Yours for the Taking

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Golden Heart Award-Winning Author
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—SUSAN SCHWAB, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ANYTHING TOO PROUD TO BITE

ROBIN KAYE

Romance Writers of America
GOLDEN HEART AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
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To my husband, Stephen, who is the inspiration for all my Domestic Gods. I'm a lucky, lucky, woman.
“Karma Kincaid, will you marry me?”

Ben Walsh sat on the weight bench in the home gym of his Columbus Avenue loft after spending the morning flipping through his not-so-little black book for the hundredth time. The pressure of a deadline was taking its toll. He had a book full of names of women he’d dated over the last ten years, none of whom he would ever consider marrying. Not that he ever wanted to marry anyone in the first place, but his grandfather had taken that decision out of his hands. He didn’t have a choice—well, not one he could live with anyway. He adjusted his Bluetooth to make sure they were still connected, and picked up a twenty-pound dumbbell, working his biceps while he waited for her reply.

“Benjamin Joseph Walsh, do you have any idea what time it is?”

He smiled and counted his reps silently. “Two hours earlier than it is here in New York. Did I wake you?” Sheets rustled over the phone, feet stomped, and then if he wasn’t mistaken, he heard peeing. “Do you always go to the bathroom when you’re on the phone?”

“No, you’re just privileged. You have some nerve calling me at seven twenty-two in the morning. I closed the bar last night and didn’t get to bed until after three.” The toilet flushed.

“Well, are you going to marry me or not?”

“How many times do I have to tell you I can’t marry you? Not only is it illegal; it’s disgusting. You’re my cousin.”

“I am not.” Ben switched hands to work his left arm. “We’re like cousins but we’re not blood relatives. There’s no law against marriage between two unrelated people who grew up like family. It’s perfectly legal.”

“Maybe, but I remember you in Spider-Man underwear—”

“It was Superman.”

“Whatever. I have no interest in ever seeing you in your underoos again, and even less interest in seeing you without them. Besides, even if I did marry you, which I won’t, Grampa Joe would never buy it. Like he’d ever believe, after knowing each other our entire lives, we chose this highly convenient time to fall madly in love.”

Ben placed the weight on the floor and lay back on the bench, curling his arm under his head. “Gramps never said anything about love. He said I had to get married and start working on producing an heir or two—”

“Can I just say one thing? Ewww! Not unless it’s artificial insemination and even then, it’s gross. No way. Sorry. I love you, Ben, but not that much.”

“Come on. Gramps is old. Maybe he’s finally losing it and going senile.”

Karma snorted. “Right. Big Joe Walsh is anything but, and you know it. Besides, he just turned eighty. That’s like sixty in human years. He’s probably going to live to be at least one hundred and ten. Did I tell you I almost ran into him the other day on Castle Rock skiing? I swear the man acts like he owns the mountain.”

Frustrated, Ben stood and picked up the dumbbell to return it to the rack. “I think he does. So, that settles it. I’m going to ask her, Karma.”

“Ask who what?”

“Gina, I’m going to call her and invite her over.”

“That friend of Annabelle Ronaldi’s who you’ve met how many times? Twice?”

“It’s Annabelle Flynn now, and yes, I’m going to propose to Gina.”

“Then why the heck did you bother proposing to me?”

“Last-ditch effort, I guess.”

“You’ve made up your mind?”

“It’s the only logical conclusion. I have to marry someone. The only question is who. Since you have so unceremoniously rejected me, what choice do I have?”

“You can call Big Joe’s bluff.”

“And let him sell my ranch to the highest bidder? No way. That’s my home.”

Karma let out a groan that sounded wrought with frustration. “It’s just land.”

“It’s my land, or it will be as soon as I talk Gina into marrying me.”

“What makes you think you can trust her?”
“I’ve done my research. Gina’s made no bones about never wanting to marry.”
“Yeah, that’s before she met you and your family’s billions.”
“You haven’t read her dossier. She has a very interesting and impressive background.”
“I don’t care what her background is. Greed is not discriminatory; people from all walks of life suffer from it.”
“That’s what prenups are for.”
“Good luck with that. What famous lawyer said he’d never seen a prenup he couldn’t break?”
“Your brother, Trapper.”
“He’s not so famous, but he knows what he’s talking about—usually.”
“I have a team of lawyers working on it and I’m paying through the nose for the best legal advice I can buy.”
“Okay, so let’s say this prenup is air-tight. What’s going to keep Gina from falling for you? All your women do, you know.”
Ben laughed. “All but you and Annabelle.”
“Quit feeling sorry for yourself. This is a big deal, Ben.”
Ben moved on to the treadmill and started a mountain hike. “You think I don’t know that? Gina’s never had a relationship last more than a month or two, and from what I’ve learned, she has ample reason not to trust people enough to let them get close—especially men.” He pumped up the incline and speed. “She’s young and she’s making a real name for herself in her field. My sources claim she has no interest in ever getting married.”
“What about sex?”
Ben laughed. “Karma, I don’t know what your mama told you, but you don’t have to be married to have sex.”
“I’m just saying it’d be nice to wake up with the same person every day. Don’t you think if that happens over a period of time you’ll both become more committed to this relationship than you bargained for, prenup or not?”
“No way. I’m not going to sleep with her. I’m just going to marry her. Besides, I make sure I don’t wake up with anyone. Ever. I leave in the middle of the night so I don’t have to deal with any morning-after awkwardness. I thought you did the same.” When there was no comment on Karma’s part he added, “I don’t remember you ever bringing anyone home.” Not that it was a major concern; still, he always tried to keep an eye on her.
“We’re not talking about me.”
Ben guessed he deserved her wrath. He did wake her up, after all, and he knew damn well Karma wasn’t Little Miss Sunshine in the morning. He should feel guilty but he didn’t. Something beeped, probably her coffee pot. He pictured Karma, wearing a ripped sweatshirt and sweatpants—her normal sleepwear. Her long, curly, blonde hair would be sticking out in all directions as she made coffee in the kitchen of her small apartment. She gulped and then let out what sounded like a sigh of contentment. Yep, she just poured her coffee.
“I’m going to ask Gina to marry me, not live with me. As far as I’m concerned, we’ll get married and then she’ll go her way and I’ll go mine. We never have to see each other again. Hell, we can even let the lawyers deal with the divorce.”
“And why would Big Joe buy that?”
“Why wouldn’t he? Gina has a career in New York. It’s not as if she’s going to quit her job and move to Idaho. Gramps will think we’re together when I’m here. You know Gramps; he hates New York. He’ll never come out here. But even if he does, what’s it going to take? Gina will go out to dinner with us, maybe take in a play. One night and Gramps will be back on a plane to Boise, I’ll have the ranch, and Gina will have whatever is agreed upon in the prenup. Gramps will be none the wiser.”
“I don’t like it, Ben. I love Grandpa Joe. I hate the thought of you lying to him and I hate that I’m going to have to lie to him even more. I can’t help but think that maybe he’s right.”
“About what?”
“About you. It might be good for you to have someone who loves you, someone to share your life with.”
Women. They were always matchmaking. “You of all people know how I feel about this. I’m happy being single. I have friends all over the world. I have the best family—you, Trapper, Hunter, Fisher, Kate, and Gramps. You’re all I need. And you know my relationships tend to be physical and temporary.”
“You’re a dog.”
“No, I just have a short attention span when it comes to women and thankfully, most of the women I date have relationship ADD as well.”
Karma let out something between a sigh and a growl. If Ben had been in her presence, she probably would have given him a shot in the arm. “Joe wants an heir.”
“Gramps said I have a year to get married. Although he mentioned an heir, it wasn’t part of the deal. I’ll get married, I’ll get the ranch, and I’ll get a divorce. End of story.”
“I hope you know what you’re doing.”
She sounded doubtful, but then again, so was he. He hated being forced to do anything. “Me too.”
Gina Reyez sat at her desk looking out over lower Manhattan while doing a mental Snoopy Happy Dance. She achieved yet another goal—finally getting a window office. She was one step closer to finding Rafael, one step closer to helping her sister and brother-in-law buy a decent home to raise a family, and one step closer to her dream of having a place of her own. Gina’s desk phone buzzed and without even turning her head, she answered. “Yes?"

“There’s a call for you on line one, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Laura.” Gina blew her bangs out of her eyes. She’d have to have a little talk with her new assistant. She’d already asked Laura to call her Gina, but Laura still called her ma’am. Gina was way too young to be considered a ma’am. Heck, she wasn’t even twenty-seven yet. She picked up the handset and pressed line one.

“This is Gina Reyez.”

“Gina, I’m not sure you remember me. It’s Ben Walsh, Annabelle Flynn and Becca Ronaldi’s partner in the Ben Walsh Gallery.”

His voice oozed through the phone like warm honey. He had a strange accent she couldn’t place, strange but sexy. To think that she, or anyone else for that matter, could forget Ben Walsh was laughable (not that she’d admit it). The man was rather unforgettable with his dark mahogany hair, slate-blue eyes that looked lit from within, and a face that was a combination of boy next door and fallen angel. He was tall, broad, and built like a model, not to mention incredibly well-dressed, rich, successful, and funny. Unfortunately, he was also gay. Gina sat back in her chair, slipped off a shoe, and tucked her foot underneath her. “Didn’t we meet at Annabelle Flynn’s wedding?”

“Yes, we did.”

She smiled to herself. “That’s right, I remember now.”

“I suppose you’re wondering why I’m calling.”

Ben cleared his throat. “I’d like to meet with you about a mutually beneficial business venture.”

“Don’t you mean to sound cryptic, but this is something I would prefer to discuss in person.”

Ignoring Rosalie’s presence, even when she set a venti Starbucks cup on the desk, Gina spun around in her chair and found her boss and best friend, Rosalie Romeo, leaning against the doorjamb eavesdropping without a hint of remorse or embarrassment. Gina wondered how much she’d heard. She twirled the phone cord around her finger. “What kind of business are we talking about?”

“I don’t mean to sound cryptic, but this is something I would prefer to discuss in person.”

As soon as possible. I’m flying out the day after tomorrow and won’t be back for a week.”

Rosalie’s eyes bored a hole through Gina as she looked over her calendar; it didn’t look good. She twirled the phone cord around her finger. “What kind of business are we talking about?”

“I don’t mean to sound cryptic, but this is something I would prefer to discuss in person.”

“Don’t you mean to sound cryptic, but this is something I would prefer to discuss in person.”

“Okay, but it’s not working for me, I’m leaving.”

“Gina, you have the right to leave at any time. I just hope you’ll hear me out before you do.”

“I’ll come with an open mind.”

“Shall we say seven?”

Gina typed it into her calendar and shot off an email to her sister, Tina, saying she most likely wouldn’t be home for dinner. “Seven it is, I’ll be there.”

“Thanks. You won’t regret it.”

Gina wasn’t too sure about that. “You’re welcome. I’ll see you tonight.”

Rosalie crossed her arms and gave Gina her you’re-so-busted look. “Dinner with Ben Walsh?”
Gina shrugged and closed her calendar. “He said it’s business. He’s a good contact.”

Rosalie walked around and inspected Gina’s desk; there was nothing on it but the computer monitor, the telephone, and her Starbucks. “Does business usually occur over dinner at his place?”

“You have exceptional hearing. And yes, it sounds as if Ben does business at his place. Since he’s one of your sister’s best friends, I’m sure he’s not an ax murderer so there’s nothing to worry about. Besides, the man is gay.”

Rosalie whipped her eyes away from the credenza she’d been examining to stare wide-eyed at Gina. “He is?”

Standing, Gina slipped her foot into her pump, and paced her office. It really wasn’t big enough for a good pace, but she had short legs so she couldn’t complain. “The man owns an art gallery, for Pete’s sake.”

“Part of an art gallery.”

“So, that doesn’t make him any less gay.”

Rosalie put her hands on her hips and stepped directly in front of Gina. “I’ve met Ben several times and my gaydar never went off.”

Gina shrugged. “Well maybe you’re getting sloppy since you married Nick. He has enough testosterone for a dozen men. Ben’s too perfect to be straight. Believe me, all the good-looking, rich, single, metrosexual men are gay.”

Rosalie sat at the chair opposite Gina’s desk, which was strange. They always met in Rosalie’s office because until today, Gina didn’t have one of her own. Seeing Rosalie on the other side of her desk would take getting used to.

Rosalie leaned back while Gina paced. “If you’re right, it’s a true blow to womankind.”

“Tell me about it.” Gina sighed. “He is somethin’. Though, I’m surprised you even noticed, Mrs. Romeo.”

Rosalie rolled her eyes. “Just because I’m happily married doesn’t mean I’m blind. As a very good nurse once told me, ‘Just because the store’s closed doesn’t mean you can’t window shop.’”

Gina stepped around her desk, picked up her coffee, and held it up. “Amen to that. I guess I’ll be window shopping tonight because his store is only open to men.”

The intercom buzzed from the gallery downstairs. “Ben, Gina’s on her way up.”

“Thanks, Kerri.” He opened the apartment door and leaned against the doorjamb waiting for the elevator. Gina stepped out and Ben swallowed hard. Damn, if Gina did marry him, it would be a very good idea never to see her again. Physically, Gina was about as far from his type as he could get which, in his book, was a good thing. He had always gone for the tall, blonde, cover-girl types. Gina was gorgeous, but a far cry from supermodel material. She couldn’t be more than five feet tall, and even with the ridiculously high heels she teetered around on, the top of her head still didn’t reach his shoulder. Gina was beautiful in a sexy-as-hell Latin pixie way. The only thing missing was the fairy dust. She had a huge personality and an even larger attitude; the fact that it was all contained in such a tiny and delicate package was mind-blowing. Everything was tiny, well, except for her mouth—it was a bit too wide with full red lips, which looked as if they were picked out in a cosmetic surgeon’s office along with her breasts. There was nothing small about those either, not that he was thinking about her lips or her breasts. Especially not her breasts. No. He had gotten up close and personal with more than one off-the-rack pair and even without touching, he knew hers were the real thing. “Gina, thanks for coming.”

Watching Gina walk toward him was like watching a three-ring circus. He didn’t know which ring to pay attention to. In ring number one, short-cropped, black hair framed her face and fell over copper eyes that flashed with equal parts intelligence and mischief. Her wide mouth painted a hot, wet red was set in a strained yet polite smile. In the center ring were her amazing breasts showcased in the turquoise twist bodice of a color block business dress and black jacket that, on her, looked sexy as sin. In ring number three was the rest of her—her small waist, the tight black skirt hugged her hips and thighs, and her tiny feet encased in fuck-me pumps made her legs look a mile long—created a hell of a show.

Gina stopped in front of him and looked up. He supposed she had to. “The last time I was at the gallery, Annabelle was complaining about you moving her office off the main floor and up here.”

“She took her old office back and is downstairs since Becca Ronaldi joined the partnership.”

“Where’s your office, Ben?”

“I don’t have one for the gallery. I’m more of a silent partner.” He stepped out into the hall and held the door open for her. “Come on in.”

She walked in ahead of him, which was probably a mistake on his part. It was bad enough watching her walk toward him. Damn, when it came to a fine ass, J. Lo had nothing on Gina. She stopped in the middle of the postmodern, minimalist living room—a spark of color, curves, and heat among the cold, hard lines, white leather,
and chrome—and turned in a circle “Wow, this is beautiful. It looks like something out of a magazine. Who’s your decorator?”

“I didn’t use one. Can I get you a drink?”

Gina shook her head, her bangs rearranging themselves over her copper eyes as if to clear her thoughts. “Club soda, if you have it. We’re talking business and I don’t believe in three martini lunches.”

“It’s dinner.” Ben caught Gina’s eye roll and laughed. “Make yourself at home. I’ll just be a minute.” Instead of using the wet bar, he went into the kitchen to check on the hors d’oeuvres. The tarts needed another minute or two. He closed the oven and wished Gina had asked for a mixed drink because he could really use one right about now. Ben poured the sodas and brought them along with a cheese tray and a tray of assorted sushi. When he returned, he found Gina studying a piece from his personal art collection. It was by one of his favorite up-and-coming artists. He watched her reaction to the mixed media painting. “It’s called ‘New York Subway.’”

“It’s amazing.” She continued studying the work; there was a lot of it to study. The piece was five feet tall and more than four feet wide. After a moment, she turned to face Ben and looked surprised when he handed her a plate.

“The tarts will be out in a minute.”

Gina walked back to the coffee table, picked up her glass, and motioned to the food. “You didn’t have to do all this.”

Ben shrugged. “I said I’d feed you. We’re having salade nicoise with tuna steak for dinner.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

Ben held up his glass to toast. “To a very profitable business relationship.”

Gina clinked her glass against his and took a sip all the while eyeing him. “Why don’t you tell me about it?”

The kitchen timer went off and Ben held up a finger. “Hold that thought.” He strode to the kitchen, pulled out the tarts, and with all the speed of a seasoned chef, placed them on the serving platter. When he returned, Gina walked back to him from studying another piece in his collection. He took a deep breath and began. “My grandfather is Joe Walsh. Ring any bells?”

“I’ve heard the name before, but I can’t place it.” She picked up a piece of cheese from the tray and nibbled.

“He’s probably the richest man in Idaho. Last I checked he was on the Forbes List above Donald Trump, Stephen Spielberg, and T. Boone Pickens.”

“That’s nice for you.” Sitting on the couch, Gina crossed her legs, and looked bored. “What does this have to do with the business venture?”

Ben took a hot tart—the irony didn’t escape him—and popped it in his mouth. The air-light pastry melted as the savory flavors melded together to perfection. “My grandfather owns more leased land than anyone in the United States. He owns the one piece I want. It’s the ranch in Idaho where my parents and I lived before their deaths.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your parents.”

“Thanks, but it was a long time ago.”

Gina leaned forward to inspect the food. “What are those?”

“Spinach, leek, and goat cheese tarts.”

“They look like something they have at that great market.” She snapped her fingers. “I think it’s called Grace’s. Do you know it? It’s on East 71st between 2nd and 3rd.”

He sat on the other side of the couch. “Thanks, but I didn’t get the tarts there.”

“Where? That shop on 32nd?”

“No. I made them.”

She took a bite and covered her mouth with a napkin. “You’re kidding,” she said around a mouth full of food. Ben grinned at her shocked look. “No, why?”

With a wave of her hand, Gina continued. “Never mind, go on with your story.” She took another bite of a tart and moaned. “These are amazing.”

Ben wished she’d stop moaning; it was distracting. “I’m glad you like them.” He took another bite of a tart and moaned. “These are amazing.”

Ben wished she’d stop moaning; it was distracting. “I’m glad you like them.” He took another bite of a tart and moaned. “These are amazing.”

“Gina, have you ever wanted something so badly you’d do just about anything to get it?”

“No.” She was serious.

“Nothing?”

“Not badly enough to do anything.” She studied her nails before gazing at him. “I have my standards.”

He moved closer and looked her straight in the eye. “What is the one thing in the world you’ve always wanted and haven’t been able to get?”

“A home. I want to own my own home. I want it bought and paid for, so that no one can take it away.” Gina covered her mouth, either to keep from saying more or in an attempt to catch the words that had escaped. She stood and paced the room. “In a few years, I’ll have enough money for a nice down payment. If all goes according to my plan, I’ll own it outright in twenty years. That’s my goal, anyway.”
Ben got the feeling she wasn’t telling him everything, not that he’d expect someone he hardly knew to spill her guts, but she seemed more evasive than most. Nonetheless, he had no choice but to work with what little information she gave him. “What kind of home?”

Turning to face him, she crossed her arms under her breasts, which did nothing for his concentration. “Why do you want to know?”

He raised his hands. “I didn’t know your choice of home was a national secret. Do I need a security clearance?”

She seemed to dig for patience. “That’s personal.”

“If we’re going to be in business together, I’ll need to know personal information. I already know a good amount about you or you wouldn’t be here.”

She turned again and paced the length of his living room. She was not happy sharing. “I’d like something similar to Rosalie’s brownstone apartment.”

Ben had been to Rosalie’s apartment when her sister, Annabelle, lived there before she married Dr. Wonderful. It was quaint and charming and in a trendy yet affordable section of Brooklyn’s Park Slope. “Isn’t that a little small?”

“It’s plenty big for me. It’s a two-bedroom and has a beautiful garden. I don’t need much.”

“You don’t have very high expectations.”

She stopped dead and faced him. “You have no idea who I am or what I want, and you’re in no position to make judgments.”

Maybe not. But he knew where she came from, and although she’d come a long way, he figured she’d want more.

“I’m sorry, you’re absolutely right. Forgive me.”

For a second Ben thought she would leave. He stood and moved close enough to stop her in case she did, but she stayed. After a moment, she gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

Relieved, he took his keys out of his pocket, flipped them into the air, and caught them. “My grandfather just turned eighty and it sounds a little crazy, but he’s holding my ranch hostage. If I don’t do what he wants, he’s going to sell it to the highest bidder.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“He wants me to get married.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“I need a woman to marry. Someone who won’t see the marriage as anything more than a business deal. In return for marrying me, I will give you an annual income and buy you the home of your dreams—within reason.”

“You want to buy me?”

“No. I’m willing to pay you to facilitate the acquisition of my ranch. Much like a homebuyer pays a Realtor.”

Gina sashayed across the room. “What do you consider reasonable?”

Ben watched as she paced, wishing he could read her mind. “Excuse me?”

“You said you’d buy me the home of my dreams within reason. Give me a dollar figure here because I have a feeling my definition of reasonable and yours are light years apart.”

“How does something in the neighborhood of ten million sound?”

Gina turned on her heel and placed her hand on her cocked hip. “Ten million dollars? What, are you nuts? Get a clue, cowboy, you could pay a woman a whole lot less than ten mil to pretend-marry you.”

“Yes, but should you accept, you will legally be my wife—”

“Wow, Ben, you’re making it sound like Marriage Impossible.” Gina hummed the theme to Mission Impossible, which really got on his nerves.

“Hardly. I’m a wealthy man and as my wife, you’ll be due no less. Any lawyer worth his salt will tell you as much.”

Gina didn’t even blink.

“I don’t want to take the chance of my grandfather discovering through the prenup that this is a hoax. It has to be legitimate in every respect. For a man of my net worth, this is a fair prenup. I’ll make monthly deposits into your account equaling a half million dollars annually for the duration of our marriage. After the uncontested divorce, you will receive alimony payments in the range of a quarter of a million a year for a period of five years for every one year of marriage. All of this is negotiable, of course.”

