantly, why was he even here?

He rose to his feet, unconcerned by his nakedness. Angela averted her gaze as he strode forward, but he slipped a finger beneath her chin and forced her to look at him. "Honey, I know Reese isn't your favorite person, but I promise, he won't be a problem."

"James, I think you're going to have to spell this out for me. Once I sell Reese back his half of the ranch, why would I return? To be your live-in lover? I'm sorry, but I'm not that type—"

"To be my wife," he growled, cupping her face and kissing her for emphasis. "I want to marry you, Angela."

Her chest swelled with hope and tears stung her eyes. Happy tears, for the first time in her life. But she had to be sure this was what he truly wanted; that he wasn't just playing noble because he'd taken her virginity. "I'm sorry, James, but ... I need to know there's more between us than just sex."

He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear as his gaze grew serious. "Sweetheart, I've *never* felt for another woman what I feel for you. You're funny, kind, sexy as hell. You love the ranch almost as much as I do. And if you're willing to put up with my moody ass, that makes you a saint in my book."

When she continued to gaze up at him expectantly, he gave her a quick kiss and dropped his forehead to hers.

"And I love you so much it scares the living bejesus out of me." He pulled back suddenly and frowned at her. "'Just sex'? Are you kidding me? What we had, lady, was mind-blowing, tingling from head to toe, hanging-from-the-stars sex. The best sex imaginable. Got it?"

Playing demure, she teased, "I guess I'll have to take your word for it since you are my first lover and all. Be nice if I had some kind of compari—ow!" He'd pinched her butt right through the blanket.

"Don't even jest, woman. You're mine and only mine. Period. End of discussion."

She smiled up at him, her heart so full she would've floated right on up to the clouds if he hadn't been holding her



so tightly; possessively. "I love you, too, James. More than I ever thought possible. And I can't wait to be your wife."

"That's a relief since Meara's no doubt planning the reception as we speak."

"As long as she makes those chive potatoes, she can arrange the entire thing."

James gave his eyebrows a suggestive wiggle. "Which will give us plenty of time get to know each other better."

She feigned a look of surprise. "What a coincidence. That's exactly what I was thinking."

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Golden Opportunity  
*by Donna Marie Rogers*

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