“Of course. Just so I understand this, you want to pay me to be your wife?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m assuming you don’t expect me to sleep with you. I mean, why would you? You’re gay.”

Ben stared at her back as she paced away from him and choked on the tart he’d just stuffed in his mouth. She thought he was gay? What is it with women? They think every man who dresses well and doesn’t burp and fart in public is automatically gay. It took him a moment to keep from choking to death, and once he took that first precious gasp of air, he remembered the only hole in his plan—the hole Karma pointed out. If Gina thought he was gay, she
wouldn’t go and do something stupid like fall in love with him.

When she turned back she saw he was red in the face.

“Are you okay?”

Ben cleared his throat. “Sorry, I just choked on the tart.” He took a sip of his drink wishing he’d chosen straight vodka because he was about to tell the biggest lie of his life. He could picture Karma laughing her ass off over this. “Most people don’t know my sexual orientation; not even my business partners and certainly not my family. I’d appreciate it if you keep that to yourself.”

“Sure, okay.” She looked skeptical. “What about your boyfriends… and mine for that matter? Oh, and just so you know, there’s no way I’d ever consider living with you. That’s a deal breaker. I don’t do roommates.”

“Yes, well, our living arrangements won’t be a problem. You’ll live in your dream home, and while I’m in town, I’ll continue to stay here. To satisfy my grandfather’s curiosity, should it rear its ugly head, my legal residence would have to be the home we purchase together. Until the divorce, the deed will be in both our names.”

“What about our social lives?”

“I’m not in a relationship at the moment, are you?”

“No.”

“I’d appreciate it if, for the first year, you would go without dating in case Grandfather does something sneaky like send someone to check up on us. I plan to do the same. After that, should the marriage even last that long, I’d ask you to be discreet. The only other thing I’ll ask of you is that you’d be available in case I should need a date in a situation in which I might be photographed—openings, benefits, that sort of thing. It wouldn’t look good to end up in the society pages with another woman on my arm.”

“I’ve never been a beard before. Will the press know we’re, you know,” she motioned with her hand as if she couldn’t come up with the word.

“Married?”

Gina shook her head, “Yeah, that.”

Ben had to keep his temper when it came to the beard comment. As if he needed one. He didn’t like that he had the urge to show her just how gay he wasn’t. What he needed to do was control his male ego. Shit, if Karma and the guys knew what he was doing, he’d be the laughingstock of the family. “I usually fly well under the press’s radar. I’m sure if we give them your name, chances are they’ll just use that and not dig any deeper. There is always a chance they will; it’s slight, but it’s there. Are you hungry?”

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Gina couldn’t believe he was talking about food at a time like this. “Why me?”

He took his keys back out of his pocket and tossed them in the air again. She crossed her arms to keep from snatching them so she could put an end to that very annoying habit and tapped her toe. “I’m waiting.” He gaped at her as if she’d just stripped in front of him.

“Why not you?”

“Come on, Ben. You just don’t ask a veritable stranger to marry you. What about your other friends?”

“I asked Annabelle but she married Mike instead.”

“The nerve. So that was it?”

Ben looked as if he was deciding whether or not to tell the truth. She gave him the Bronx stare, which made men much bigger than him go crying to their mamas.

“I asked my only other good female friend.”

“And she said no?”

Ben sat on the metal and leather chair and crossed his long, long legs at the ankle in front of him. He was so gorgeous, the fact that he was gay was a real shame, but then Gina had never met an ugly gay man.

“If she hadn’t, I wouldn’t be talking to you, now would I? I’m not trying to rush you, but I have a time limit. When do you think you can tell me your decision?”

“I don’t know about this. I have goals and I’ve met every one of them on my own. Marrying you would feel like cheating. Not only is it a lie, which always catches up to you, but I don’t want to look back on my life and wonder if I could have made it on my own.”

Ben shot out of his chair. “Let me get this straight, you’re going to refuse me because you want to struggle when I can easily give you whatever you want?”

“I’m not for sale.”

“Gina, this is a business transaction, plain and simple. You’re getting paid to marry me and put your social life on hold for up to a year.”
“One year of my life is going to cost you twelve point five million dollars. That’s roughly thirty-five thousand dollars a day. That’s insane.”

“That’s what a typical prenup would state for a person of my income and net worth. Why are you complaining? I’m not. I don’t care what you do with the money. If you feel guilty, give it to charity.”

With that much money, she’d finally be able to afford to hire a professional to search for her brother, Rafael. She wasn’t sure how she’d find him, but she knew better than most that money made almost all things possible. She could buy her sister Tina and her brother-in-law their dream home in the suburbs, and after the divorce, she could sell whatever castle Ben bought, buy a normal home for cash, and invest the rest.

Gina had spent her life worrying about Rafael and fighting to keep her and her sister safe and fed. She might be overly proud, but she wasn’t stupid. She’d be crazy not to marry him. “So, Mr. Richie Rich, how did you get from Idaho to New York, and where’d you get all this money you talk about?”

Ben looked up to the heavens as if he were praying for mercy or patience, probably patience, but at this point Gina couldn’t care less.

“I went to NYU and majored in business and art history. Since I turned eighteen, I’ve been given a monthly allowance from my trust. I saved a lot. When I saw an opportunity to buy this building and start my gallery, I jumped at it. I’ve been living between here and Boise ever since. When I turned thirty, I was given control of the trust and the rest is history.”

At least he wasn’t some kind of high-class drug dealer—just a well-funded art dealer. Gina crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her toe. “We’d have to have a time limit. Your grandfather could hold this land over your head forever unless he put something in writing, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life married to you.”

“Okay. What do you think is fair?”

“Three years, max?”

Ben stood and held out his hand. “Deal?”

Gina looked up at him and shrugged. “As long as my lawyer doesn’t have any problems with the prenup, I guess we have a deal.” She shook his hand, looked him in the eye, and thanked God he was batting for the other team. If he were straight, Gina would probably end up making a fool of herself over a guy like Benjamin Walsh.
Chapter 2

One month to the day after accepting Ben’s business proposal, Gina placed the box of her meager possessions by the door of her small bedroom. She dusted off her hands and looked around. That was it. She was all packed.

She eyed her one box of knickknacks with a certain amount of apprehension. They were presents Rosalie had given her over the years—little dust collectors Gina never understood. The only things she collected were necessities like clothes, shoes, and purses. Okay, maybe they weren’t all strictly necessities, but they were useful. She wondered if a Coach purse could truly be considered a necessity. Gina smiled to herself when she remembered the day she found one on the rack at TJ Maxx for $40. That made it a necessity.

As for the possessions other people thought important, she knew better. She grew up keeping only the things she could carry with her in two bags and a backpack. It was only recently that her clothes closet went beyond that rule, even though it had been years since she had to pack in the dark to sneak out of an apartment so she, her mother, and her sister could skip out on the rent. Having so many possessions made her nervous.

Gina had taken the day off to move into her temporary place. She’d rented Rosalie’s brownstone apartment until she could buy something Ben approved of. This was the first time she had to hire a cab to move. Her last move was by bus. The two bags and backpack rule had still been in place then.

Checking the time, she cursed. Leave it to her to be late for her own wedding. She still had to shower and dress before heading downtown.

Ben offered to send a car for her, but Gina refused. Maybe because she wasn’t sure she could go through with it and the last thing she needed was to have to escape from a limo driver on Ben’s payroll—if he had a limo driver on his payroll. The way it sounded, he very well might. Not that she cared. What Ben Walsh did with his money certainly wasn’t her business.

She tossed a towel over her shoulder and tiptoed through the apartment to the bathroom. Her brother-in-law, Sam, a cop, worked night duty and was a light sleeper. She definitely didn’t want him awake to give her a hard time. He’d take one look at her dress and he’d know something was up. She hadn’t told Sam or her sister Tina about Ben or the wedding and she wasn’t about to mention it until it was absolutely necessary. They were one of the few insanely happy married couples. They’d have a real problem with Gina marrying for money. It wasn’t as if Gina didn’t have a problem with it; just not as big a problem as Tina and Sam would. Gina didn’t believe in marriage, well, at least not for her; and even if she did, this was business, not a real marriage. Besides, it wasn’t as if she was selling her body. If sex were involved she wouldn’t do it. All she was selling was up to three years of her independence for roughly $35,000 a day. She wasn’t proud of it, but since someone was going to get that money, Gina couldn’t think of one good reason why it shouldn’t be her.

Gina raced to get ready and when she finally stepped into the elevator, she took a deep breath to calm her nerves. It was stupid to be nervous; after all, this wasn’t a real marriage. With any luck, in a year—or at worst, three years—she’d have forgotten the whole thing. She checked her watch and tried to decide which would be faster, subway or bus. Then she remembered she was wearing her favorite Marilyn Monroe white halter dress, and had second thoughts about public transportation. She wasn’t looking forward to the afternoon’s events, but that didn’t mean she wanted to show up looking dirty. When the elevator doors swooshed open, she rushed across the lobby and out the door. Spotting a cab, she put two fingers between her lips and whistled. The checkered cab screeched to a halt in front of her.

Gina slid in, took one look at the cabby, and groaned. “Carlos, what are you doing? Stalking me?” Carlos had had a crush on Gina since they were both twelve and she grew boobs. He’d been a sweet pest ever since.

“Hey, Gina.” Carlos smiled his toothy grin. “No, I just dropped Tina off at the grocery down the block. This was pure luck.”

“Yeah, bad luck is more like it.”

She looked out the back window and saw no other cabs. Because she was already running late, she didn’t have time to chance it, but she’d be damned if she’d have Carlos take her where she was going. No, the man talked way too much.

“Take me to City Hall, and hurry up. I’m late.”

He stared at her breasts. “Damn, Gina, you’re lookin’ fine. So, what are you gonna do at City Hall lookin’ like a
“hot, Latin Marilyn Monroe?”

Gina pulled her coat closed and started her makeup. “Nothing you need to know about. And you better not breathe a word of this to Tina and Sam.”

Carlos smiled back at her through the rearview mirror as he turned on the meter and pulled into traffic heading downtown. “Yeah. Sure, you know, us cabbies, we’re like priests. We don’t say nothin’ to nobody.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “I’ll give you an extra twenty if you keep your mouth shut. And so help me, Carlos, if you say so much as a word, I’ll make sure you regret it.”

“Eh, Gina. No need to get nasty now. I get it.” He switched lanes, cutting off a bus, and she almost put her eye out with the liner pencil. “So, I was thinkin’, maybe we should, you know, go out sometime. I got season tickets to the Yankees. What’a‘ya say?”

“Thanks, Carlos, but no. I’m busy.”

Carlos stopped short at a light and Gina had to brace herself against the front seat. When she looked up, he was watching her in the mirror. “I didn’t tell you what day.”

She pulled out her mascara. “Believe me, Carlos, I’m busy every day.” For the next year at least, and even if she wasn’t, life was too short to date men who wore pants large enough to double as a parachute. You don’t have to be Einstein to know women like seeing a man’s body in clothes that actually fit. Give her a man in a well-tailored suit or a nice-fitting pair of jeans any day. No, Carlos, as nice as he was, was not her type.

Being midday, the traffic wasn’t bad. She paid Carlos, gave him a $20 tip for his silence, and watched as he pulled away before walking the rest of the way to the Marriage Bureau.

Gina entered the 1920s Art Deco building and saw Ben waiting for her. She was about to turn around and go out the same way she came in but he spotted her before she could.

“You’re late.” He tossed his keys in the air and caught them, which set her teeth on edge. “I’ve been waiting twenty minutes vacillating between hoping you’d show up and praying you wouldn’t.”

“You’re lucky I’m here. I’ve been doing some major vacillating of my own. I’m sorry I’m late, but I couldn’t help it. I knew the cabby and I had to have him drop me at City Hall. I hoofed it the rest of the way.”

Ben looked as if he was about to blow his top. Gina guessed no man, gay or straight, liked to be kept waiting and then told he was lucky his date showed up at all.

“If you had let me send a car for you, you wouldn’t have had that problem.”

Gina rolled her eyes as Ben took her arm. “We need to sign the prenup and a wedding chapel is being held for us.” He led her to an office where Gina signed the prenup with a shaky hand before it was witnessed and notarized. She returned Ben’s pen and stood. “All done.”

“No quite.” Ben didn’t look happy, but then why should he? Gina was sure gay men all over Manhattan were crying in their lattes over Ben being taken off the market for the next year. “The chapel is just down the hall. Rosalie picked up some flowers. Oh, and nice move inviting your ex to be a witness.”

“What?”

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“I, Benjamin Walsh, take you Gina…”

This was a nightmare. A waking nightmare. Gina stood in the wedding chapel, wearing a white dress, in front of witnesses, hearing a veritable stranger speak the words she knew by heart but swore she’d never say aloud.

She looked up at Ben holding her hand and never realized how very tall he was, at least as tall as her last boyfriend, Rich Ronaldi, who topped out at six feet three inches. Gina knew this because Rich was serving as Ben’s best man and wasn’t too happy about it. Neither was Ben, not that it was her idea. She was definitely going to have a word with Rosalie after this whole fiasco. When Gina called Rosalie and asked her to be a witness at this sham of a wedding, she expected Rosalie to bring Nick, her husband. Bringing the newly married Rich Ronaldi was a cruel joke.

Ben stalled at her name and all the blood ran from his face. Gina prayed he’d come to his senses, or was having second thoughts until she realized he had just forgotten her last name. She leaned forward and whispered, “Reyez.”

Ben gave her hand a thankful squeeze. ‘Gina Reyez. To be my lawfully wedded wife—”

Por Dios! She probably should have mentioned her own second, third, and fourth thoughts before she signed the prenuptial agreement, but definitely before the justice of the peace picked up his Bible and began the ceremony. Marrying Ben was something for which she’d spend a lot of time in purgatory. She had to promise to love this man in sickness and in health and she hardly knew him. That whole part about forsaking-all-others was worrying but not half as much as the keep-thyself-only-unto-him-for-as-long-as-you-both-shall-live part—at least for the first year, but honestly, Gina couldn’t see herself breaking wedding vows even if the marriage was in name only.
Ben promised sex wasn’t part of the deal, but that tidbit didn’t make it into the prenup—probably because that would open the door for an annulment. Unlike them, she figured most married couples want to have sex with each other.

The words “to be my lawfully wedded wife” reverberated in her head like the echo of the loudspeaker at Madison Square Garden. She stepped closer, willing Ben to lean down so she could whisper, “You do? Really? Are you sure you still want to do this?” not that he hadn’t covered his own ass with the prenup, but still, marrying someone was an awfully big step just to get a hunk of land, even if it was the size of several boroughs of New York.

Ben motioned to the JP to wait and ushered Gina across the chapel until they were out of earshot. “I don’t want to, I have to. I thought you of all people understood.”

Okay, so maybe he wasn’t a total stranger. “I understand wanting to save your ranch, but there has to be some other way.”

Ben raked his hand through his dark hair that curled up against his collar and pinned her with his slate blue eyes. “If there was, believe me, I wouldn’t be doing this. Marriage is not on my list of top ten things to do. Shit, it isn’t even on my bucket list.”

Gina crossed her arms. “Just so you know, marriage is on one of my lists. The list of things I would never do. Comprendes?”

Ben straightened the tie of his perfectly tailored Hugo Boss suit and crossed his arms, which did nothing but highlight the breadth of his shoulders. “Good, then we’ll have no problem making sure this marriage only lasts as long as absolutely necessary.”

Gina eyed him. It looked as if he were telling the truth, but still, she trusted no one—especially not a man. She’d had her lawyer go over every syllable of that prenup. It was amazing what a person would do to get or protect their home. She should know. “Okay then, let’s get this over with.”

Rich walked over to them. “Is everything all right?” He had the protective big brother shtick down pat, which was weird considering they’d spent several months as long-distance bed buddies. Still, Gina appreciated the thought.

Ben didn’t spare Rich a look as he took her arm. “We’re fine.”

Richie stepped in front of them. “Gina?”

She patted Rich’s chest, “It’s all good, Richie. I just wanted to make sure Ben wasn’t having second thoughts.”

Rich wasn’t convinced, and Ben didn’t look as if he cared what Rich thought. Ben really surprised her; she didn’t know gay men could be so alpha. It was almost as surprising as Rich backing down. It was a damn good thing Ben was gay because if not, between his looks, personality, and the alpha male mojo, well, she’d be toast. Gina knew her weakness for alpha men and was smart enough to avoid close contact. That’s why she broke up with Rich when he’d moved back to town. His close proximity became problematic. Distance had been her safety net. She told him he wasn’t relationship material, but the real reason was that she never wanted to lose control of a relationship.

When they returned to the Justice of the Peace to continue the ceremony, Rosalie stared a hole through her. Rosalie had made no secret she didn’t agree with Gina marrying Ben, but then Rosalie was still in the honeymoon phase of her marriage and under the delusion that everyone has a soul mate and should be happily married just like her. Being Rosalie’s best friend had been much easier before Rosalie met Nick, back when she didn’t believe in marriage either. The two of them would sit at their favorite bar and talk over dirty martinis about fools in love. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

Gina shot Rosalie a threatening look; she didn’t trust Rosalie to keep her mouth shut. Asking Rosalie to stand up for her was a huge mistake, but Gina had no one else to ask. Other than Tina, Rosalie was Gina’s only friend, and Tina couldn’t know about this until it was over.

Ben gave her hand a tug as the Justice of the Peace cleared his throat. Madre de Dios, she’d missed something. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“Repeat after me…”

Gina got through the vows only stumbling over the section about until death do us part. She expected the whole thing to be over and waited for the dreaded “you may kiss the bride” line.

The Justice of the Peace said something about the exchange of rings. Rich handed Ben a ring. Gina didn’t know why she was surprised. Most people who married exchanged rings, but that seemed too real for a fake marriage. Still, Ben took her hand and slid a white gold band on halfway up her finger. It was plain and for that she was thankful.

Ben slid the band the rest of the way on and then topped it with the biggest engagement ring she’d ever seen, and she had a feeling the diamond wasn’t man-made. Heck, the ring probably wasn’t gold. She’d bet her eyeteeth it was platinum. She was wearing a fortune; she might as well just wear a sign saying Mug Me Now!

“With this ring I thee wed. With my body I thee worship. With all my worldly goods I thee endow.”

The shock about the rings was diminished by the overwhelming panic she felt when she heard those fatal words.
No matter how fake she knew them to be, the fact that this marriage was legally as binding as any other left her shaken. When Rosalie handed her a ring, she mumbled something just wanting the whole thing to be over. The room was closing in on her and she didn’t have enough air. She was just about to run when Ben wrapped an arm around her and leaned in for a kiss. When his lips touched hers, all thoughts of Ben being gay seemed to take a backseat to the fireworks going off in her mind and body. It was at that moment Gina realized she’d just made the biggest mistake of her life.

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Ben bent down to kiss Gina because it was expected and to show Rich Ronaldi, in case he had any question, just where he could stuff his concern. Ben wasn’t sure why he felt the need, since Rich was married to Ben’s partner in the Gallery and he knew Becca and Rich were disgustingly happy. Still, when Rich stuck his nose into the conversation during their marriage ceremony time-out, Ben had the urge to flatten him.

Gina stiffened and then melted as her mouth softened beneath his. For a little thing, she sure packed one hell of a powerful punch. Ben hadn’t expected the way his heart would race or the way she’d feel when he held her against him. He pulled away and watched as she blinked and then stepped back looking just as shell-shocked as he felt. Note to self: No more kissing his wife. Ever.

Rosalie stepped in between them to hug Gina who looked as if she still hadn’t recovered, not that Ben had. He found himself shaking hands with Rich and then on the receiving end of a kiss on both cheeks and a hug from Rosalie.

After thanking the Justice of the Peace and signing the marriage certificate, Ben looked at his new wife and waited, not sure of what to do. Rosalie and Rich watched him expectantly. “How about all of us going to lunch to celebrate?”

Gina shook her head. “I can’t. I took today off for this and to move into Rosalie’s old place.”

“Why? We’re going to buy a place together. That was the plan.”

Gina looked exasperated. “Yeah, but until then I needed a place to stay. I’m not going back to my sister and brother-in-law’s. Not after today.”

Ben shrugged. “No problem. I’ll help you move.”

Gina didn’t giggle like most women he knew; she guffawed. “You in your $2,000 suit. I don’t think so. Besides, I’m fine on my own.”

All Ben could picture was her in that do-me dress, with those sexy-as-hell heels making her legs look longer than any short woman’s legs should, dealing with big sweaty movers. “We can stop by my place on the way and I’ll change. It’s not a big deal. I’m sure you could use the help. Moving is awful.”

“No for me it’s not.”

Ben’s mind was made up. “I insist.”

Gina’s eyes went wide and she licked her lips. Ben had a feeling she didn’t mean for that to look like a come-on, but it did.

“Look, cowboy, just because you’re used to ordering people around doesn’t mean——”

Rosalie tugged on Gina’s arm and pulled her aside. “No fighting on your wedding day. That’s bad luck.” She whispered, “Gina, you married him, you could be a little nicer. I know this is more of a business deal than a real marriage, but it would be easier all around if you could bend a little. Like it or not, you’re still legally his wife and the man wants to help. Would you just say thank you and let him?”

Gina skewered Rosalie with a look. “I don’t need help.”

“Of course you do. Everyone needs help when they move. You remember my move to Nick’s. It took all of us days.”

“Yeah, but I don’t collect stuff like you do. I can move everything I own in one cab ride.”

Gina looked over at Ben and Rich, Ben was tossing his keys in the air, catching them again. Gina pasted a smile on her face and shrugged. “Fine. I’ll be nice. Are you happy now?”

Rosalie nodded. “Are you?”

Ignoring the question, Gina said good-bye to Rich, and made her way back to Ben. She told herself that Rosalie had a point; the man was paying her a fortune to be his wife. It wouldn’t kill her to watch what she said.

He turned toward her and smiled. “I have a car waiting. Come on, let me help. I want to, really.”

“Fine, if I do, will you promise to leave me alone?” Gina let him hold her coat because she was trying to be nice. She even bit her tongue while he led her to the waiting car. Ben nodded to the driver as he opened the door for them.

“Take us back to my place and then we’re going to Gina’s.”

Gina followed Ben into his loft above the gallery. It was still immaculate. She’d never seen a man’s apartment so
clean and tidy. She attributed it to the fact that except for the few times she’d stopped by her soon-to-be upstairs neighbors, Henry and Wayne, she hadn’t made a habit of hanging out with gay men. She took off her coat, laid it on the white couch, and sat while Ben tossed his keys on the table.

“If you want to grab something to drink, there’s plenty in the kitchen.” He pointed to the swinging door. “Help yourself. I’ll just be a minute.”

Gina picked up a *Gourmet* magazine from the top of a pile on the chrome and glass coffee table. “I’m fine. Go ahead and change. The sooner you do, the sooner I can move my things to Rosalie’s.” She checked her watch, hoping she could get everything out before her sister Tina came home. She’d leave a note saying she’d moved out. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t mentioned she was planning to, although she’d never given them a firm date. She’d also avoid telling Tina and Sam she ran off and got married. It was much better to ask for forgiveness than permission, not that she needed either.

Ben disappeared down the hall. She blew her hair out of her eyes and found herself listening to him padding around. Within a few minutes, Gina bored of the magazine. Wine and gourmet food were not on her list of interests. Though the pictures were really pretty, they made her hungry and just reminded her of the difference between her and her new… well, whatever Ben was.

She tossed the magazine back on the pile when a big hand reached down and put it back on the stack of fanned magazines correctly. She was tempted to just mess them all up. “What are you? OCD?”

Gina looked up and blinked, repeatedly. Mr. Hugo Boss was now looking more like the bad boy she’d always wished would move next door. He wore well-worn Levi’s, a rugged wool sweater that looked as if it had been around the block a few times, and scuffed hiking boots. She wondered if he bought distressed boots the way a person buys distressed jeans.

“I’m not OCD. I just like the place to look neat.”

“Uh huh, like I said, OCD. Nice getup. Is that your straight look?”

Ben looked down at his clothes. “You said I should change, I changed.”

“I didn’t mean you had to dress to hide your sexual orientation. Though, I gotta say, you do it well.”

Ben ran his hands through his hair. “These are my casual clothes. I don’t wake up in the morning and throw on a suit or dress clothes just for kicks. It’s one thing if I have a meeting, but if not or if I’m just hanging, this is pretty much how I dress.”

Gina didn’t look as if she believed him. Maybe she didn’t understand. “You see, from the time I was a little kid, I had to dress for business. My grandfather does business all over the world. I met Queen Elizabeth for the first time when I was eight and even a kid from Idaho isn’t going to wear jeans and a T-shirt to a royal’s garden party.”

“Sure, right.”

“When I went to college, I started going to art shows and openings. I couldn’t very well wear a Brooks Brothers suit there and fit in. Could I?”

Gina tilted her head and eyed him. “I guess you could have tried, but it would have killed your love life.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Do you have only one style?” He looked Gina up and down. “I doubt you’d wear that dress to the office.”

“No.”

“So why do I get the feeling you think I should dress the same everywhere?”

Gina stood and looked around. “Because you live here. Look at this place, you’re practically the OCD poster child, and because you’re richer than The Donald—you never see him out of a suit and tie.”

“Just because Gramps has money doesn’t mean we go around wearing three-piece suits all day, or even dress for dinner. Most of the time Gramps is in a pair of baggy Dockers and a sweatshirt. He buys a new Cadillac every five years whether he needs it or not, and he wouldn’t be caught dead living in a place like the Trump Towers. He’s a billionaire, but when it comes down to it, he’s a simple man who never saw the value of flaunting anything, not his wealth, or his knowledge. Every Saturday morning, he goes to a greasy spoon to meet up with his buddies for flapjacks, coffee, and to bore each other with stories they’ve all heard a thousand times. He looks like every other sixty-year-old man in the place.”

Gina crossed her arms. “I thought you said he was eighty.”

Ben smiled. “He is. He just doesn’t look it.” He picked up his keys and tossed them in the air before catching them. “You know, Gina. This is real life. It’s not like what you see on soaps.”

She didn’t say anything; she just stared at him like he’d grown another head.

“When I’m not working, I’m usually hiking, skiing, biking, camping, or helping my wife move. I’m not going to ruin designer clothes. Heck,” he pulled on his worn sweater, “I wouldn’t have dressed this nicely if I didn’t think we’d probably stop for lunch somewhere.”

She still looked skeptical. What did it matter what she thought? After he bought her dream home, they’d part
company and only see each other whenever absolutely necessary. “Are you ready to go?”

Gina grabbed her coat and hightailed it out of his place. Just as well, he wasn’t interested in her getting
comfortable in his apartment, or even with him.

When they arrived at Gina’s, Ben followed her into the tiny apartment. “How long have you lived here?”

“A couple of years. My sister and brother-in-law are saving to buy their own place. They had a second bedroom
so I moved in to help.”

“Tina, is that you?”

Gina let out an expletive that sounded Spanish just before a mountain of a man walked out of the kitchen. He
looked at Ben and scowled. “Who the hell are you?”

Gina stepped in front of him, placed her hands on her hips, and stood up to the huge guy. “What are you doing
home?”

“It’s my day off. What the heck are you doing here in the middle of the day dressed like that?” It was just about
that time he noticed her ring. “What the hell? You’re married?”

Gina looked down at her ring and cursed. “I forgot to take it off.”

The guy looked as though he was about to explode. Ben pulled Gina behind him and held out his hand. “I’m Ben
Walsh, Gina’s husband.”

The guy puffed out his chest and crossed his arms.

Gina shot Ben an angry look and tried to push him back, but he didn’t move. “Sam Corrigan, this is Ben Walsh.
Ben, this is my brother-in-law, Sam.” She blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Sam, behave.”

“You run off and get married without saying a word to Tina, and you’re telling me to behave?”

“It’s temporary.”

If it were possible, Sam looked even angrier.

“I told you I was moving out.”

“You told us yesterday. You forgot to mention the whole marriage thing and since when is marriage temporary?”

The front door opened and a woman who looked a whole lot like Gina walked in. “What is going on? I heard you
two yelling all the way from the elevator.”

Sam glared at Gina. “Go ahead, Gina. Explain to your sister why you got married to this guy without a word to
either of us.”

Tina’s eyes went wide. “You what?”

Gina turned to Ben. “Ben, this is my little sister Tina. Tina, this is Ben Walsh. And don’t look at me like that. I
was going to tell you about it.”

Sam put his arm around his wife. “She said it’s temporary.”

Tina’s shock was evident.

Gina nodded and swallowed hard. “It’s a long story.”
Chapter 3

It took one trip for Gina, Ben, and the driver to have all her worldly possessions in her new place. After throwing the suitcases on top of the unmade bed, she turned to find Ben leaning against the doorjamb to her bedroom. “Where’s the driver?”

“I sent him away.”
She put her hands on her hips. “Then why are you still here?”
“I let him go. I didn’t need him any longer. If I had known you had so few things, I would have just brought my car.”
Gina raised an eyebrow. “And how are you planning to get home?”
Ben shrugged with one shoulder since the other was holding him up while he leaned. “I can call a cab or take the train.”
She remembered what Rosalie said about being nice and kept her mouth shut. What she really wanted to know was when he was leaving. She had a lot to do. It would take her a couple hours at the most to unpack, then she needed to run to the store to buy groceries and, Lord knows, she didn’t want to spend any more time with Ben than absolutely necessary.

He cleared his throat, which brought her attention back to him. “I thought we could set up some appointments to look at houses.”
Gina would rather discuss this anywhere but inside her new bedroom, but since he took up the entire doorway, she was stuck. “What’s the rush?”
“I’ve got to get back to Idaho, so the sooner we buy a place, the sooner I can leave.”
Gina was happy where she was and the thought of moving again, even though it wasn’t much trouble, wasn’t something she looked forward to. “Okay, I guess there’s no harm in looking but I have one problem.”
Ben straightened up and looked almost eager. “What’s that? I’m good at solving problems.”
Whatever we buy will have to be furnished, either by the former owner or by me.”
Ben crossed his arms over his chest further blocking her in. “A deposit has been made to your account so spending money on furniture won’t be an issue.”
For the first time, the reality of what she’d done hit her. Someone was filling her bank account with money just for saying two little words—I do. “How much?”
“I had my accountant send over $50,000. I know it’s a bit more than we agreed on, but there are always unexpected expenses and you’ll need to go shopping so you have some evening wear on hand for our occasional dates. I’ll reimburse you for any expenses and if you’d like, we can lump the cost of furnishing the house into the money set aside for housing.”

Gina wanted to get past him so she could think. There was $50,000 sitting in her bank account? One inner voice screamed, “Yes!” and planned a shopping spree while the other screamed, “You’re a whore just like your mother.”
She did her best to ignore both. She needed to be rid of Ben so she could think, but it didn’t look as if he was going to move any time soon. Maybe he’d leave if she placated him. She blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Do you have a newspaper? We could look at the real estate listings.”
“No, but I have a Realtor on speed-dial.”
So much for that idea. “Of course you do.”
“I called her last week. She’s found a few places she thought we might like.”
Gina chewed on the side of her thumb trying to keep her temper. She was not used to being out-maneuvered.
“When is the meeting?”
“Whenever you’re ready.”
Gina looked around at her two boxes and numerous suitcases and shrugged. The sooner she got this over with, the sooner he’d be on his way. “I have to change. I can’t very well go house hunting dressed like this.” She picked up the full skirt of her dress and let it drop; the fabric swishing down her legs.
Ben smiled that slow sexy smile of his that made her toes want to curl. “I don’t see why not. You look fabulous.”
“Ben, just so you know, that wasn’t a request for a compliment. It was a hint for you to leave so I can find something to change into.”
“Oh, okay. How long do you need?”
“Do you need to change? Maybe fifteen minutes since I have to dig through my suitcases.”
“I’ll call Jess and give her a heads up.”

Gina crossed her arms. “Yes, you do that. Right after you get out of my bedroom.”
Ben nodded, flipped his keys in the air, caught them, and stepped out just before Gina shut the door on his face.

When she opened the door, Ben did a double take, obviously surprised she could make such a mess in less time than it took him to make a phone call. “Jess said she’d be here in ten minutes. We’ll grab a quick lunch with her before going to look at the places she’s lined up.” Lucky for him he didn’t mention the mess. Smart boy.

Gina picked up her stockings and rolled them together. “That’s fine. I’ll be out right after I hang up my dress.”
She figured he’d leave. He didn’t. He just stood there watching her, which was a bit unnerving. She hung her dress and placed her shoes neatly on the shoe rack, then turned to find Ben holding her garter. Great. She ripped it out of his hand, balled it up, and stuffed it back into an open suitcase.

“I didn’t think women wore those outside the bedroom.”
Gina laughed. “Shows how much you know.” She unzipped another bag and pulled out her leather jacket. “I hate panty hose and thigh highs don’t stay up, so I wear garters all the time.”
Ben swallowed the few comments he thought about making. He’d almost forgotten Gina thought he was gay. Now that he thought about it, it was probably a mistake calling Jess to show them houses. Jess and he had dated a few years ago and she knew he was definitely heterosexual. Maybe if he introduced Gina as his wife, it would put a stop to any reminiscing Jess might want to do.

The intercom beeped announcing a visitor. Gina threw her jacket on before grabbing her purse. “I guess the Realtor is here.”

Ben opened the door and took Gina’s keys from her to lock up. “It sounds that way. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”
They met Jess on the stoop. “Jess, this is my wife, Gina. Gina, this is an old friend, Jessica Spencer.” He gave Jess a pointed look hoping she’d take the hint not to discuss their past liaison.

Jessica did a double take. “You’re married?”
Ben put his arm around Gina. “Yeah, just today, actually.”
Jess looked Gina up and down and unsuccessfully tried to hide her shock. “Congratulations!” She gave him a hug and then shook Gina’s hand with both of hers. “I never thought I’d see the day someone landed Ben Walsh.”

Gina snorted. “Yeah, well, what can I say? He drove a hard bargain.”

He gave Gina a pinch on her very pinchable ass and ignored her little jump. Serves her right.

Jess smiled her fake model smile. “Let’s go celebrate over lunch, shall we? That way we can talk about what you’re both looking for in your new home.”

***

Gina stood in the entry of a Romanesque Revival mansion in Montgomery Place, one block off the park. “This is just too big. It’s five stories, Ben. Count them, five.” She held a finger up for each floor and counted them off. “Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco. Five.”

Jess stood off to the side as Ben pulled Gina into his arms, a place she definitely did not want to be. This show he was putting on for the Realtor was beginning to get on Gina’s nerves.

“I know it’s large, but it’s well within our price range and you have to admit, it’s beautiful.”
Gina did her best not to look at him. Instead she checked out all the molding on the walls, the rich colors they were painted, and the elaborate woodwork. If someone had told her last year she’d be standing in a home like this, no less considering purchasing it, she’d have thought the person was insane.

She whispered, “Ben, I can’t live in a place like this.”

“Sure you can.” When she shook her head, he pulled her closer. “Let’s at least look at it. You’re the one who wants to stay here in Brooklyn. If you don’t, I’m sure we can find a great penthouse in the city.”

“I’m not a penthouse type of girl.” Before he could say anything to rebut her statement, she continued, “I’m not a Romanesque Revival mansion type either.”

Ben squeezed her hand. “Come on, give it a chance. You might just surprise yourself.”
She doubted it. The place looked like a museum.

Ben didn’t let go of her hand as he and Jess dragged her from room to room, each more gorgeous than the last.
When they hit the master bedroom, he looked over at Jess. “Do you think the owners would be interested in selling the place furnished?”

Jess’ eyes glazed over, Gina was sure she was seeing dollar signs. “The owners didn’t mention it, but it wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

Ben nodded. “Why don’t you give them a call while Gina and I talk.”

Jess took the hint and closed the door behind her, leaving Gina stuck in yet another bedroom with Ben. She turned on him and poked his chest. “Are you nuts? What am I going to do with this much space?”

Ben calmly removed her finger from his chest and held her hand in his as he shook his head at her like she was an errant schoolgirl. “I told you we could spend about ten million. This place is only going for three point seven. With the downturn in the real estate market, it’s cheap, but that’s not helping you. It would probably be better for you to go to the city and let me buy one of those penthouses I mentioned, but if you insist on staying in Brooklyn, this is about the best you can do. I suppose I could put whatever we don’t spend of the housing fund into a trust for you. That seems fair, doesn’t it?”

Gina shook her head and blew her bangs out of her eyes. “It’s insane. I never said you had to spend that much. Heck, I’d be happy staying in Rosalie’s place.”

Ben pulled her over and sat on the bed. She flopped down next to him. “I need to buy a home and spend the expected amount of money if we’re going to make this marriage look real. That’s the point here, Gina.”

She shrugged and chewed on the side of her thumb. “Then buy it. I guess I could live in one of the attic rooms. It would be about the same as staying in an extremely nice fifth-floor walk-up.”

“Nonsense. Why stay there when you can stay in this room?”

“You don’t get it, do you? You saw where I came from. Tina and Sam’s apartment is the nicest place I’ve ever lived by far. Going from a small two-bedroom in Spanish Harlem to a mansion in one day is disconcerting.”

Ben smiled. “Yeah, but in a good way.”

“Ben, I think this whole marriage thing was a mistake. Look, why don’t we just get it annulled and you can marry someone like that Realtor who’s been making eyes at you all afternoon.”

Ben raised his eyebrows. “Are you jealous?”

Gina laughed. “Hardly. I just think it’s funny because her gaydar is on the fritz. She obviously didn’t get the upgrade. What does she think, there are no gay guys from Iowa?”

“Idaho.”

Gina waved away his correction. “Whatever.”

“We’ve been married all of four hours and you’re already trying to get rid of me? This is working out better than I expected.”

Gina wanted to wipe that smirk right off his too-pretty face.

“Let’s see if we can buy this place with the furniture and then I’ll be out of your hair for the foreseeable future.”

“Is that the only way for me to get rid of you?”

“Either that or let’s get a penthouse in the city.”

“Are those my only choices?”

Ben stood, took his keys out of his pocket, and tossed them in the air. He caught them and thought about it. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Fine. Buy it then. But if you don’t get the furniture with it, I can easily live with one furnished room.”

“If we don’t buy it furnished, I’ll have a decorator come in and take care of it. She’ll want your input though.”

“Don’t be too sure of that. I’ve never furnished anything in my life.”

***

Two weeks later, Ben watched as Gina stared at her suitcases lying on the same king-sized mahogany sleigh bed they’d sat on while Ben railroaded her into buying this mansion. He knew exactly what he’d done at the time and he didn’t regret it. He’d even compromised; a penthouse in the city would have looked better for him and would have been a much better investment for her, but for some reason Gina insisted on Brooklyn. She still looked unhappy, not that he could figure out why. After all, he’d caved in and bought the place in Brooklyn, and was even able to get it furnished. For someone who supposedly had a great mind for finance, she certainly hadn’t used it while making this decision.

Ben stood in the doorway watching Gina. It was becoming a habit. He couldn’t help it. The woman fascinated him. Most women he knew would be thrilled to be stuck living in a mansion. Not Gina. He wasn’t sure if his interest was simply because of her obstinacy or in spite of it. The fact he studied her didn’t surprise him. He seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time staring at his wife, and when they weren’t together, he was thinking about her.
No matter what he did, he couldn’t seem to stop himself. He was just glad he was heading west in a few hours.

“Now that you mention it, Jess sent over a very nice bottle. It’s chilling in the refrigerator if you’d like some.”

“Ben, it’s not even noon.”

He smirked. “We could throw in a few drops of orange juice and call it a mimosa, if drinking champagne at ten in the morning offends you.”

“No, it doesn’t offend me, though I’d rather have a Starbucks,” she muttered before she looked up. “Did you buy glasses too, or do we have to drink it out of plastic cups?”

“The kitchen is fully stocked. I think you could probably have a dinner party for a hundred and not have to deal with renting a thing.”

“Oh, good. And to think, I was worried about that.” She unzipped one of her suitcases. “I do so love to entertain.”

Ben turned on his heel and headed to the kitchen. Whistling, he grabbed the champagne from the refrigerator and filled an ice bucket before sticking the champagne bottle into it. Searching the kitchen for flutes, he pulled them off a top shelf and threw a folded linen towel over his arm for spite.

He returned to the bedroom just as Gina was sorting through her lingerie. Perfect timing. From the little he saw, the woman had fantastic taste in unmentionables. When it came to what she wore over those little scraps of silk and lace, that was another story. She dressed loudly, in bold bright colors, and had no qualms about showing off her killer body. She had a style all her own and he wasn’t sure if he liked it, but as a man, he certainly appreciated it.

Still, every time he’d seen her in the last two weeks, he’d felt the need to cover her up. He didn’t miss the fact that every other man who saw his wife drooled over her. Their marriage might be in name only, but no one else knew that.

Gina turned toward him and laughed. “Only you would play waiter. Too bad you don’t have the outfit for it.”

He looked down at his jeans and button-down shirt, set the champagne bucket and glasses on the dresser, and picked up a white-on-white corset. “No, but you can dress up if you want.”

She slapped his hand and ripped the corset out of his grip. “Oh, yeah, as if you’re interested.”

She had no idea. This, he reminded himself, was a good thing. “I do have fabulous taste in clothes. We should go shopping for a few evening gowns next time I’m in town.” When she made a face, he continued. “It’ll be fun. I’ll probably have a few benefits to go to when I get back and, if you remember, that was part of the deal.”

She stopped what she was doing and looked into his eyes. All hint of her teasing smile was gone. “Don’t remind me. Please, really, don’t.” She threw her hands up in the air as if to encompass the entire house. “I’m going through culture shock as it is.” She turned her back to him. “Rosalie and Nick’s wedding was the dressiest thing I’ve ever gone to.” She looked back over her shoulder. “Give me some time before you start parading me around, would you?”

Ben shrugged and pulled the champagne bottle out of the bucket.

“What are you doing?” She turned around, stomped over to the dresser, and picked up the ice bucket obviously looking for another place to set it. She sat it on the carpeted floor, pulled the towel off his arm, and wiped the dresser where he’d set it in the first place. “Don’t ever put an ice bucket on the furniture. It’ll leave a ring. This stuff is probably antique and even if it isn’t, it’s hardly Salvation Army castoffs.”

Ben picked up the bucket and set it on the marble table. “Is that better?”

Gina furrowed her brow. “I don’t know. I guess since they make countertops out of marble, it’ll be okay. But put this under it just in case.” She tossed him the towel.

“Yes, ma’am.” He did as she requested. “I didn’t think you liked the furniture.”

“What are you talking about? I love it. I’m just not used to having furniture like this. High style for me was the dresser I picked up in the scratch-and-dent room at Ikea for $60. This stuff is way out of my league.”

Ben thought about correcting her but knew she’d only argue with him. He decided to forgo that experience, popped the top off the champagne, and poured instead. He handed Gina the flute. “Here’s to a short and successful marriage.”

She nodded, clinked his glass, and took a sip. “So, when’s your plane?”

“Whenever I get there.” He checked his watch. “Grandfather sent one of the corporate jets for me. We have a board meeting tomorrow—it’s his way of ensuring my attendance.”

Gina’s eyes widened.

“He was hoping you’d come along, considering he’s interrupting what he thinks is our honeymoon.” When her eyes bugged out, he took pity on her. “Don’t worry, I told him you were busy getting settled in our new place. He
wasn’t happy about it, but he didn’t argue the point.”

“Good.” She set her glass down on the marble table and returned to folding her lingerie and placing it in the dresser drawer. “Can you picture me in Ohio? I’ve never stepped foot west of New Jersey.”

“It’s Idaho.” He slid a suitcase over, making room to sit on the bed where he’d have a good view of her lingerie.

“You know that state in the northwest, west of Montana, north of Utah, and east of Washington and Oregon.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t need a geography lesson.”

“Could have fooled me. So far you’ve hit just about every state that starts with an i or ends in an o other than the one I’m from.”

“Well don’t expect me to go out there and certainly not in a plane. I don’t fly.”

Ben was taking a sip of champagne and almost spit it out. The bubbles burned the back of his nose and he coughed. “What? How the heck do you get around?”

“As nature intended: by bus.”

Ben pushed another suitcase aside and sat on the bed. “You’ve never been on a plane?”

“No, and I never plan to be.”

“Why not?”

She stared at him as if he’d just grown horns. “Why would I? The only place I’ve ever been interested in going was Miami and I took the bus. It was nice.”

“Nice?”

“Besides, planes crash.”

“So do buses.”

“You wasn’t going to give you money. I was just going to make sure you had all my numbers.” He pulled out his card and jotted down his grandfather’s home number, his office number, and his cell. “I’m staying with my grandfather and it would be nice if you’d call me so he’ll think you miss me. Most married people talk when they’re away from each other.”

She looked a little embarrassed; her cheeks turned the most attractive shade of pink. “Oh, right. Okay, I’ll call you. Lord knows what we’ll talk about, but I’ll call.”

“Good.” The doorbell rang, sounding like church bells on a Sunday morning.

Gina’s brows shot up. “Are you expecting someone?” She obviously wasn’t.

“I called the local market and ordered some food. I told them you needed to stock up on the basics. They deliver.”

“Thanks, that was very… thoughtful.” Her words belied her expression. She mumbled something to herself in Spanish as she followed him downstairs to the door. The delivery people had four boxes of food. “Did you buy out the entire market?”

Ben tipped the delivery boy and shrugged. “I wasn’t sure what you liked.”

Gina began unpacking the groceries; there was an awful lot of food. He might have gone a little overboard. “I’m sorry.”

Ben tried to help but she shooed him aside. “If you put the stuff away, I’ll never be able to find it. Would you please just let me do something for myself?”

Ben nodded. “Okay, I’ll just get out of your way.”

“Thank you.” She seemed relieved and for some reason, that didn’t set well with him. No one had ever worked so hard to get rid of him before. “I thought I’d take you out to eat before I left.”

Gina picked up a bag of rice and set it in the pantry. “That’s not necessary. I have a lot of unpacking to do before work tomorrow.” She looked at the boxes of groceries on the counter. “And it’s not as if I’ll starve.”

Ben called a cab and stayed out of her way as she put away the groceries. “I reset the alarm, you have the code.”

“I know.”

“You have the number of the alarm company?”

“Yes, you wrote it down with all the other instructions.”

He checked his watch; he only had another five minutes before the cab would be there to take him to the airport.
“You have all my numbers.”
“Yes.”
“Is it okay if I leave my car here?”
“Fine.”
“You might have to move it if it snows—is that a problem?”
“No. If I can’t, I know plenty of people who can.”
Ben made his way to the foyer while mentally checking off the list of things he had to go over with her. He thought he covered it all. Gina handed him his coat and waited for him to leave. A horn tooted as he shrugged on his coat. “I guess this is it. Come on out with me so I can give you the car keys after I get my bags out of the trunk.”
“Sure.” She didn’t bother with a coat and followed him out, wrapping her arms around herself against the cold.
Ben handed his bags off to the cabby who was too busy checking out Gina to notice. Ben cleared his throat to get the guy’s attention. Still, the man didn’t move. “Are you going to take my bags? If not, just pop the trunk so I can stash them and say good-bye to my wife.”
The guy popped the trunk and took one of Ben’s bags but not before he let out a low wolf-whistle.
Ben gave the guy a dirty look and turned back to Gina who didn’t seem to notice the cabby or the attention.
“Have a safe trip.”
“Thanks.” Ben handed her the car keys. “You take care of yourself.”
Gina nodded and started to back away. “Always.”
Ben heard the trunk close behind him and pulled Gina’s little compact body in close to his, ignoring the shocked look on her face. She started to say something and he took advantage of her open mouth to kiss her good-bye. He wasn’t sure if he was doing it for his benefit or the cabby’s—he’d think about it later—but he took her mouth the way he’d been tempted to ever since the day he’d married her. God she tasted of good champagne and shock and felt even better, especially after he straightened and lifted her off her feet. She didn’t fight him and he didn’t release her until he’d had her thoroughly kissed and confused. He set her back on the first step of their stoop, making sure she had her footing before letting her go. He turned on his heel and got into the cab without looking back. He didn’t need to see the look of relief on Gina’s face.

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Gina rushed up the steps of the mansion, locked the door, and armed the alarm system behind her. What was that kiss all about? The man certainly didn’t kiss like he was gay. But then, she wasn’t sure what a gay guy kissed like either. He could have been imagining Hugh Jackman for all she knew. Still, that didn’t explain why he’d kissed her in the first place. Sure the cabby was checking her out, but so what? That’s what men did. Well, straight men at least. Maybe Ben was worried the guy would get the wrong idea. Not that it mattered to Gina, but it obviously mattered to Ben for some unknown reason.

She rested against the big double doors that weighed more than she did and had to take a minute to catch her breath. Damn, for a second she let herself imagine Ben wasn’t gay. Not a good thing to do. No, what she needed to do was forget both kisses ever occurred. Unfortunately, her body wasn’t getting the message. She looked around the foyer of her new mansion and wrapped her arms around herself to fend off the sudden chill. If she didn’t think about the kiss, all she was left with was the thought that she was the last person in the world who should be living in a place like this. Not a good alternative.

Everything about the place was so perfect. It was filled with what looked like priceless antiques, crystal chandeliers, and oriental carpets an inch thick. She hadn’t asked Ben how much the furniture and furnishings cost, but that was only because she’d already been wigged out over the price of the house itself. Three million seven hundred thousand dollars. She dealt with numbers like that every day in business, but they were just that—numbers. This was personal. She didn’t even want to know how much he spent on the contents, not to mention all the bedding, towels, and other incidentals that just appeared in the closets. She wondered if he’d hired a service to do that. Heck, she didn’t even know if there were services that did that.

She looked around the big empty house and didn’t think she’d ever felt so alone. She’d never lived alone until she stayed at Rosalie’s place, but that hadn’t bothered her. She knew the neighbors, Henry and Wayne, and heard them banging around upstairs, so it wasn’t much different than being at home in the apartment she’d shared with Sam and Tina. Here, there was no one to make noise but her—or so she hoped. Growing up, she’d always lived with her mother, Tina, and sometimes the guy she thought might be her father. Of course, there were also the times they’d lived in shelters, they were the pits, but having all this peace and quiet—it was unnerving. Gina pulled her cell phone from her pocket and hit the speed dial.

“Hello?”
“Hey, Tina.” Gina returned to the kitchen thinking she should put the rest of the food away. “What are you and Sam doing tonight?” She dug through a box, pulled out all the pasta products, and carried them to the walk-in pantry. She remembered Jess had referred to it as a butler’s pantry. As if…

“Sam’s working tonight so I’m going home to make myself dinner. Why?”

Gina nudged the box filled with refrigerated food toward the refrigerator. Ben had bought enough to feed a family of five. There was so much perishable food, most of it would end up going bad if she didn’t cook and freeze meals. She’d gone to bed hungry enough times to never allow that to happen. No, wasting food was not something she ever did. “You want to come over after work and see my new place?”

“Tonight?”

Milk, cheese, eggs. “If you’re too tired, I understand.”

“Gina, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.” He’d bought her two boxes of butter? It would take her a year to go through that much. “I just thought you’d like to see where I’m living. Hey, why don’t you pack a bag and have Sam come here after his shift.” Steak? She checked the label. Filet mignon. Nice. “I’ll have dinner ready by the time you get here. We can have a sleepover, and then have breakfast with Sam before work in the morning.”

“You want to have a sleepover?”

Gina heard concern in her sister’s voice. *Madre de Dios*. “Forget about it. It was a stupid idea. You’re right.”

“I’ll be there right after work. I don’t even need to stop at home. I know you’ll have something I can wear tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to. Really, I’m fine.”

“Give me the address.”

Gina did because once Tina started worrying, she’d never let it rest until she checked Gina out in person. The last thing Gina wanted was her little sister worrying about her. Worrying was Gina’s job. She’d been doing it most of her life.

Gina finished putting the food away and left the kitchen. She picked up her briefcase, determined to put that money in her bank account to good use, and went to sit in the library. The desk looked way too big for her so she curled up on the couch, opened her notebook computer on her lap, and took a deep breath as she signed onto the Internet and Googled Private Detective Agencies. She clicked on the site she’d looked at earlier and dialed the number.

“Hello, I need to talk to someone about a missing person case.”
Chapter 4

“There’s not a box of Mac & Cheese or Hamburger Helper to be found.” Tina spun around in the butler’s pantry, which was larger than Tina’s entire kitchen, and smiled at Gina. “I don’t know what half this gourmet stuff is, but it sure looks good.”

Tina explored as Gina tossed the salad. The filets were almost done.

“Do you need help with anything?” Tina asked.

“No, grilling sure is easy when you have one built into the twelve-burner stove. There’s no crawling out on the fire escape to flip the burgers in this neighborhood.”

Tina looked out the windows overlooking the garden. “You even have one of those super-deluxe built in barbecues down there. Why do you need two?”

“Probably because it rains and snows. I guess barbecuing isn’t just for summer anymore.” Gina put the salad on the table and searched the cupboards for serving bowls for the broccoli and rice. She had to get a stool to reach the bowls and ended up handing them off to Tina.

“Wow, this stuff is real china. And we’re not talking Corelle either. I bet the silverware is really silver.”

Gina climbed off the step stool. “God, I hope not. Just think of how much time it would take to keep it all polished. Heck, as it is, I’m going to have to clean one floor a day just to keep up.”

Tina set the small table in the breakfast room. The dining room table probably sat twenty comfortably—not that they’d be comfortable eating there. “It’s definitely not like our place. I can clean everything in under two hours. Maybe you should drape sheets over all the furniture in the rooms you don’t use and just close them off like they did in all those old movies we used to watch when we were kids.”

“Yeah, that’s where the ghosts got the sheets they’d fly around under. No thanks. This place gives me the willies as it is. I don’t need any help in that department.”

Spreading her arms out wide, Tina spun around the unbelievably large kitchen. “Is this place really all yours? Ben gave it to you just for marrying him?”

Gina spooned the rice into a small serving bowl. “For now, both our names are on the deed, but that will change once we file for divorce. He’ll sign it over to me free and clear. It’s in the prenup.”

“Are you going to stay here?”

Gina filled the other serving bowl with broccoli. “No, as soon as the divorce is final, I’ll sell it, buy a place like Rosalie’s, and invest the rest of the money. And believe me, there will be plenty of it. Besides, what would I do with a place like this?”

Tina folded napkins and placed them under the forks. “I don’t know. I guess you could marry someone who isn’t gay and raise a family.” She carried the food to the table.

Gina turned off the grill and brought over the filets. “You and Sam are the only family I need. I’m not the maternal type or the wife type. That’s always been your style, not mine.”

They sat and passed the bowls and platter back and forth, filling their plates until Tina stopped serving herself rice, the spoon mid-air. “You don’t know that. You’ve just never had the opportunity.” She emptied the spoon onto her plate. “That will change. Before I met Sam, I never thought I’d fall in love and get married.”

Gina laughed as she speared the broccoli. “You might not have, but I knew you would. That’s just the type of person you are. Me, I’m way too selfish for a real relationship. Besides, I like living my own life.”

Tina laughed. “You’re the least selfish person I’ve ever known. And as for you living your own life, you don’t know what that means. You’ve spent your entire life doing nothing but going to school, working, and taking care of people. You took care of Mama whenever we could find her and you practically raised me single-handedly. I remember all those nights you fed me and didn’t eat anything yourself.” She shook her head. “You did everything for everyone else.” She cut her meat looking more serious than Gina wanted her to. “You know, at first I was really against this thing you and Ben are doing. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe this is God’s way of giving you the winning lotto ticket.”

Gina shook her head. “Someone was going to get a boatload of money for marrying him, and I couldn’t come up with one good reason why it shouldn’t be me. Still,” she moved her food around her plate, “that doesn’t mean I’m proud of it.” She cut the meat. It was so tender; she could have cut it with the side of her fork. “I almost stopped the
wedding halfway through. It’s all a farce, but I still had to say the words. Promising to love Ben in sickness and in health just felt wrong.”

“It would be different if Ben didn’t know the deal. It’s not as if you were lying to him.”

“No, I just lied to God. That’s so much better.”

“Okay, so that was wrong, but it’s nothing that can’t be forgiven. You did it for all the right reasons. That’s got to count for something.”

Gina brightened up. “Which reminds me. I’m going to make a deposit to your savings account. You and Sam need to start looking for a house in the ‘burbs.’” She did a quick calculation. She’d transferred $15,000 to the detective agency to start the investigation, which left her $35,000 in the bank. “I can write you a check for $30,000 today, and I’ll give you about the same amount next month. Between that and what you and Sam have saved, you’ll have enough for a down payment for your dream house.” Gina took a bite of her steak; it was much more palatable when she discussed what she could do to help Tina. “I’ll send you more every month so we can start paying off the mortgage. By the time Ben and I divorce, I want us both to own homes free and clear.”

Gina looked up from her plate and found Tina shaking her head. “Oh no. Sam and I can’t accept that kind of money from you. You know that. It was one thing when you were living with us and paying rent. But to take that much money from you? No way. But thanks for offering.”

Had Tina absolutely lost her mind? “Thanks for offering? Are you nuts? Call it a loan if you want. I don’t care. I just want to make sure you and Sam will never be put in the position to lose your home. Why do you think I did this, anyway? It wasn’t just for me, it was for you, too.”

Tina sat back and crossed her arms. “Don’t you dare get mad at me. As I recall, I wasn’t given a choice in the matter. You can’t just do things like this without discussing it with Sam and me. You don’t run our lives, we do. You have to stop this, Gina. It’s time to cut the apron strings.”

“What apron strings?”

Tina reached over and took Gina’s hand. “Gina, you know I love you, but I’m all grown up now. You’re not responsible for me anymore. I’m a big girl; I have my own marriage and my own career. I’m settled and happy. Maybe it’s time that you stop worrying about me and worry about you. You’re the only one in this room who’s not happy.”

“What are you talking about?” Gina looked at her sister and couldn’t help but be hurt. “It’ll be years before you and Sam can afford to move out of the city and start your family. I’m just expediting it.” She pulled her hand from beneath Tina’s. “And I am happy, damn it. Don’t I look happy?” When Tina gave her a skeptical look, she continued. “I have everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s why you married a stranger and moved into this monstrosity of a house. Because you’re oh so happy and have such a full life.”

“I have the life I always wanted and it’s a beautiful house.”

“It’s beautiful, but Gina, you gotta admit it’s way over-the-top. It looks like something out of those mansions on One Life to Live. As a matter-of-fact, your life could be a story on a soap opera.”

Tina didn’t know the half of it, which was something Gina thanked God for every day. Tina had been too young to remember, Gina had been old enough to remember but too young to stop it. She closed her eyes and tried to feel hopeful. It wasn’t working.

Bringing her mind back to the present, Gina chose to ignore the soap opera comment because she’d spent many a night lying in bed thinking the exact same thing and wondering if she’d wake up and find herself in some kind of reality TV show. Things like this just didn’t happen to women like her—the illegitimate daughter of a whore and a drug addict. She’d spent the last month looking for the catch in the deal but didn’t see one. “I’ll admit the house isn’t my style but it’s an investment.” She’d always seen it as an investment in both their futures, and with a whole lot of luck, maybe Rafael’s too. Now that Tina shot part of that down, there was no reason why it shouldn’t be an investment in she and Rafael’s futures. “Once I sell it, I’ll buy a little place that fits me and invest the rest. Still, I’d be happier if you’d let me—”

Tina cut her off with a wave of the hand. “Sam and I are happy doing things our way. If he knew you’d even offered—”

“Oh, he’ll know. I’ll tell him myself. Tina, I always thought I was the stubborn one but now I’m beginning to wonder. You’re cutting off your nose to spite your face. It’s insane not to take the money even if you want to pay it back with interest. Now is the perfect time to buy a house in a nice, safe neighborhood. The real estate market is down; you’ll be able to buy so much more of a house than you could have two years ago, and the interest rates are still so low. They’re only going to go up, just wait. Maybe Sam will be able to talk some sense into you.”

Tina pushed her plate away. “Ha! A lot you know.”

“Fine, then at least get out of your place and move in here. There’s tons of room and you and Sam can live rent
free for as long as I own it.”
“You’re doing it again.”
“What?”
“Not cutting the apron strings. Besides, don’t you think you should ask your husband about that?”
Gina picked up her plate and Tina’s and carried them to the sink. “What does he have to do with anything?”
“He’s only the half owner of this place, until the divorce, that is.”
Gina shrugged. “So, it’s not as if he lives here. It sounds as if he’s spending most of his time in” —she snapped
her fingers twice before remembering it— “Idaho.”
“I can’t believe you have a hard time remembering where your husband went.”
“I told you we’re married in name only. We went to the closing together so I could sign the documents. I moved
in, then he went his way and I went mine.” Gina didn’t bother telling her little sister about that kiss Ben planted on
her before he’d left. She refused to think about that. She’d all but erased it from her memory bank, or she was trying
to at least. The only reason she could come up with was the way the cabby was looking at her. Still, it didn’t make
sense that Ben would notice or even care.
“What are you thinking about that has you blushing?”
“Oh, that’s a good one, Tina. I don’t blush.”
Tina leaned against the marble counter. “Right, that’s why your cheeks just turned magenta.”

***

Ben landed in Boise and tossed his bags into the back of the Land Rover he’d left in the hanger the last time he’d
flown out. Someone had given it a wash and even detailed the inside. Not bad. He should leave it here more often.
Of course, they may have washed it out of necessity—he’d left the vehicle covered with a thick layer of dust and
mud which probably didn’t smell so nice heated to room temperature. He’d spent the weekend winter camping and
four-wheeling with his cousins in the desert and had come back so dirty, he had to take off his boots before climbing
onto the jet and throw a towel over the seat before he sat down. He’d showered just as soon as they reached cruising
altitude and spent the rest of the flight sleeping off a weekend of rock climbing and four-wheeling.

He headed toward his grandfather’s house on the other side of the Boise Valley, stopping at a light on the rim
overlooking the city. He never tired of the view. The white Capital Dome stood out against the brown foothills. The
few tall buildings rose before the Boise Front.

Ben loved Boise; it was an incredible small city with enough culture to keep him happy. Between Boise and New
York, Ben had everything he wanted. Well, everything but the ranch. Now that he’d lived up to his part of the
bargain, he’d have that too.

Ben drove to his grandfather’s house in the foothills and parked in the attached garage. He entered the alarm code
at the door to the house in case Kate was there by herself, and let himself in. “Kate, I’m home.”

Ben heard her stomping through the kitchen as he put his bags on the bench in the mudroom. “It’s about time.” He
heard something being slapped down on the counter, a towel, or an apron maybe. “What took you so long?” Her
reddish-brown hair and tanned face poked through the doorway. “Where’s Gina?”

Ben dropped his jacket on the hook by the door. “I’m sorry to disappoint, but it’s just me.”
“Where’s Gina?”
“Gina’s busy getting settled in our new house and she has work on Monday. She has her own career in New York and can’t just drop everything to run here and meet my family.”

Kate hugged him back and then held his shoulders searching his face. Her short hair curled around her face and
seemed to be lighter than usual; could it be it was mixed with gray? He’d never noticed the fine lines feathering
around her eyes and mouth as she smiled up at him.

“Karma told me you proposed to her first.”

Ben winced feeling like he was sixteen again and getting caught making out on the couch. “I wasn’t going to
touch her, Kate, I swear. I was just going to marry her. I needed to get married…”

She placed her fingers on his lips to silence him. “I know all about it.” She released him and he followed her into
the kitchen where she poured coffee and handed Ben his. Ben leaned back against the granite counter and took a sip.
Kate added cream and sugar to hers. “Believe me, I don’t agree with your grandfather’s ultimatum.” She returned the creamer to the refrigerator and sat beside him on a stool. “I tried to talk him out of it, but you know how stubborn he is. Once Joe has his mind set on something, there’s no talking to him. But that doesn’t make what you’re doing right either. If you weren’t ready to marry, you should have refused.”

Ben put his coffee down and faced her. “He would have sold the ranch to a developer.”

“He may have, but Ben, it’s not as if you’re ever going to live there. It’s just a place.”

“It’s home.”

“No, this is your home. You’ve lived here longer than you lived in Three Whores Bend.”

“It’s all I have left of my parents, Kate.” As usual, the pain slammed into him. No matter how old he got, thinking about his parents still hurt. “I can’t lose the ranch too.”

Kate slid off the stool and held him close. “Honey, I’ve told you, you haven’t lost your parents; they’re with you in your heart. They’re not at that ranch you disappear to every time you need to lick your wounds. Maybe the memories you have of them took place there, but they aren’t. Your parents are with you always.”

He’d heard her say it a million times, but the only place he felt close to his parents was at the ranch. He could still picture his mother by the stove or reading to him in the meadow, his father helping him build his fort or fixing the generator. For Ben, that was where all the memories of his parents were. Where they would always be.

She studied him. “I’ve always worried about you, you know—losing both your parents at such a young age. You were taken away from everything you knew and thrown into a much different world.”

Ben took a sip of his coffee, set it down, and stared into it. “I was fine.” The last thing he wanted to do was talk about this. It brought back too many memories—bad ones. No one wants to think of their parents flying into the side of a mountain.

Patting his hand, Kate silenced him with a nudge. “You went from being homeschooled to private school. From being an only child running around the mountains to one of five living under the same roof in town, with your grandfather introducing you to world leaders and grooming you to take over his empire. That’s a lot of change and pressure for a little boy.”

“I had you and Gramps. I was fine.”

“You’ve always been a chameleon.” Kate sighed. “No matter who you met or where you were, you seemed to blend right in. I kept waiting for you to react, to lash out, something… I thought for sure you would end up on a shrink’s couch for the rest of your life.”

“But I didn’t.”

Kate sipped of her coffee before dabbing her lip with a napkin. “I can’t tell you how many sleepless nights I had worrying about you. I thought for sure you were burying your pain and would finally snap and show us who was really behind that chameleon persona. It never happened. It took me a while but I’ve realized that you are just comfortable in your own skin. No matter where you are, who you are with, you have a God-given ability to relate to anyone. Though, I don’t think it would hurt you to see a shrink. You’re far from perfect.” She studied him in that way she had that made people want to confess all. “And you still have that little problem.”

Ben wanted to roll his eyes but didn’t since Kate wasn’t above giving him a smack upside the head. “What problem?”

“You, Benjamin Joseph Walsh, are a card carrying commitaphobe.”

Ben laughed. “Gina says I’m OCD and now you tell me I’m afraid of commitment? How can you say that? I just got married.”

“Yes, but not because you’re committed to your wife. The only thing you’re committed to is that ranch.”

“I need the ranch, Kate. It’s mine.”

She gave Ben a big hug before she released him. “You and Joe are on your own with this one, Benji. I’ve decided to stay out of it. You’re a grown man and so is Joe, although sometimes you both make me wonder.”

Ben bent down and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Kate. If it makes you feel better, I don’t like it much myself, but he’s given me no choice. You know how much that ranch means to me.”

“Maybe Joe will learn a lesson about interfering in other peoples’ lives. It would serve the old goat right. Still, I’m worried about your relationship if this blows up in both your faces. He needs you, Ben. I know it seems like he’s going to live forever, but he’s slowing down. He needs you to pick up the slack or he’s going to have to find someone else to do it.”

“That’s why I’m here. I figure I’ll telecommute when I can, and when I can’t, I’ll be here.”

“Have you called Karma and the boys to tell them you’re home?”

Ben lifted the top off a pot she had simmering on the stove. “Not yet. This smells great. What is it?”

“Elk stew. Hunter went and filled my freezer and your grandfather’s in one trip.”

“I figured I’d go over to Humpin’ Hannah’s and surprise Karma if she’s working tonight.”
“She is, but I still don’t know what a girl with a college degree is doing tending bar.”
Oh, the same argument Kate had had with Karma since the day she graduated. “She’s making great money, more
than she’d make at an entry-level job.”
Kate stirred the stew. “Sure she is but entry level means she wouldn’t stay at that pay level for long. She’d do
better as she worked her way up the corporate ladder. But no, she’s all about getting paid the big bucks now.”
Ben shrugged. “Karma’s a smart kid. She knows what she’s doing.”
Kate thumped the wooden spoon on the side of the big pot with more force than necessary. “I don’t like her
working there until all hours.”
“I know, but the boys keep an eye on her. The three of them are there all the time.”
Kate shook her head as if to clear it. “So, how long are you staying?”
“I don’t know. I’m in no rush to get back to New York.”
“And your wife doesn’t have a problem with that?”
“Gina knows the deal. It’s business.”
Kate held up her hand. “Stop, I don’t want to hear anything else. All I want to know is that you are okay with it.
That’s all I care about.”
“I’m fine with it.”
“Good then. Why don’t you take your bags up to your room while I set the table?”
“Yes, ma’am.”
“And you better actually put your clothes away. I’m not your personal maid.”
Ben smiled as her lecture followed him down the hall. It was good to be home.

***

The phone rang and Gina reached for it, flipped it open, and growled.
“Hi, honey, I’m home.”
She rolled over and pushed her satin sleep mask off her eyes onto her forehead. “Who the hell is this?”
Ben’s deep voice came through the phone. “You’ve forgotten about me already?”
Gina opened one eye, the blue numbers on the clock said 11:43. “Ben? Why are you calling this late? You better
have just survived a plane crash or I swear I’ll make you wish you had.”
She heard his soft chuckle. “Aw, you were worried about me, weren’t you?”
Gina sat up and pushed the feather pillows behind her. “Yeah, that’s why I was sleeping so soundly.”
Tina rolled over and groaned. “Who is it?”
“Go back to sleep. It’s just Ben being a pain in the ass.”
“Gina, who the hell are you talking to in bed?”
The first thing that came to mind was that it was none of his business, but since they’d agreed to forgo bed
partners of the opposite sex, or in his case, the same sex, she figured she should answer him. Still, it didn’t mean she
had to like it. “My sister. Sam works nights so I invited her to dinner and she ended up sleeping over.”
“You have seven bedrooms and you’re sleeping in the same one?”
“Yeah, so? It’s not like we’re sharing a twin. This thing is as big as our first apartment.”
“Kinky. I like that about you.”
“Yeah, you would.” His gravelly voice gave her goose pimples. She rubbed her bare arms and tried to control her
temper. “So is there a reason you called me in the middle of the night and woke me out of a dead sleep?”
“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize the time. I just thought you’d like to know I arrived in Boise safe and sound.”
“I know I should say thank you, but right now, I’m not feeling that charitable. I’m glad you didn’t crash is about
as nice as I get at this hour.”
“I guess that’ll have to do. Sleep well, Gina, and have a great day tomorrow. I’ll give you a call tomorrow night.”
“You will?”
“Yes.”
“No, what do you need?”
“If you’re going to call me, do it before 11:00 my time, or the next time I see you, you’ll have a real brush with
death.”
His low chuckle rang out until she hit the end button. She missed having a real old-fashioned telephone. There
was something so satisfying about slamming the phone down on an annoying caller.
Tina rolled toward her. “He sure is attentive for a relative stranger.”
Gina scooted under the down duvet. She’d never slept in a bed this comfortable or under sheets this fine. She
doubted they’d come from K-Mart. They felt glorious on her bare arms. “I think he just gets off on yanking my chain. Plus, he’s staying with his grandfather who thinks he interrupted our honeymoon. Calling me to say he arrived safely just makes it look good for the old guy.” Only his grandfather wasn’t there earlier to witness that über-confusing, not to mention meltingly hot, kiss. She still couldn’t figure out what that was all about. Not that she was thinking about it.

“Oh yeah, that’s why he mentioned the kink factor. He sounded weirdly jealous.”

“You heard that?”

Tina pushed her hair out of her eyes. “It’s not like I’m in the next room. He sounded equal parts turned on and mad.”

“Tina, he was joking. Besides, we made a deal not to see anyone for the first year. I’m hoping the marriage doesn’t last that long, but we both agreed to give up men just in case the old guy gets curious and sends someone to check up on us. The marriage has to look legit.”

“That must be difficult to explain to your boyfriends.”

Gina laughed, but there was no humor in it. “I guess it’s a good thing I don’t have any, and, at the moment, neither does he.”

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Ben hung up the phone and laughed. Gina really didn’t like being woken up. He’d completely forgotten about the time change. For some reason, he just needed to talk to her.

“Were you just talking to that wife of yours?”

Ben looked up from the sandwich he’d been throwing together to find his grandfather pouring himself a Jim Beam.

“Her name is Gina and didn’t your doctor tell you to knock off the booze?”

Big Joe slicked back what was left of his white hair and scowled. “I’m eighty years old. When you get as old as me, you have the right to tell your doctors where to stuff their advice. I have one or two a night. It’s medicinal. How do you think I’ve survived this long?”

“I figured it was sheer orneriness.”

Gramps shrugged. “Yeah, I’m sure it’s that too. So, tell me about the little missus. You got any pictures of the wedding? You know, the one I didn’t get an invitation to?”

Ben bit the corner off the sandwich and chewed. Damn, he’d never even thought of getting wedding pictures. At the time, the only thing he could think of was getting through it. He did remember Rosalie snapping a picture or two with her camera phone. Hardly a wedding album. “I don’t have any pictures with me. I’ll get some though.”

His grandfather didn’t look as if he believed the marriage ever took place. He should have thought about bringing proof. “Gina’s a tiny little thing.” He put his hand out to show how short she was. “She has jet-black, short hair and the most amazing honey-colored eyes. She’s well-built but man is she tiny.”

“You sound like you’re talking about a car. I thought since I sent the jet over for you, you’d bring her along. You’ve been married all of what, two weeks? Is the honeymoon over already? That doesn’t bode well for the marriage.”

“Gina doesn’t like flying. As a matter-of-fact, she’s never been on a plane.”

Big Joe sat on a stool at the breakfast bar across from Ben. “Women are like horses. You have to break them early. It’s about time you started. You need to bring her out here, show the little lady her new home, and introduce her around to the family.”

Right, like that’ll ever happen. Ben couldn’t imagine Gina in Boise. He shook his head. “Gramps, Gina’s a New Yorker. She’s not the Idaho type. She has her own career in Manhattan and she’s not interested in giving all that up to live here.”

“Then why in the hell did you marry her?”

“You wanted me married, I got married. Besides, I spend a lot of time in the city. We’ll have plenty of time together and plenty of time apart.”

“Boy, what you don’t know about marriage could fill Hell’s Canyon. You have to build a marriage the way you build a log cabin; you gotta start with a good strong foundation. It sounds to me like you’re building your marriage on a pile of sand. Come the first windstorm, it’s going to fall apart. You mark my words. I was married to the same woman for almost forty years. We didn’t stay together that long by flying away from each other two weeks after our weddin’ day.”

Ben took a pull off his beer. “Gina’s a modern, independent woman. Things are different now, Gramps. She has her life and I have mine. It works for us.”
“Yeah, then who was she talkin’ to when you were on the phone with her? It’s a little late on the East Coast to be keepin’ comp’ny.”

Ben set his beer down on the counter. “She invited her little sister over for dinner to show her our new house and since Tina’s husband works nights, she stayed over.”

“In the same bed?”

“Gina’s a little intimidated by the size of our house—we bought a five-story brownstone in a really nice section of Brooklyn and she’s never lived in such a big place. She told me our bed is bigger than her first apartment. It’s good Tina stayed over. She and Gina are very close. I felt bad leaving her there alone the first night in our new home.”

Grandpa Joe took a sip of his drink. “She wouldn’t be alone if she was where she should be, here with you.”

Ben looked up from his sandwich. “Give her a break, Gramps. You’ll meet her eventually, and when you do, I know you’ll love her. She’s a real spitfire.”

Gramps grumbled. “I don’t know about you, but it’s about time I got these old bones of mine into a nice soft bed.”

He drained the last of his whiskey. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Gramps. Sleep well.”

“The board meeting is at nine. Don’t be late.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there.” Not that he had much of a choice. Ben watched as his grandfather shuffled out of the kitchen. He would swear the old guy was beginning to shrink. He took a sip of his beer and wondered when his life had gotten so out of control. Okay, scratch that, he knew when. His grandfather’s eightieth birthday.

Ben checked his watch and smiled. He took the last bite of his sandwich, rinsed his dish, and put it in the dishwasher before he chugged the last of the beer and tossed it in the recycling bin. He knew if he left a mess, Kate would box his ears. It was a good time to go over to Humpin’ Hannah’s and see Karma. He shrugged on his shearling-lined denim jacket and grabbed his keys. The metal keychain smacked against his new wedding ring. That was something else he’d have to get used to.

***

Ben pulled the door of Humpin’ Hannah’s open and the sounds and smells of his home away from home hit him. The band played a cover of “Walk this Way.” Karma worked the crowded bar, her wild blonde hair shining under the overhead lights. He pocketed his keys and pulled out his billfold before slapping a twenty on the bar to get Karma’s attention.

“Benji!” She ran around the bar and jumped up on him, wrapping her legs around his waist the way she had ever since she was big enough to jump.

Ben gave her a hug and set her down.

“I wasn’t expecting you! What are you doing here?”

Ben sat on a stool. “I just flew in a few hours ago. I have a board meeting in the morning.”

Karma turned, worked her way back behind the bar, and looked around before filling a mug with Pale Ale. “Is the little woman with you?” She slid the beer toward him.

“Are you kidding? Gina in Boise? Not likely.”

Karma scrunched up her nose. “Too high-brow for us rednecks?”

Ben laughed. “Definitely not. She’s just a city girl who’s never set foot west of New Jersey and apparently never wants to—a definite plus.” He took a sip of beer.

Karma gave him another crinkled-nose look.

“I got married to get my ranch, not for companionship. The last thing I need is to spend any more time with my wife.” He brushed his hair from his forehead and took off his jacket. Just the thought of Gina was enough to raise his body temperature twenty degrees. Not a good idea. The further away he stayed from her, the better.

Karma turned to the other bartender. “Kevin, watch the bar. I’m taking a break. You,” she pointed at Ben, “come with me.”

Ben followed her through the tables to the office on the other side of the room. She unlocked the door and turned on the lights. “Shut the door behind you. We need to talk.”

“That sounds ominous.” He took a seat and set his beer on the desk. “I guess this is my night for the third degree.”

Karma sat at the desk and poured herself a shot of tequila. “I still can’t believe you actually went through with it. You married a total stranger.”

“It’s a business agreement, Karma. Nothing more.”

She tossed back the shot and poured another. When she came up for air, her angry eyes met his. “Is that what you’re going to tell your next wife?”

Next wife? He’d never planned to have one wife, no less two.
“You hadn’t thought of that, have you, Ben? What happens when you fall head over heels and have to explain to your true love that you were married before? Or worse yet, that you are married. That’ll go over real well.”

Karma slammed her glass down on the desk. He was pretty sure she left a dent.

“Him in love? “Not likely.”

He sat a little straighter. “What is your problem?”

“You really don’t get it, do you?” Karma walked around the desk, leaned against it, and kicked his boot with hers.

“I love you, Ben, like a brother. I always have. You, Trapper, Hunter, and Fisher have always been my heroes—I’ve looked up to you all my life. Every guy I’ve ever dated is compared to the four of you. Marrying a woman you hardly know in order to trick your grandfather and get a piece of land is the first decision you’ve made I don’t respect. I’m disappointed in you, Ben. I thought you’d man up and tell Grampa Joe where to stick it. But you didn’t.”

“That ranch means everything to me. You know that.”

“I didn’t think it meant more than your honor. And what does it say about Gina? What kind of person is she that she’d marry you for money? Is Gina the person you want to be tied to, at least legally, for the duration of this fiasco?”

Ben had had enough. He stood nose to nose with her. “Grow up, Karma. I’m sorry I disappointed you but I’m not going to apologize for being human. You can stand here, looking down your nose at me for not living up to your very high expectations, but leave my wife the hell out of this. You know nothing about Gina and I’ll be damned if I’ll allow you to say one more word about her. She doesn’t deserve it.”

Karma’s head shot back like he’d hit her. They had a stare down, and Karma looked away first. “I’m sorry. I was out of line.”

“Yeah, well, I guess now we’re even.”

Ben shook his head and walked out. Leave it to Karma to hold a mirror up to his face, and as much as he thought she was wrong about so many things, she was right about him trading his honor for his home. He lied to the only people he loved or put them in the position to lie for him. The thing that was even harder to swallow was that he tainted Gina by doing it.

He sat back at the bar and watched as Karma returned to work, not sure what could be done to smooth things over between them. She moved around the bar like a dancer, swaying to the music and pouring drinks wearing a forced smile. When she moved back toward him, he caught her eye. “When are you off?”

“I close.” She scrubbed the bar that was already well scrubbed and met his eye. “Look, Ben, I’m sorry. I guess your wife, even if it’s just a marriage contract, is off-limits. I get it. I was wrong.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry too.”

She cracked a smile and shook her head. “No, you have every right to be fallible. I just wish you’d stand up for yourself as well as you stood up for Gina. She’s a lucky lady.”

Just then, a hand smacked the back of Ben’s head. He stood before Trapper could put him in a chokehold.

Karma pointed one finger. “Trap, you cut that shit out or I’ll have Danny toss you like week-old garbage. How would the prisoners treat a sitting judge if you were to get your ass thrown in jail?”

Trapper stopped mid-move. “Oh yeah, probably because Ben never once put a snake in my bed.”

Trapper shrugged and pulled out a stool next to Ben’s. “I heard you were back in town.”

Ben sat back and hooked the heels of his cowboy boots on the stool-rung. “Yeah, work, you know how it is. How are things on the bench?”

“Same old, same old. You know, drugs suck, breaking and entering usually involving drugs, which sucks worse, and then there’s always a juicy murder every now and then. I’d rather talk about skiing. The Rock got another six inches of powder yesterday. You up for playing hooky?”

“Is Hunter going to give me hell again? Shit, last time I skied Castle Rock he sent the damn ski patrol after me for going off trail.”

Trapper smiled. “He was just pissed because you didn’t ask him to come along.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured.”

Trapper took a sip of his beer as he pulled out his phone and sent a text. Ben didn’t bother asking to whom. He figured the rest of the crew would be here in about twenty minutes if neither of them had any female company, and then maybe even if they did.

Trapper turned back to Ben. “So, how’s married life treating you?”

“Not bad. I just bought Gina a place in Park Slope, which is Brooklyn in case you’re interested. I moved her in today before I flew out here. She’s all set up and happy as far as I know.” Though she didn’t sound very happy to hear from him earlier.
“I still think you could have gotten away with less in the prenup.”

“Oh no. I wanted to make sure Grandpa Joe had nothing to come back at me with. He wanted me married. I’m married. Everything is official.”

Trapper raised one of his brows. “Everything? You know, a marriage isn’t official unless it’s consummated.” He took a drag off his beer and studied Ben over the rim. “So Benji, did you have yourself a good time on your wedding night?”

“Hell no. This is a business deal, pure and simple. Sex complicates matters.” He took a long drink of his beer. Just kissing Gina complicated everythi

“Gina’s brash, mouthy, driven, and smart. She has a mind that works faster than a damn computer. It took her less than a minute to calculate the dollar amount she’d amass by marrying me.”

“‘If she’s so great, why not take the ride?’

Ben would never live down the fact Gina assumed he was gay. No, he’d take that to his grave. “Gina’s not interested in relationships, which is why I married her in the first place. I’m in it to get my ranch, not to get laid. And even if she were interested in the bennies, you know me, I’m not looking to get tied down.”

Trapper let out a laugh. “Well, not for more than an hour or so.” Ben shot Trapper a warning glance that Trapper chose to ignore. “But if you’re talking about a ball and chain as opposed to fuzzy handcuffs and silk ties, it doesn’t sound as if she’s the needy type. There’s no reason you can’t have the marriage of necessity along with all the bennies of a real marriage, at least temporarily.”

“Hey, Benji! When did you fly in? You look like shit, by the way.”

Leave it to Dr. Fisher Kincaid, MD to notice Ben had more than a few sleepless nights since his wedding day. He smiled at Fisher and gave him what Karma called a guy hug, slapping him on the back a bit harder than necessary. “Not enough sleep, but you’re looking good. Nice tan.”

Fisher grinned. “I just got back from Sun Valley, one of the partners in the practice lent me his house for a week. It was great, sun, snow, and women—a perfect combination.”

“‘So you’re glad to be out of Chicago then, huh?’

Fish grabbed the stool on the other side of Ben and flagged down Karma before turning to Ben and Trapper. “You guys want a pitcher?”

They nodded and Karma started filling it. “Chicago was fun, but it’s nice to set bones which were broken in skiing accidents or football instead of shattered by a bullet.” He made a face. “Those are way too gory for my taste. Did I beat Hunter here?”

Ben looked up from his beer. “He’s coming too?”

Fisher smiled. “Yeah, and since I won, he owes me a ten-spot.”

Trapper high fived Ben before turning to his brother. “Sweet, then you’re buying the pitcher.”

Fisher shrugged and put money on the bar.

When Hunter came in, he gave Fisher a slap on the back. “Shit, you beat me again? What did you do, fly? I live five miles closer than you.” Hunter bent over the bar and waved to Ben. “Who said I was at home?” Fisher waggled his eyebrows. “I haven’t been home in a week.”

Ben looked over at Fisher and Hunter; they were twins and looked almost identical except for their hair color, Hunter’s was dark, Fisher’s platinum blond. Fisher was a little leaner, probably because of his occupation. Hunter ran the ski school in the winter and was a white-water rafting and fishing guide through the summer months. The man was ripped, not that Fisher wasn’t; he just wasn’t as bulky.
Ben sat back and listened to the guys razzing each other. It was good to be home.
Chapter 5

Gina looked up from the spreadsheet she was working on and found her boss delivering a venti caramel macchiato. Except for the day Gina moved into her new office, Rosalie never brought her Starbucks unless she wanted information or a favor. From the look Rosalie wore, Gina knew she was in for a good grilling. She was in no mood for Rosalie this morning. Her mood went straight downhill at breakfast as soon as her asinine brother-in-law refused to take the thirty grand she’d offered to deposit into his and Tina’s dream house fund.

“A little birdie told me you moved out of the apartment yesterday morning. When were you going to tell me about it?”

“When I decided if I was staying in my new digs. I’m paying the rent; I don’t know why you’re worried.” Gina took a sip of her coffee and almost moaned with pleasure. Whole milk, extra whipped cream, and enough caramel to drown an apple, just the way she liked it. If Rosalie kept this up, Gina would have to go on a diet. There’s nothing like 500-calorie drinks to make a short woman a short, fat woman.

“So, tell me about the new place. What did you and your new sugar daddy buy?”

“It’s a five-story brownstone on Montgomery Place.”

Rosalie whistled between her teeth. “Wow, that’s some spendy real estate. What the heck are you going to do with a five-story brownstone?”

“Other than sell it as soon as the ink is dry on the divorce decree? Not much. I stayed there last night and the place was so huge and empty, it gave me the willies. I practically begged Tina to come over for dinner and a pajama party.”

Rosalie raised an eyebrow.

Gina got up to pace. “Sam works nights so there was no need for her to go back to the city. It was fun until he came over for breakfast. I tell you, Rosalie, my sister and brother-in-law are two of the most hardheaded people I’ve ever met.”

“Worse than you?”

Gina ignored her sarcasm. “I offered to give them thirty thousand dollars so they could start house shopping and they had the nerve to refuse. Why do you think I married Ben in the first place? So I could help them out and make sure they had a nice house all bought and paid for.”

Rosalie gave Gina one of her annoying looks that was usually followed by a lecture. Great, here it comes.

“It didn’t occur to you to ask them how they felt about taking that much money from you?”

“No. What sane person would turn down a gift of $30K?”

Rosalie crossed her arms and smiled. “Oh, I don’t know. Someone related to you, maybe. Just because you think you know what’s best for your little sister doesn’t mean you do.”

“That’s just insane. Of course I know what’s best for her. Who do you think raised her?”

Rosalie smiled. “You did, and you did a great job. Tina’s all grown up now, not to mention married. She doesn’t need you to make decisions for her.”

Gina slumped back into the chair next to Rosalie’s. “Yeah, thanks. Like I didn’t hear that enough last night and this morning. When they refused the money, I asked them to move in with me. The place has seven bedrooms. They can move in and we’d still have to phone each other if we wanted to talk.”

Rosalie sat forward. “You’re afraid to live alone.”

Gina shot out of the chair. “What are you, nuts? I’m not afraid. It’s just stupid for them to pay rent when I have four stories of a beautiful Romanesque Revival brownstone sitting empty. That way they can take all the rent money they’d be shelling out and put it right into savings.”

“And you won’t have to live in that big place all by yourself.”

Gina looked away. So what if she was a little uncomfortable living alone? She’d get used to it in time, maybe.

“Gina, you know you can always come over and hang with me and Nick, if you want. Hey, you can even borrow Dave until you feel more comfortable.”

“You loan your dog out?”

“Only to you. He’s great company. I know—why don’t you get a dog?”

Gina shook her head. “You should see this place, Rosalie. It’s so perfect, I’m afraid to live there. It looks like a
castle filled with antiques and priceless shit. They even have real china in the kitchen. Like Wedgewood. I didn’t
know if I should put the stuff in the dishwasher last night. The first time in my life I have a dishwasher, and I’m
afraid to use it.”

“That’s just wrong in so many ways.”

“Don’t I know it. I gotta tell you, though, the sheets Ben had stocked in there were the nicest things I’ve ever slept
between. I swear they must be 10,000 thread count.”

“There is something to be said for quality linens. The only thing better is to have a quality man between them
with you.”

“Yeah, so you say. I, for one, am happy to enjoy them alone.”

Rosalie didn’t look as if she believed her, and after that kiss Ben had left her with, Gina wasn’t too sure either. No
sex for a year was not something she wanted to think about.

“I heard Ben went back to Idaho.”

“Aren’t you just a font of information? Are you checking up on me, Rosalie?”

“No, but Annabelle gave me a call this morning. She said Ben probably wouldn’t be back for a month.”

“He doesn’t go over his schedule with me. As far as I’m concerned, I won’t see him until the divorce.”

“Oh good, then you won’t mind taking on a new project.”

Gina rubbed her hands together. “I’d love to take on a new project. Tell me all about it.”

***

Ben looked over his notes from the board meeting. It seemed to last forever and he had the darnedest time
concentrating on the topic at hand. And leave it to his spry old grandfather to notice. It didn’t help that Ben had
woken up hungover. He should know better than to play pool with Trapper while doing shots of tequila. It never
bothered him when he was younger. He must be getting old. He regretted he’d told Trapper he’d meet him up at the
Rock for night skiing. He really wasn’t in the mood but canceling wasn’t worth the shit Trap would give him if he
didn’t show. Ben threw the papers in the drawer of the desk in his new office at the corporate headquarters and shut
down his computer before walking over to his grandfather’s office.

When he found his grandfather alone, he stepped into the doorway. “Gramps, I’m going to take off. Trapper and I
are going to hit the slopes tonight. I’ll be back late.”

“You just got here and you can’t even put in a full day’s work? Lord knows, you didn’t do much at the board
meeting.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I have a lot on my mind.”

“I told you that you should have brought Gina with you.”

“Don’t worry about Gina. She’s doing fine.”

“Yeah, you say that now. It’s going to take you a good month to get this system up and running. Are you going to
fly back and forth to New York City every weekend?”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Well then, how in the hell are you going to give me those great-grandbabies you promised me?”

Ben held up his hands. “Hey, I said I’d get married. I never said I’d have kids right away. Gina and I aren’t ready
to start a family.” Ben told himself that it wasn’t exactly a lie. The two of them would never be ready—especially
not with each other.

“Ben, you’re thirty-two years old. At the rate you’re goin’ you’re not going to be ready for parenthood until
you’re my age. Shit, you just need to go and get that little lady and bring her back home with you and let nature take
its course.”

“Gramps, I told you. Gina doesn’t fly.” Ben reached into his pocket, grabbed his keys, tossed them in the air, and
caught them.

“Of course she flies. She’s not going to fall out of the damn sky. But it’s impossible to get in the air if you never
set foot on an airplane. If you need to hog-tie her to get her on our company jet, that’s just what you’re gonna have
to do.”

Ben swung his keys around on his pointer finger. Shit, if he was going to tie Gina up, it certainly wasn’t going to
be to put her on a plane, though the plane did have a nice bedroom suite in the back. He shook his head as he backed
out of his grandfather’s office. “Have a great night, Gramps. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Ben’s grandfather picked up the phone with a knowing smile. Shit. The old guy was up to something and Ben
figured it wasn’t going to be something he would enjoy.

***
Gina jumped into her first solo job as a turnover expert with both feet. It was a small restaurant chain that wasn’t quite making it. The food was very good. That was one of the first things she’d checked out. There was nothing you could do to save a restaurant if the food wasn’t top-notch, especially in the city.

She spent the first week going over the books and came up with several immediate stopgap measures to keep them afloat. Gina was revamping their benefits package since it had been years since they’d shopped it around. She also called in a few favors with two food critics she knew. They said they’d visit the place once she gave them the go-ahead.

Ben still called her every night, but even that wasn’t bothering her since he’d made it a point to call before she went to sleep. It didn’t take him long to figure out their conversations were much more pleasant if they spoke while she was awake. He’d called her from a few unusual places. A ski lift was probably the strangest. Who knew people actually skied at night? One night he’d called her from a bar where he’d been playing pool with some of the guys he’d grown up with. But mostly, he called her from his grandfather’s house. It was almost nice. They talked business, and they’d both given each other enough ideas that it more than made the conversations worthwhile. Not that she was paying the phone bill. Still, she was surprised by what a great business mind Ben hid behind those good looks of his. The man definitely wasn’t just another pretty face. He attacked problems from a different perspective than she did. Together, they’d come up with a few amazing solutions which meant happy clients and an even happier boss. Rosalie was bringing Gina coffee as a reward system now, which worked for Gina.

The last few nights when Ben called, they debated about suggesting a change of the menu to attract a higher class of clientele, which would then increase the sale of wine and alcohol. Ben didn’t think the owner would go for it, but she proved him wrong.

Gina snagged a seat on the subway and spent her commute making notes and smiling to herself. When the subway car hit the elevated tracks in Brooklyn, she dialed Ben’s cell to tell him how her meeting went. Her eyes scanned the list of ideas she’d planned to throw at him. She really enjoyed listening to him think things through and seeing where he took them. It also felt great when she saw a hole in his logic about something he was working on. She’d saved his ass a time or two. That made up for some of the guilt she felt when she saw another deposit hit her account.

“Hi, Gina. I was just thinking about you.”

“You were?”

“Yeah, how did your meeting with the owner go? Who won the bet? I believe the loser has to take the winner out to dinner.”

Gina crossed her win off her list. “I don’t remember that.”

“It was late and you were tired. You were practically falling asleep on the phone.”

“I’m just not much of a talker.” There was silence on the other end. Gina looked at the phone to make sure she hadn’t lost the signal. “Okay, I’ll admit I’m good at telling people what to do, but this thing between us, it’s different.”

“Yeah, the whole marriage thing is definitely odd.”

“So, okay. I won. It looks like you’re buying.”

“Good. I’ll meet you at the house in an hour. Will that give you enough time to change? We have reservations in town.”

“You’re here?”

“Yeah, I flew in late last night.”

“And you want to go out tonight?”

“Why? Do you have a hot date?”

“No, but Tina’s expecting me.”

“So, call her and tell her something came up.”

Gina wondered if this would be a good time to clue him in on the fact that Tina and Sam had moved in, but then part of her said it really wasn’t his business who she lived with just as long as she wasn’t sleeping with any of them.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Someplace nice. It’s a surprise.”

“How nice is nice?”

“A cocktail dress would work.” When she didn’t say anything, he continued. “Did you do any shopping while I was away or do I have to take you?”

“I don’t need you to take me shopping. It’s not as if I don’t have plenty of other gay friends who are up to the job. As a matter-of-fact, Wayne, Rosalie’s upstairs neighbor, and I went shopping together a few weeks ago, so I’m all set.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up at 7:30.”
“I can meet you there.” She would rather break the news that Sam and Tina had moved into the brownstone in person, and without Sam breathing down her neck while she explained.

“I left my car at the house, remember? I need to pick it up anyway, and it’s not as if you can drive it in.”

Good point. Crap. “Okay, then. I guess I’ll see you at my place.”

“Our place.”

“Hey, cowboy. Your name may be on the deed, but it’s my house and you know it. You are definitely not a resident.”

“Touché. Feel better now that you’ve put me in my place?”

“Marginally. I’ve got to go, I’m almost at my stop.” She disconnected the call and prayed that Sam was working. She doubted her luck was that good.

###

Ben stood outside the well-lit brownstone and smiled. Gina must be nervous living there alone. She even had the upper stories lit. He walked up the steps and had the urge to use his key; instead, he rang the bell and was surprised when Sam answered wearing jeans, a long-sleeved NYPD T-shirt, and no shoes.

“Come on in. Gina will be down in a minute.”

Ben stepped in and shook Sam’s hand while he looked around. The coat tree in the hall held Sam’s coat and a sweatshirt that would dwarf Gina. There was a mix of men’s and women’s shoes lining the wall.

“Gina won’t let us wear our shoes in the house. She said we’ll soil the carpets.” Sam made a face. “Do you want a drink? Tina’s with her and you know how women can be.”

“Sure.”

Sam waved him toward the kitchen and pulled a beer out of the refrigerator. “We have beer, wine, and I think there might be some hard stuff somewhere. I’m not much of a drinker.”

“A beer would be great.”

Sam tossed him one. “When did you get back to town?”

“Last night.”

Leaning against the counter with his big feet crossed, Sam looked as if he owned the place, making Ben feel like the outsider. He didn’t like it. He saw subtle changes in the kitchen. A funky cookie jar on the counter definitely wasn’t on the list of furnishings he’d agreed to buy. He remembered something like it in Sam and Tina’s apartment. Not to mention the cheap dishes in the dish drain.

Since he’d moved Gina in himself, he knew they didn’t belong to her. Either she went shopping for cheap dinnerware when she had perfectly good china in the cabinet, or Sam and Tina were living there.

“So when did you and Tina move in?”

Sam took a pull off his beer and raised an eyebrow. “Observant, aren’t you? You would have made a good cop.”

Ben looked at him a little harder. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“A week or so after you left. Gina tried to give us money for a down payment on a house in the suburbs, but Tina and I don’t take charity.”

“She probably wasn’t happy to hear that.”

“No.” Sam smiled. “Not happy is an accurate description. Since Tina’s gotten it into her head that Gina’s afraid to live alone—”

“Really?”

Sam shrugged. “It’s hard to believe. I’ve seen Gina take on men twice her size and have them shaking in their shoes within a minute.”

“Are you talking from personal experience, Sam?”

“Actually, yes. He is.”

They both turned and found Gina posing in the doorway wearing a blue taffeta wraparound cocktail dress. “For your information, I am not afraid of living alone. And yes, I have made Sam want to go running for his mama on more than one occasion. You too can share in the experience, or would you rather have that dinner you owe me? Your choice.”

Ben stared at Gina and just about swallowed his tongue. Shit, she was hot when she dressed like the normal, loud Gina. When she dressed like this, she decimated him. It might be safer for him to stay on her bad side. It wasn’t half as scary as her good side.

Gina put her hand on her cocked hip. “I don’t need your permission to invite my family to move in with me. What I do is none of your business.”

Ben fought with himself to make a decision.
“Well, aren’t you going to say anything?”
“It’s nice to see you too.”

Gina took one a good long look at Ben in his suit, looking tan and edible. What did he do? Take a weekend trip to the Mexican Riviera? It would be so much easier to fight with him than to be nice. She gave him the eye, daring him to say something about Sam and Tina moving in with her. When he smiled, she did her best not to melt.

Tina came in through the swinging door and pushed Gina toward Ben. “Wow, you two look like you’re going to a prom.” Gina smiled at Ben. “You know, Gina never went to her prom. We should take pictures.”

Ben stood a little straighter. “That’s a great idea. We never did get a wedding picture, the lack of which was pointed out to me repeatedly when I was in Idaho.”

Gina stepped back and shot a venomous look at her little sister, the brat. “I hate pictures.”

Ben smiled down at her, as if he was enjoying her plight. “Come on, just take a few. I need them to prove you actually exist.”

“Who did your grandfather think you were talking to every night? The phone-sex hotline?”
“I didn’t ask and I honestly don’t want to know.”

Tina shoed them into the living room and Ben walked to a spot in front of the fireplace over which a beautiful oil painting hung. Knowing him, it was probably priceless. He faced Gina and pulled her close. The man didn’t only look edible, he smelled good enough to eat. The musky citrus scent was impossible to ignore.

“You wrinkle my dress and you’ll be sorry.”

Ben held her tighter. “Smile, sweetheart.”

Tina took what felt like dozens of pictures; Gina had all but lost her temper by the time the doorbell rang. A perfect excuse to get out of Ben’s arms and well away from his warm body. When she pulled the door open, she came face to face with an old man with white hair wearing a western suit with a bolo tie and cowboy boots. On anyone else, it would have looked ridiculous. With this dude, though, it worked.

“Didn’t anyone ever teach you to answer the door correctly? You’re living in New York City, little lady. You don’t even ask who it is?”

“I’ve got a cop and a cowboy here and I live in Brooklyn. Manhattan is across the river if you’re lost.” She noticed a limo waiting on the street. “But then your driver could probably find it on his own.”

Someone came up behind her. Gina knew it was Ben; Sam never stood that close.

“Grumps? What the hell are you doing here?”

Gina should have recognized the sparkling blue eyes; the fact that Ben’s grandfather’s held a more mischievous glint wasn’t comforting.

“I need an invitation to visit my only grandson and his bride?”

Ben opened the door further and his grandfather stepped in, his eyes locked on Gina. Ben put his arm around her, his eyes never leaving his grandfather. “Not an invitation, but a warning would be nice. Gina, this is my grandfather, Joe Walsh.”

Sam shook hands with the old guy. “Nice to meet you, sir.”

“It’s nice to meet my new granddaughter and her family, finally.” He shot a pointed look at Ben and then smiled at Gina. “You’re all gussied up to go out I assume. It’s good timing. I have a car waiting.”

Gina laughed. “So you’re leaving?”

Ben’s grandfather chuckled. “No, I’m joining you. We have a lot to discuss. Like when you’re gonna get your pretty little self on my plane to Idaho. Ben, get your wife a coat. It’s too damn damp here in New York City. Gina, just wait until you get out to Boise; it’s a high-mountain desert so you don’t feel the dampness in your bones like you do here. You don’t mind me tagging along, do you?”

Gina shook her head and laughed at him. “Why would I mind? I’m just as excited to go out to dinner with you as I am my new husband.” Ben helped her into her new cashmere wrap and shot her a warning look that she ignored. She just thanked God she remembered to take the tags off it before she hung it in the closet. Before she knew it, they were pulling up to the front of Tavern on the Green. They checked her wrap and were shown to their table.

As a kid, Gina had been caught with her nose pressed against the glass looking in at the people at high tea in a room filled with crystal overlooking Central Park. Who’d have thought she’d actually get to eat in that very room? The trees outside were covered in fairy lights; candles and crystal chandeliers lit the room and reflected off the glass walls. It was incredible, magical, and the most expensive place she’d ever set foot in.

Joe didn’t miss the wide-eyed look of wonder that crossed Gina’s face as they were shown to their table. Ben held her chair and the little filly was surprised. Joe had done his homework and had gotten a bit of information about the girl. He also knew that Ben hadn’t stayed with her the night before. Sure, he’d arrived late and it was easier for him
to go to his old place, but Joe had thought a man would want to snuggle up with his new wife instead of bedding down alone in a cold, empty apartment. Seeing them together, Joe was sure he was being duped. He didn’t like it, but in the time it took them to get to the restaurant, he knew even though the marriage might be a sham, there was a hell of an attraction between the two. Even an old geezer like him couldn’t miss that. Joe ordered champagne and congratulated himself on how well his little plan was going to work.

“I thought since you have so many bedrooms in that new house of yours, I’d stay with you. I hate hotels.”

Gina was just taking a sip of her water when she choked on it. Ben patted her on the back. “You can stay at my place in the city, Gramps. I haven’t had time to move my things into the new house yet. I only had enough time to get Gina’s things moved in before I left.”

Joe always knew when his grandson lied; the boy could never look him in the eye. “You’re not going to have time to do it this trip either. Not that it’ll matter much. You and Gina are coming home with me.”

Gina opened her mouth to say something, her eyes blazed, and Joe had to admit, she was one hell of a good-looking woman when she was about to explode. Ben put his hand on hers and squeezed it. Gina was a smart girl, and she quietly simmered.

When the champagne was served, Joe raised a glass. “To Gina, I’m happy to see my new granddaughter is no shrinking violet.” He took a sip and leaned over to whisper to her. “Ben needs a strong woman who’s not afraid to stand up to him.”

“Gramps.”

Joe waved his grandson’s warning away. “That’s what Ben’s problem has been from the beginning. He went out with women more concerned with his money than the man. They didn’t want to stir the pot or anything else. No wonder the boy got bored with them. He’s certainly not bored with you.”

Gina shot him a tight-lipped smile and then started in. “Mr. Walsh—”

“Little lady, you don’t have to call me Mr. Walsh. You can call me Joe, or Grandpa Joe, or just Gramps would work too. Mr. Walsh makes me feel my age, and believe me, no one wants to feel that old. Not even me.”

“Fine, Joe. I can’t possibly go running off to Idaho with you. I just started a new case—”

Joe patted her hand and Gina slid it as fast as she could from beneath his. The girl had spirit; he’d give her that. “I spoke to your boss, a sweet young thing named Rosalie Romeo. Did you know her husband is the owner of Romeo’s, the chain of car dealerships?”

“Yes, I know all about Nick Romeo. I was at their wedding.”

“Of course you were. It’s a small world, now isn’t it? Nick and I ran into each other a few years back. That boy’s a hell of a businessman.”

“I told Rosalie that you and my boy here have yet to have a honeymoon. Now we can’t have that, can we?”

“Joe—”

“It turns out you’re not much for vacations, you have a lot of time saved up. Now is the perfect time to take that honeymoon. That sweet bit of a girl, Rosalie Romeo, agreed with me when I told her it was my wedding gift to you and Ben. She said she’d personally take care of your client until you get back next month.”

Gina closed her eyes for a moment and looked as if she were trying to hold her tiger of a temper by the tail. Joe sat back to enjoy the show.

“Joe, while I appreciate the offer, I’m in the middle of a job and now is just not the right time for me to go.”

“Nonsense, it’s a done deal, little lady. You’re going on your honeymoon and we’re leaving just as soon as you pack your bags. A few weeks up at the family ranch will do you two a world of good.”

“I don’t fly.”

Joe couldn’t hold back his laugh. Hell, he was eighty years old, he’d earned the right to laugh as loud as he wanted to, even in a swanky place like this. “Wanna bet?”
Chapter 6

Ben walked into the master bedroom with his suitcase after showing Gramps to the guest room.
Gina slammed the door so hard the walls shook. “You didn’t warn me that your grandfather was a cagey old fart.”
“I believe I did, which is why we bought this house and took all the precautions with the prenup in the first place.”
“Does he think he can just buy everything and everyone he wants? Here’s a newsflash for you, Ben. I’m not for sale.”
Ben sat on the bed and leaned back against the pillows. “He just forced you to take a vacation. If you have a problem with that, I guess you need to talk to Rosalie. Knowing Gramps, though, I think it’s safe to say it would be a waste of time.”
He watched her pace the room. She was a little bundle of energy about to explode. “It’ll be fine. Once you’re in the plane, you can pretend you’re in a really nice bus. Why don’t we call Dr. Mike? I’m sure he could prescribe a couple of Valium to get you through the trip. I’ll wake you after we land.”
She turned on her heel. “I don’t do drugs.”
“Gina, it’s not as if it’s heroin. It’s just something to help you relax.”
“No. No drugs.”
“Fine, we’ll give you a couple shots of vodka and it’ll be over before you sober up.”
She hugged herself. “I’ll take a bus or a train. How long could it take?”
“Days.” Ben shook his head. “Gina, flying is safe. You have nothing to worry about. Besides, you’ll be with me.”
“Oh, and just what are you going to do when we crash? Sprout wings and whisk us away from the fireball? I don’t think so.”
Ben went to her and put his hands on her very tense shoulders, massaging them. “Come on, Gina. Let’s go to bed and get some sleep. Things will look better in the morning.”
She turned around and faced him. “And just where do you think you’re going to sleep?”
Ben couldn’t help but smile. “Here with you. I can hardly take the next bedroom. Gramps is in there. I think he’ll notice.”
She shook her head, her bangs flying to and fro and then rearranging perfectly, tapering down to her cheekbone. “Whatever happened to the bed being as big as your first apartment? I’ll stay on my side, you won’t even know I’m there.”
“Sleeping together wasn’t part of the deal.”
“Yeah, and neither was flying. Things change and we have to improvise.”
“Improvisation? Is that what you call it?”
“Whatever works.” He pulled his suit jacket off and hung it in the closet before he emptied his pockets on her dresser. She rummaged through a drawer full of nightclothes. Ben had spent long sleepless nights imagining what she wore to bed. She’d pictured her in everything from flannel grannies to peek-a-boo nightgowns and unfortunately for him, she looked hot in all of them. He purposely didn’t look at what she’d picked out. He wanted to be under the covers before he got a load of Gina in sleepwear. As it was, he was glad his trousers were pleated. It was going to be a long night.
Ben brought his shaving kit to the double vanity and brushed his teeth. Gina walked past and slammed the door to the bathroom. He heard the shower running as he stripped down to his boxer-briefs and wondered what side of the bed she preferred. Since he couldn’t tell, he slid to the center.
Gina emerged from the steamy bathroom wearing a tight, pink, racer-back tank night gown, which ended at mid-thigh but left nothing to the imagination. God help him. She turned off the lights and climbed in on the side closest to the bathroom, opened her bedside table drawer, took out a black satin sleep mask, and donned it.
“I can’t believe you wear that thing to bed. I thought people only wore those in the movies.”
She raised the mask to her forehead and glared. “I can’t believe you’re in my bed and you actually have the balls to talk to me when I was doing such a great job ignoring your presence.”
“Why do you wear it?”
She pulled her bangs out from under the elastic. “Why do you care?”
“Just curious, I guess.”
“I sleep better when I can’t see the clock.”
Her reason was insane. “You can if you lift the mask.”
“But I don’t.”
“Then why not just stop looking at the clock?”
“Why not just stop bothering me?” Gina crossed her arms, giving him a great cleavage shot.
Ben did his best to keep his eyes on hers. “Because I’m on Mountain Time and it’s not even 10:00 there.”
“And this is my problem because?”
“It’s your problem because, like it or not, you’re sleeping with me.”
“Hold on.” Gina held up her hands as if to stop him. “This is my bed so you’re sleeping with me. And believe me, I don’t like it. I don’t like anything about this. How could your grandfather turn around and pull a stunt like forcing me to go on a honeymoon and get away with it?”
“Gina, not to point out the obvious, but money talks and he has about seven billion ways to make people listen. Every one of them works.”
“You know,” her hands flew, punctuating every point, “I told you this whole marriage thing was a mistake.”
Ben put his arm around her and then regretted the action. Damn, she was so tiny, his arm could wrap all the way around her. She leaned into him and tucked her head beneath his chin. Her breasts were pillowed against his side and his dick jumped. Shit.
“It’s a shame.”
Ben found his voice. “What is—the marriage?”
“No, the fact that you’re gay. If you weren’t, at least I’d have something to do to keep myself from thinking about the possibility of getting on a plane in the morning.”
“Go to sleep, Gina.” He hoped his voice didn’t sound as strained to her as it did to him.
She curled up next to him, pulled down her mask, and was asleep in less time than it took him to stop tenting the sheet. It didn’t help that the soap she used was a jasmine scented musk that made him want to just inhale her.
The king-sized bed seemed to shrink with Gina in it. Who knew such a little thing could take up so much room? She was a complete bed hog. No matter how far Ben slid over, she followed like a cat follows the sun. All night he did his darnedest to stay away from her but he’d awaken with her curled up against him.
“Get off of me!”
Ben opened one eye and found himself practically on top of his wife. Thank God only the upper half of his body was touching her. She’d have a hell of a shock if the lower half were.
“Sorry.”
Gina slid away from him. “You’re sorry?”
Ben rubbed his stubbled chin. “Not especially. You?” He stared at the old guy through bleary eyes as he searched the cabinets for a mug. He found it on the third try, poured coffee, and drank it down in one gulp. He couldn’t stand small mugs.
“I slept like a baby. How long do you think it’ll take for Gina to get packed?”
Ben shrugged. “I have no idea. She’s not happy about you forcing her to fly. She wants to go by bus.”
Gramps shook his head. “You’ve got to get a tight rein on that little filly of yours now, or you’ll regret it, believe you me.”
Ben looked up from his coffee and caught his grandfather’s eye. “You better not let Gina hear you talking about her like that. That filly has one heck of a kick.”
“Shit, she’s just a cute little pixie.”
“Yeah, a pixie with a machete.”
The kitchen door swished closed and Ben winced.
“Do you two always talk about women behind their backs?”

Shit. He turned around and found Gina standing in her normal pose, her hand on her cocked hip, her black and white silk skull and crossbones robe hanging open, showing off the breast he’d had pillowed against his chest and side all night in the tight pink tank dress that she’d worn to bed. “Only you, sweetheart.” He reached up, pulled another mug from the cupboard, and filled it with coffee. He didn’t know how she took it. He handed the steaming cup to her and let out a sigh of relief when she drank it black. That’s probably the only simple thing the woman did.

“Morning, Joe.”

Gramps took a good long gander at Gina and Ben had the urge to cover her. No wonder he’d never wanted to get married.

“Well now, aren’t you a sight for sore old eyes?” Gramps winked at Ben. “There are worse things to wake up to, huh Ben?”

He decided to take the fifth.

Gina released the death-hold she had on her coffee cup, set it on the counter, wrapped the short robe around her, and tied the sash. Not that it helped, it only made Ben want to unwrap her. He tried to think of something else. It didn’t work.

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After watching Gina pack almost every piece of clothing she owned, Ben got her into the limo and poured her shots of vodka the entire way to the airport. It wasn’t a long enough drive.

“There’s not enough vodka in the world to induce me to step foot on that plane.” She motioned outside the limo to the sixteen-passenger Gulfstream G550.

Ben pushed another shot toward her. Thank God Gramps’ car came with a full bar.

“Bottoms up.” Ben needed to get her mind off the plane and onto something else. She already had half a bag on, along with a very short jean skirt, a tight turquoise T-shirt which read, “Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy” under a short brown suede jacket replete with turquoise and silver beaded fringe and matching turquoise high-heeled cowboy boots with what looked like fake spurs that spun with every step. He hadn’t said anything before because she was a tad overwrought, but now he saw it as his last defense.

“What the heck are you wearing, by the way?”

“What is this? An episode of Queer Eye for the Straight Girl? I’m wearing my cowboy garb, why?”

Ben laughed. “Sweetheart, you have a lot to learn about cowboys, though I can’t say I know any who would object to the way you look.”

After getting her to down a couple more shots, he wondered if he should have forced her to eat something before they left. He pulled a pack of crackers out of the built-in cabinet. He wasn’t sure what they’d stocked in the Gulfstream. If he knew his grandfather, he probably made sure there was a big prime rib dinner with all the fixins. With any luck, Gina would sleep through it.

“Here, eat a few of these. You don’t get motion sickness, do you?”

“How do I know?” Her speech was beginning to slur, a good or a bad sign depending upon how he looked at it.

“There’s not much time on a cross-town bus to figure that out. I’m good on subways, even standing backward.”

“How do you stand backward?”

“You know, with my back facing the direction the train is going. Backwards.”

Ben just nodded and wondered how much she usually drank. “Come on, sweetheart, let’s get you strapped in.”

Gina tilted her head, smiled, and blinked her glassy eyes at him. “Can’t we just hijack the limo? It’d be a fun ride and maybe you could show me the sights, like that mountain with all the presidents’ faces carved in it. That would be cool, huh?”

Ben opened the door and pulled her out along with him. “Not this time, Gina. Maybe next time.”

“You’re no fun. I was thinking we could get a big picture of President Obama, like a huge one,” she threw her arms out wide to demonstrate and almost hit him in the face, “and hang it up next to what’s his name…the last guy.”

“Lincoln or Washington?”

“Of course you would know the presidents on the end. You’re a living, breathing Wikipedia. I bet you even know the ones in the middle.”

She leaned more on him than on her own two feet. He wasn’t sure if it was due to the vodka or those ridiculous boots. He picked her up. “Thomas Jefferson and Teddy Roosevelt.”

“Was he the one in the wheelchair?”

“No, that was Franklin Roosevelt.”
“Why are you carrying me?”
“Because you’ll never manage the bus steps in those boots.”
“You forgot my purse.”

Ben had his hands full of a very wiggly woman who seemed intent on rubbing her hip against his crotch. It was a good thing she was too drunk to realize the effect she was having on him. He looked inside the limo and sure enough, there was a purse the size of his suitcase. He leaned her in far enough to allow her to grab it, adjusted his stance to accommodate the added weight, and hightailed it up the steps of the jet.

Ducking his head, he stepped aboard and carried her through the ebony galley sideways.

“Would you look at this place? You should have told me it was ebony and turquoise. I would have worn my black leather instead of my suede. I could have matched.”

Sure enough, the countertops were made from a marble-like turquoise material. Leave it to Gina to notice.

“This is a really, really nice bus.”

“Yeah, that’s right, Gina. It’s a luxury liner bus.” He sat her down and buckled her in tight before he shut the window shade.

Ben spotted his grandfather who’d had a few things in town to take care of before meeting them on the plane. “Gramps, it might be a good time to tell the driver to get this bus moving.” He took the seat next to Gina just as her head dropped against his shoulder.

The jet engines whined to life and Gina’s head came up. “It’s an awful weird sounding bus.”

The jet taxied to the runway. “Just close your eyes and go to sleep.” Ben prayed silently that she’d doze off before they received clearance for takeoff.

“Gramps, did you tell the bus driver to keep the chatter to a minimum?”
“I can.”

Ben rolled his eyes. Gramps was having far too much fun with this. “Please do.”

Gramps picked up the phone and called the pilot. “Johnny, let’s keep the chatter in the main cabin to a minimum. Ben’s got the little lady thinking we’re on a bus.” He put the phone down and laughed. “You’re gonna be in some deep shit whenever she comes down from whatever it is you’ve got her on.”

“I wouldn’t laugh too hard about that, Gramps. She just drank enough vodka to drown a good-sized man. Let’s hope she can keep the stuff down.”

The cabin speakers clicked on. “We’ve got clearance to leave the um… terminal. If you haven’t already, please buckle your seat belts. Over.”

Ben stretched out his legs, put his arm around Gina as her head rested against his chest, and placed his hand over her ear to muffle the whine of the engines. The jet lunged forward, the g-force pushing them back into their seats. Ben tried in vain to find a decent receptacle should Gina fail to hold her liquor as they were thrust down the runway at 175 knots. The wheels left the ground and, seconds later, the landing gear retracted. Ben thanked God the pilot didn’t break any records reaching cruising altitude. When they leveled out, Ben pushed Gina’s seat back down to lounge, loosened her seat belt, and gently slid her off his chest. She curled up next to him, tucked her arm around his, and grumbled something unintelligible. Ben unbuckled his seat belt, slipped his arm out of her grasp, and stood, wondering which would be safer: to leave Gina sleeping in her seat or carry her back to the bed in the back of the jet.

“What’s goin’ through that mind of yours, Ben? Wonderin’ if she’ll come to in time to join the mile-high club?”

Ben’s head whipped around to his grandfather. But when he saw the old guy’s eyes sparkling, he couldn’t help but laugh. “She’s bombed, Gramps. I don’t take advantage of inebriated women.”

“Aa, hell, son. When you’re married, that’s allowed. Shit, it’s expected.”

“And you would know, right? How many years has it been since you had a wife?”

“Too many to count, but some things never change. And that’s one of ‘em. You can take that to the bank.”

Ben went to join his grandfather, but stayed close enough to Gina to see if she stirred. He really wasn’t looking forward to her waking up and finding out she was flying on more than just vodka.

“That wife of yours is a wild one. I never figured you’d take on a mustang like her, but seein’ the two of you together, I have to hand it to you, boy. You’ve sure picked a hell of a lady to spend your life tryin’ to tame.”

“Women are not horses, Gramps, and Gina’s definitely untamable. It’s part of her charm.”

Gramps raised his glass, probably filled with whiskey from the looks of it. Ben went to the refrigerator to get a beer and on the way back, he pulled out a blanket and covered Gina. Her short jean skirt seemed to shrink when she curled up in the seat. From the looks of her cheeks peeking out, she was wearing a thong. It was one thing for him to see her ass; he didn’t need his grandfather or a member of the crew to have that pleasure too. Ben tucked her in and pushed the bangs out of her eyes. She looked almost sweet all curled up like that. Unfortunately, he had a feeling that would change just as soon as she awoke. He prayed that happened after they landed in Boise.
Gina awoke with a roaring in her ears as her stomach jumped into her throat. Her mouth felt as if it were filled with cotton balls and she swore she was thirsty enough to drink all the water in the Hudson River. She opened her eyes and saw Ben watching her. “Do not tell me I’m on a plane and not a bus.”

Ben put the newspaper he was holding down, “Okay, I won’t.”

She lifted the weird window shade and saw clouds. “Liar.”

“A plane is nothing more than a bus with wings. You’re fine. See, Gina, you do fly. You’ve been flying for about four hours. We haven’t crashed, there’s been no fireball, and you’re doing great.”

“Did it not occur to you to avoid using words such as crash and fireball when speaking to a nervous, hungover woman who would rather do anything than fly?”

“Anything?”

Ben’s mischievous grin had her wondering what he was thinking about. If he were straight, she’d say kinky sex. She blamed it on her fuzzy gaydar. Obviously, she was mistaken. She pushed the blanket that was tucked around her and tightened the loose seat belt. “I’m so thirsty.”

“I can imagine. You put away a half bottle of Grey Goose.” Ben walked through what looked like a narrow plush living room. When he returned, he had a big bottle of some foreign bubbly water and a couple of Excedrin. “Here, this should help.”

“Thanks.” Gina took the pills and drained the bottle as Ben sat back beside her. She craned her neck looking around. The plane was amazing. She’d only seen things like this in movies.

“We can watch movies, get the news, play video games. Do you like playing X-Box?”

Was he on drugs? Did she look like a person who sat around playing useless games?

“Dinner is in about an hour, but if you’re hungry, I’m sure there are snacks. I’ll call the attendant.”

“You have a flight attendant?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll take you back there.”

Ben took the empty bottle from her and helped her out of the blanket and seat belt. She had to take evasive action because somehow during the drive, her skirt had ridden up. She was thankful Ben pretended not to notice her shimmying her tight skirt back into place.

Once she was covered, he offered her a hand. She realized she didn’t have to look quite so far up since he stood hunched over. She guessed jets weren’t built for tall guys. Ha, she finally found a perk to being short.

Ben led her back to a little bedroom with a big bed. The walls were covered with ebony wood paneling and what might be a closet, not that she bothered opening the doors to check. She would have if Ben hadn’t sprawled out on the bed.

“The bathroom is through there.” He pointed to a little door. Gina wasted no time ducking into the bathroom with the same wood paneling and even more mirrors than were in the bedroom, along with a turquoise marble sink, shower stall, and thankfully, a weird-shaped toilet. She had to hand it to Ben. The plane was gorgeous. If she didn’t hate flying, she could really get used to this. Heck, she’d live in the plane as long as it never left the ground. After she took care of business and washed her hands, she found a new package of toothbrushes, which she gladly took advantage of. There were soaps, lotions, and hair products. She put some product in her hair, mussing it up to get rid of the plane-seat head. She rubbed a squirt of really nice hand lotion in and wondered how she was going to get through the rest of the flight, not to mention the landing. First, she had to deal with Ben.

When she returned to the bedroom, he was lying down watching a flat-screen TV built into the wall. Of course he had the remote in his hand. “Want to watch some TV?”

“No, I want to yell at you for forcing me on this plane.”

“I didn’t force you. I just got you drunk enough not to notice.”

“Still, that wasn’t nice.”

Ben sat up, tossed another pillow against the headboard, and, grabbing her waist, pulled her onto the bed, settling her next to him. “Maybe, but it was expedient.”

Gina blew out a breath. “And that makes it okay? And don’t move me around like I’m your personal plaything.”

“You don’t want to watch TV?”

“The point is, I’m sitting here in boots and spurs on top of your bed.”

Ben grinned. “Sounds kinky.”

“No, I’m ruining this silk coverlet which looks as if it costs more than I make in a month.”
“So, take your boots off if you’re worried about it. I’m kind of fond of them though.”

Gina cast a sideways glance in his direction. She didn’t get him. He was a consummate flirt, and yet he was a self-professed homosexual. What he was doing wasting his time flirting with her was a mystery unless, of course, he was a switch-hitter. Gina tried to pry off her boots, which was difficult to do from a prone position since there were mirrors just about everywhere which would show off the fact that she was wearing very little under her skirt. If she scooted down the bed to sit on the edge, she’d surely snag the coverlet before she got there. Frustrated, she looked around and found Ben watching her.

“You want a hand with those?”

“Do I have a choice?” She turned toward him, trying to keep her legs together. He pulled her leg up and tugged on her boot. So much for modesty. “You could at least pretend you’re not looking up my skirt.”

He got the first boot off which left her sprawled out on the bed, desperately holding on to the coverlet. “What would be the fun in that? Anyone ever tell you that you’re cute when you’re embarrassed?”

Ben got the second boot off and threw it to the side.

“I don’t get embarrassed.”

“Really? Then that pink in your cheeks is due to what?”

“It’s physics, plain and simple. You had my feet higher than my head.”

“I think it’s because you’re wearing that cute little red thong. Your turquoise thong must be in the laundry. Not that I’m complaining. Red’s a good color for you. It’s the second time I’ve seen it today. Tell me, is there a little bow in the back?”

Gina grabbed the remote and started channel surfing just to piss Ben off. “I’m not the bow type, so although I haven’t looked, I highly doubt it.”

“We could check.”

“Let’s not and say we did.” Gina quickly flipped through the channels trying to ignore Ben’s presence when what looked like a naked man caught her eye. She flipped back a few channels and her eyes just about bugged out of her head. “Your grandfather has porn on his plane?”

Sure enough, there was a very naked man on the receiving end of oral sex.

“It looks that way, doesn’t it?”

Gina pressed the wrong button and the action moved in slow motion, damn. “Turn this thing off.” She threw the remote at Ben.

“And here I thought you were just trying to get a better look. Porn in slo-mo, a novel idea.”

Yeah, porn was about the last thing Gina wanted to watch. It was difficult enough being in bed with Ben when he was fully clothed. “I don’t need to watch two people having a lot more fun than I’ll be having in the next year.” She expected a smart-ass remark from Ben, but there was nothing but deafening silence, which was thankfully broken by a knock on the door.

“What?” they asked in unison.

“Supper is ready.” Joe’s big voice boomed through the door. “That is if you two can pull yourselves apart long enough to eat, though if you’re busy, it’ll keep.”

Gina hit Ben’s shoulder. “Turn that damn thing off already. What if he comes in?”

Ben pushed the off button. “He can’t. I locked the door.”

“Why?”

Ben shrugged. “Force of habit, and it doesn’t hurt for him to think we’re back here getting busy, now does it? That’s the reason he’s forcing this trip to Boise in the first place. He’s hoping for great-grandchildren. That’d be proof positive this marriage is on the up and up.”

“We’ll be right out, Joe,” she yelled and then lowered her voice. “Kids are not part of the deal. I’ll never have children.” Gina practically jumped off the bed. Ben held up his hands. “Hey, I’m not looking to procreate. Gramps, on the other hand, would like to see me with a whole brood but he’s going to have to be happy with a marriage certificate.”

Gina tucked in her T-shirt and straightened her skirt before looking for her boots.

Ben rolled off the bed, careful to keep from hitting his head on the ceiling. “I am curious though. Why don’t you want kids of your own someday?”

Gina pulled on her first boot. “I’m hardly the poster child for future mother-of-the-year. I wouldn’t want to screw anyone up the way my parents did me and Tina.”

By the time she got the second boot, Ben was standing in front of the door staring at her with an expression she’d never seen before and would be happy never to see again. “What?”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth.” Ben grabbed her by the waist. “Any kid would be lucky to have you for a mom.”
“And what makes you an expert?”
“Nothing, but I know you. I know how you try to take care of your sister and brother-in-law. You’d never let a kid of yours want for anything, especially not love.”
“What you don’t know about me could fill the Encyclopedia Britannica.”
“I know what counts. I would never have married you if I didn’t think you weren’t an exceptional woman. I trust you and I don’t trust easily.”
“Then you’re not as smart as you look. I know enough not to trust anyone and you shouldn’t either. Everyone has an agenda. And for your information, this so-called marriage is on paper only. It’s not real. You might think you know me, but you don’t. Now get out of my way.”
Ben looked as if he wanted to say something else, but she pushed by him, fumbled with the lock, and got the hell out. She wished she could get off the plane but since they were probably five miles off the ground, that wouldn’t happen anytime soon.
Chapter 7

When Gina barreled out of the bedroom, all of Joe’s hopes that she and Ben had been back there making his first great-grandchild evaporated faster than piss on a roaring campfire. Damn, and he had such high hopes. He hadn’t missed the look on Ben’s face when he’d tucked the blanket around his wife to cover what her skirt didn’t. It held a lot of lust mixed with true affection. Affection was one feeling Joe had never seen on his grandson’s face, except when the boy was with Katie or his cousins.

The little filly paced the aisle as her food cooled on the table beside him. Ben sat across from him watching her. Joe took a bite of his steak and decided to up the ante. “You two have a fight back there? Ever hear the saying, ‘Make love not war’? It’s a hell of a lot more fun.”

Ben shook his head. “Gramps, leave it alone.”

“Aw hell, son. You two might as well have it out right here.” Ben didn’t look sold on the idea.

Joe waited until Gina turned. “Come on, girl. Sit down and eat your food, and tell me what my boneheaded grandson did to piss you off.”

Gina sat down and placed her napkin on her lap. “I’d rather not. There’s nothing to discuss. The subject is closed. Now tell me, Joe, what is Idaho like?”

“Aw, hell, girl. I’m sure Ben’s told you all about it. I’d rather hear more about you and your family. Tell me about that sister of yours.”

Gina smiled; the girl radiated pride. That was refreshing. “Tina’s great. She’s a hair stylist and she’s doing really well. She works in a trendy salon in SoHo. She’s even done a few movie and Broadway stars’ hair.” She took a sip of wine and continued. “Tina and Sam got married a year and a half ago and they’re saving to get their own place in the suburbs.”

“And Sam’s a police officer?”

Gina nodded, “A homicide detective. He’s a great guy. They’re really happy.”

“I know the chief of police in Boise. I could give him a call and see about a transfer. Boise could use a few more good cops.”

Gina stopped mid-bite. “Why would you do that?”

“Because then you’d have your family close to you. Besides, he’d be safer working as a cop in Boise than in New York City. They could get a little spread close by.” When she didn’t say anything, he continued. “They have trendy salons in Boise too. We even have a few movie stars living there. It ain’t the backwoods, girl.”

“I didn’t say it was. But, Joe, I’m not moving to Boise.”

“The hell you’re not.”

Gina pushed her plate away. “Look, old man, you might own my husband, but you don’t own me—”

Ben set his beer down with a thunk. “No one owns me.” Ben’s voice got dangerously low.

Joe took one look at his grandson and knew it was time for him to back off. Damn the girl, if she kept this up, they were going to have World War Three right here on this jet.

She waved away his warning like she might swat a fly. “Whatever. The point is, our home is in Brooklyn and that’s as far outside of Manhattan as I ever plan to live.”

Ben wiped his mouth on his napkin and dropped it back in his lap. He’d never been pissed off, turned on, and impressed at the same time. He was getting used to being turned on whenever Gina was in the vicinity. He’d already accepted the fact that he’d be sporting a hard-on for the duration. He was pissed because he didn’t like the insinuation that he was nothing more than a pawn on his grandfather’s chessboard, but then part of him wondered about that too. He wasn’t for sale, but he would do just about anything to gain ownership of the ranch. He was impressed because Gina left his grandfather speechless—something Ben had never done in his life. He’d never seen anyone tell his grandfather where to stuff it like Gina just had. Probably because the man was a living legend and most people feared him—with good reason. Gramps wielded immense power. Ben didn’t know if Gina had done any research on Big Joe Walsh, but his gut told him it wouldn’t matter if she had. Gina would kowtow to no one, no matter how many billions they were worth.

Gramps cut a piece of meat with more force than necessary and looked at Ben as if he expected Ben to set Gina straight. “Don’t look at me, Gramps. I’m fine with us living between Boise, the ranch, and Brooklyn. Gina has her
work, her family, and she’s spent her whole life there.”

“You’re her family now, boy, and that means her life is with you.”

Gina laughed but there was no humor in it.

Gramps raised an eyebrow. “You married my grandson, little lady. Your life is wherever your husband is, and his life is in Boise.”

Gina shook her head. “He might visit Boise, but our home is in Brooklyn. You’ve seen it. Does it look temporary to you? Ben spends enough time in New York to suit us.”

“How are you going to raise a family if you’re never in the same place for more than a weekend?”

Ben cleared his throat and set his utensils down on his plate with a clink. “I told you Gina and I aren’t ready to start a family. If and when we are, we will decide where to live. It has nothing to do with you, and our marriage is not up for discussion.”

Gina turned a full-wattage smile on Ben and took his breath away. If only he could keep her looking that satisfied… okay, maybe satisfied wasn’t the right word, especially since whenever Ben thought about satisfaction, his pants got way too tight. Happy or not, his wife was going to be the death of him. If she didn’t kill him, the look on his grandfather’s face warned that Gramps very well might. Still, it would be worth it to see that look of satisfaction on Gina’s face, preferably in bed.

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When the plane finally landed, Ben helped Gina down the stairs. He had poured more vodka into her so she wouldn’t notice the landing. Unfortunately when Gina got a little alcohol into her, she noticed way too much of everything else. Especially when she saw Trapper leaning against a car waiting for them.

“Who is that? Ben, please tell me he’s not one of your boyfriends.”

“That’s Trapper, my cousin.” Trapper leaned against his black Sequoia dressed as if he were on his way to Shorty’s—the cowboy bar—for ladies night. He had his black cowboy hat pulled down low, so his curly blond hair peeked out from beneath it. He wore tight Wranglers, a big belt buckle along with his black leather biker’s jacket, and boots. Gina was drooling. Ben told himself it was because she’d had too much vodka, but even he didn’t believe it.

Trapper pushed his hat up and took a good long look at Gina. A crooked smile split his face when his eyes made contact with her shirt. Ben wasn’t sure if it was because of what was written on it, or what was beneath it. Shit.

Ben pulled Gina closer to his side. “Gina, this is Trapper. Trapper, this is my wife, Gina.” A few weeks ago, Ben would have done just about anything to avoid saying those words aloud. Now, he’d like to have a damn nametag made for her that said, “Ben’s woman. Hands off.” He had half a mind to wipe that grin right off Trapper’s face with his fist. Ben wasn’t sure where that came from. He’d never been the possessive type, but then, he’d never been married to a minx before either.

“Gina.” Trapper took her hand and pulled her into a hug. “Welcome to the family.”

“Thanks. So are all the men around here as good-looking as you and Ben or are you two exceptional?”

That damn grin was back on Trapper’s face. “I don’t know. You’ll have to ask my little sister, Karma, about that. I don’t check out men, but you’re a welcome sight. We don’t get many women as pretty as you around here. Those boots are great boots.”

“You like them? Ben was teasing me about them.”

Ben pulled her away from Trapper. “Only when I was trying to get them off you.”

He shot Trapper a warning look that his cousin completely ignored. “Let me guess, you’re off to ladies night at Shorty’s.”

“Yeah, Karma and the guys asked me to pick you and Gina up. Everyone wants to meet Gina.”

Gina graced Ben with another one of those smiles and wrapped her arm around him. “That sounds great, doesn’t it?”

No, what sounded great would be going home to bed, the same bed, not fighting off his cousins and every other man on the prowl at Shorty’s. “Yeah, just great.”

Trapper grabbed the bags from the airport staff and stowed them in the trunk. “Joe can take your Land Rover home and I’ll drop you two off at the house later.”

Gina accepted Trapper’s help stepping into the Sequoia before Ben had even thought of it. He cursed as he went around to the front and hopped in. Gina buckled herself into the middle seat and leaned forward. Trapper removed his hat and threw it in the back before getting behind the wheel.

“So, Gina. How did you and my cousin meet?”

“We met at Annabelle and Mike Flynn’s wedding. Annabelle, his partner, is my boss’ sister.”
Trapper looked at her in the rearview mirror. “Which is why I never date women I meet at weddings—that’s
dangerous territory.”

“Oh, come on, a big guy like you afraid of weddings?” She squeezed his shoulder. “I’m surprised some smart
woman hasn’t gotten to you yet.”

Trapper laughed. “That’s why I never date smart women. When I meet a woman, I introduce myself as Fakie
McNamerson. If they don’t blink an eye, I know she’s the girl for me—at least for the next seventy-two hours. I’ve
realized it’s impossible to be nice any longer. After that, I turn into an asshole.”

Ben laughed. “I’m surprised it takes that long.”

Gina gave his arm a push and turned back to Trapper, which was really chapping Ben’s ass. “I guess there’s
nothing wrong with playing the field. So are your brothers anything like you?”

Trap shrugged. “They’re not judges, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You’re a judge?”

“That’s what the nameplate on my office door says. They make me wear the black robe and everything. Every day
I’m in court is like Halloween.”

Gina giggled. Ben had never heard that sound come out of her mouth before. She didn’t seem the giggling type,
but then she’d never flirted with him.

“What do your brothers do?”

“Ben hasn’t told you about us?”

Gina shook her head, which let her hair fly around her face. Trapper spent more time watching her through the
rearview mirror than watching the road.

Ben smacked him. “If you two want to chat, why don’t you let me drive?”

Trapper hit him back. “No, I’m good at multitasking.” Trapper smiled at Gina. “Fisher is an orthopedist in Boise,
and Hunter manages the ski school at Castle Rock in the winter. During the summer months he’s a white-water
rafting and fishing guide.”

“It sounds like your parents named them wrong.”

Trapper laughed. “Yeah, I guess. Maybe they got them mixed up after they were born. The two of them used to be
almost identical.”

“All three of you are single?”

“Yup, Karma is too. She’s the baby.”

“I have a little sister too. Are you hard on Karma’s boyfriends?”

“Only if they don’t behave. It’s not smart to screw with a judge’s little sister. I can cause a man a world of hurt.”

Ben leaned back in his seat. “Which is why Karma never introduces you to any of the guys she dates. She’s no
dummy.”

Trapper looked at him sideways. “She doesn’t?”

“Hell, no. Between the three of you, she’d never see a guy more than once.”

When Trapper parked, Ben hopped out even before the ignition was killed and opened Gina’s door for her. If he
was going to take Gina into Shorty’s, he was definitely going to walk in with his arm around her. He wondered how
he got talked into taking his Brooklyn bride into a cowboy bar on her first night in Idaho. Talk about a culture shock.

The bar was a mob scene. The dance floor was packed with line dancers shaking it to the house band playing a
rendition of Alan Jackson’s “Good Time.” Everyone who wasn’t dancing stared at the newcomers, and Gina stood
out like the Statue of Liberty in the New York Harbor. Ben pulled Gina closer to his side and looked around for the
gang. Nothing like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Karma stood, took one look at Ben, and ran for him.
He had to push Gina away in case Karma did her usual stunt. Which of course, she did. Shit. He caught Karma mid-
jump—right before she wrapped her boot and jean clad legs around his waist.

“Benji! You’re home!”

Gina didn’t know why Ben had pushed her aside until she saw the kamikaze suicide-blonde running toward him.

Benji?

Ben wasted no time putting the girl back on the floor. “Hey, Karma. You gotta stop jumping me every time I see
you.”

“Why?”

The Amazon actually looked perplexed.

“Because you almost kicked Gina.”

“You brought her? You said she’d never step foot in Boise. Where the heck is she?”

Gina rolled her eyes. Okay, the girl stood almost a foot taller, but still, was she blind? “You might want to look
down here.” Gina raised her hand and waved it.

“Oh, I didn’t expect someone so… short.”
“Yeah, that was obvious. I guess they grow everything bigger out here.”

It looked as if Karma didn’t know what to say to that so she just stuck her hands into the pockets of her jeans and stared. Gina knew she was being measured, but she couldn’t find the energy to be annoyed. It was obvious by the way everyone else’s attention was riveted on her that no one knew quite what to make of her. Just as well, let them wonder.

Ben put his arm back around her and led her to the table where his cousins waited. Trapper was already there. Women buzzed around the table and Gina could see why. Jeez, were all the Idaho men this good looking? The twins stood as soon as they reached the table. Hunter, the bigger of the two, shook her hand. “Gina, it’s great to finally meet you. And let me just say, Ben’s description didn’t do you justice.”

Ben pulled her closer. “Cut the shit, Hunter. She’s married, remember?”

Fisher gave her a smile. “I’m Fisher, the smarter twin. Not to mention better looking.” He pulled a chair over for her and held it as she sat.

“Nice to meet you both.”

Hunter grabbed his chair, spun it around, and sat. “Do you drink beer? Or can I get you something else?”

“Do they have Grey Goose Dirty Martinis here?”

“Is that a girly drink? ’Cause if it is, I’ll have Karma fetch it.”

“No, it’s not girly. I know a lot of real men who drink it.”

“Yeah, but that’s not saying much. Look at who you married.”

Ben gave him a shove. “I’ll get our drinks. Do you guys want another pitcher?”

They didn’t bother answering. They just divvied up what was left of the pitcher and handed him the empty.

Ben leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Don’t move.”

“Where do you think I’m gonna go? I don’t even know where I am.”

“You’re in Boise. I’ll be right back.”

Ben turned to leave as Trapper sat and pushed his hat back. “Ben’s the real deal, huh? He’s turning into a regular ball and chain.”

Gina decided it was best if she kept her thoughts to herself. She looked around. “Karma, do you know where the ladies room is?”

Karma pointed at the far corner of the bar, on the other side of the dance floor.

“I’m just going to go freshen up, it was a long flight.”

The guys all stood as she left. At least they had manners in Idaho. She walked around the dance floor and begged out of a half a dozen offers for a good time, not likely, as well as dances, as if she knew what the hell they were doing on that dance floor. She finally made it to the restroom, did her thing, freshened her makeup, and when she exited she ran into a mountain of a shaggy man. He smiled and a gold tooth winked out at her. “Excuse me.” She moved to her left to get past him and he blocked her.

“I was wait’n for you.”

“That’s a shame. I’m not interested.”

She stepped right and he blocked her again, but this time he wrapped his paw around her waist.

“Look, I said I’m not interested. Now I’m warning you. Get your hand off me or I’ll be forced to hurt you.”

The man laughed at her. “Why, a little thing like you couldn’t hurt a fly.”

She put one hand on his neck, pushed down on that spot Sam had shown her and, at the same time, pulled his thumb back with her other hand. It worked like a charm; the man was on his knees in less time than it would have taken her to kick him in the balls. “Told you.”

As soon as the brute dropped, she saw Ben hurrying toward her with a look on his face that made her want to go back to Hairy—almost.

“I told you not to move! I knew something like this would happen.”

Gina put her hands on her hips to keep from giving Ben the same treatment she gave Hairy. “I’m more than capable of going to the ladies room on my own.” She looked down at the guy who was pulling himself off the floor. “I’ve wrestled bigger cockroaches than him in Harlem, so don’t you dare give me any of your crap.”

Someone behind Ben started clapping and Gina looked up to find Hunter, Fisher, and Trapper backing her up. Trapper tipped his hat at her, which she took as some kind of cowboy salute, so she smiled at him, walked past Ben, and went back to the table.

The guys taught her some strange dance called the two-step, which entailed walking backwards most of the time, something at which she excelled, while Ben spent the night stewing. Karma pulled her into a line dance, which was easy to pick up, and then Gina accepted dances from a few other guys who’d asked nicely. The entire time, Ben looked on from the edge of the dance floor as if he wanted to kill someone. Since it wasn’t her problem, she didn’t waste time worrying about it. It occurred to Gina the only man she hadn’t danced with was Ben, which was just as
well; she figured he’d just spend his time lecturing her. Frankly, she got enough of that from her brother-in-law Sam, although she’d have to thank him for showing her that pressure point move. It certainly came in handy.

Ben wanted to pick his wife up off the dance floor where some guy had his hand too damn close to her ass, throw her over his shoulder, and leave, but she was already dancing with someone else. When he went back to the table, Trapper gave him a look and Ben was tempted to leave to avoid what he knew was coming, but he had nowhere to go.

“Gina sure is having a good time. Who’d have thought your big city girl would get along with all of us rednecks so well.”

Ben watched some guy twirling her around the dance floor and growled.

“Wanna tell me why you’re sittin’ here when your wife is out there having a great time with everyone but you?”

Ben took a sip of lukewarm beer and refilled his mug.

“You could get off your fat ass, change that scowl you’re wearin’ into a smile, and cut in.”

Ben took a long drink from his beer and ignored Trapper. What did he know?

“You’re just pissed you weren’t there to save the damsel in distress. Well, shit, Ben. I hardly know Gina, but even I know she can take care of herself. Looks to me like she’s been doing it for years before she met you, and that was in New York. Shorty’s hardly compares to Spanish Harlem, even on a night like this.”

Trapper tipped up his hat and looked Ben in the eye. “Ignore me all you like, but you’d get a whole lot farther with your wife if you were more proud of her standing her ground than pissed off at yourself for not being there to protect her. I don’t know when you turned into such a horse’s ass, but if you want the little lady talking to you for the rest of your so-called marriage, you better change your tune.”

Ben had about as much of Trapper’s advice as he could stand without planting his fist in Trapper’s face. If he did that, he’d have to answer to Kate, which was never a good thing. He got up, stalked to the dance floor, and cut in.

Gina looked shocked to see him. He tried for a smile as the song changed to a slow one, pulled her close, and for the first time all night, relaxed.

“You want to tell me who pissed in your Cheerios?”

“What?”

“You heard me, you’ve been sitting at the table grimacing or standing on the edge of the dance floor looking like you were… what was it that guy said? Loaded for bear? Whatever that means. I guess it’s Idaho vernacular. You can explain it to me.”

“I was worried about you when that guy—”

“Fell to his knees? Oh yeah, I was in some danger there. Give me a break. You’re going to have to come up with something better than that.”

“I told you not to move.”

“Do you mind telling me where in the marriage vows it says I’m supposed to obey? Here’s a clue—it doesn’t. I think that was taken out of the vows in the ’70s. You really have to keep up with this stuff, Ben.”

“Can we stop fighting and just dance?” He tucked her head under his chin.

Gina pulled away. “Sure, I’d be happy to, just as soon as you apologize for acting like a Neanderthal.”

“Okay, I’m sorry.”

Gina looked up at him and smiled. “There, that’s better.” Then she tucked her head under his chin and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He took a deep breath of relief and got a big whiff of her perfume. She smelled like blueberries and vanilla. He hadn’t expected that. The scent was soft, subtle, and so unlike Gina but it definitely worked for her. “You smell amazing.”

“It’s pretty sad we’ve been married over a month and this is the first time we’ve gotten close enough for you to notice my perfume.”

Ben didn’t bother to tell her that it was the second time he’d noticed how great she smelled. Just that morning in bed, he’d gotten a good whiff of it too, but he’d been so worried she’d notice his hard-on that he hadn’t mentioned it, which was probably for the better. The discussion made him wonder how he was going to survive sleeping with Gina for the next month without touching her.

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Five minutes into the drive home from Shorty’s, Ben saw Gina had fallen asleep in the back of Trapper’s Sequoia. As soon as Trapper noticed, he smiled at Ben. “I see you took my advice and apologized for being an asshole.”

“Yeah, don’t let it go to your head.”

“I was just going to tell you that you’re a fool. You married her, and you’re not going to sleep with her? What are
Ben was already busy kicking his own ass for letting her believe he was gay. The last thing he was going to do was admit it to Trapper. He’d never live it down, not to mention that Trapper would tell the rest of the clan which would mean he’d have to hear it times four. He might not be too bright, but he wasn’t stupid. “Our sex life is none of your business.”

“Ben. If you don’t want her, can I borrow her? I wouldn’t mind spending a very memorable seventy-two hours with a girl like Gina.”

“If you so much as look at Gina sideways, I’ll kick your ass from here to Montana and back again. Are we clear on that?”

Trapper let go of the wheel long enough to throw both hands up. “Crystal. I was just saying, a girl like Gina doesn’t usually go without.”

“I’m not discussing my wife’s sex life with you.”

Trapper shrugged. “Or maybe you have a few plans of your own. It’s gonna be awful hard to explain to Grandpa Joe why you and the missus are sleeping in two different bedrooms. Not to mention explaining it to my mom.”

“Get your head out of the gutter and drive before I’m forced to hurt you. Then you won’t be worth the trouble to any woman, not even my wife.”

“Well, I for one am very glad you’re home. The two of you are gonna be really interesting to watch. We’ve been a little short on entertainment around here lately.”

Trapper drove up to Grandpa’s house and parked by the front door. “Why don’t you wake up your wife while I drag the bags in? I assume you’re going to your room.”

“Yeah, we are.” Ben got out and opened the back passenger door. Gina was all curled up and sleeping soundly. He didn’t want to wake her, but he’d be damned if he’d carry her and let Trapper get a glimpse of what was under that skirt. “Gina, we’re home, sweetheart. Time to wake up.”

Her eyes winked open and she smiled such a warm beautiful smile, he just stared. “I was just dreaming… it was nice.”

Ben wrapped his leather duster around her. It was so long, it dragged on the ground, but he didn’t care. It was worth it to keep that smile on her face.

“Come on, let’s get you inside and put you to bed.” He steered Gina through the house and into his room. Trapper had dumped their bags on the floor beside the closet and gave them a quick salute as he left the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Alone, finally. Ben pulled the bed covers down before he took the coat off her shoulders. She leaned toward him as he caught her in his arms. Gina had definitely hit the wall. “Where are your nightgowns?”

She shrugged. “Can I just have one of your T-shirts to sleep in? I don’t want to go digging through both suitcases.”

Ben pulled one out of his dresser and when he turned around to hand it to her, she’d already stripped down to her bra and thong. He blinked to make sure he wasn’t seeing things. She was even more gorgeous than he’d imagined, and he’d spent a whole lot of time imagining how Gina would look naked. Unfortunately or fortunately, depending upon how he looked at it, his imagination didn’t do her justice, which was hard to believe, because he had one hell of an imagination. It didn’t help that she wore a bright red bra that barely covered her exceptional breasts. He swallowed hard, and although he’d tried to make himself turn around, it seemed as if all parts of his body stopped functioning except his dick. “The bathroom is through there.” He nodded in the direction, so okay, both his heads were functioning.

Gina took the jersey from him, turned around, showing him her back and her amazing ass, and unhooked her bra. “What does it matter since you’re gay and all? I’m not shy. Besides, we’re married and we’re stuck sleeping in the same bed. Believe me, I won’t complain about you changing in front of me.”

She probably would if she saw the condition his dick was in. She slipped the blue Boise State Broncos v-neck jersey over her head and turned before she managed to get her arms through the armholes. The nipples that peeked out from beneath the hem were dusky rose and puckered. Ben’s mouth watered.

Gina smirked. “Are you going to just stand there, or are you going to get in bed? Which side do you want?”

“You go ahead. I think I’ll grab a quick shower.” A cold one, but she didn’t need to hear that. “Take whichever side you prefer.” He went through his drawers and found a pair of sleep pants Kate had bought him for Christmas a few years ago. He’d never worn clothes to bed, but that was before he started sleeping with Gina. God help him.
Gina lay in bed thinking about Ben. When she’d danced with him, she snuggled close and she thought she felt a subtle pressure on her belly. When she’d moved closer, she’d been sure of it. Then when she stripped, the poor guy’s eyes practically bugged out of his head. He was either lying about being gay, really, really confused, or bi.

The more she thought about it, the more sense it made that he had lied to her about his sexual preference. None of his friends seemed shocked that he’d married a woman. And she’d seen a few women approach him at the bar, women he obviously knew, and they left looking depressed when he’d turned them down. Gina formed a plan while he was in the shower, and she couldn’t help but pray she was right. If she was, this marriage thing might actually work out, temporarily.

Ten minutes later when Ben emerged from the bathroom, Gina pretended she was asleep. He tiptoed to bed, staying clear on the other side and laying so still, he hardly breathed. A few minutes later, he slid farther down, punched his pillow, and snuggled in. She let him lie there a moment before making her move. Resting her head on his shoulder, she threw her leg over him, making sure it landed right on his dick.

Let the fun begin.

Gina trailed her hand to the waistband of his sleep pants. His abs tightened as her hand roamed back to tangle with his chest hair. God he had a great body.

She snuggled closer, her breasts pressing against his chest. He tried to scoot away, but there was no room, she’d made sure of it. He was stuck. She ran her hand over his chest again. Ben groaned, his nipples hardening beneath her fingers as she raised her head, brushing her lips against his neck.

“Gina, for God’s sake, roll over.” He gave her a gentle push as he rolled onto his side.

Sure, no problem. She scooted back against him, wiggling her bum, spooning, and stirring things up even more. The hard ridge of his erection rested between her cheeks. She really hoped he wasn’t gay. If he were, he wouldn’t have a hard-on, would he?

Ben got out of bed grumbling and got in on the other side. Fine, she’d just move back over there. This time, when she threw her leg over him, she felt his hips lift. Gotcha!

He rolled onto his side, but he made the mistake of facing her. When his erection came in contact with the crotch of her thong, it was her turn to groan. Her breath caught in her throat as she nuzzled his neck, waiting for his arms to come around her, but they didn’t. He lay stiff as a post, barely breathing. She had half a mind to just pull those pajama pants he wore down and take things in hand, but no, that would be too easy. She wanted him to lose control and fess up, if there were something to fess up to. If not, she’d be sorely disappointed, not to mention frustrated.

Ben went right from Dante’s second level of hell, to the eighth. The second, he knew, was lust. He’d spent the last month feeling the heat—firmly entrenched in level two. If he remembered correctly, the eighth level was fraud. A fraud would be the perfect description of him at that moment. The woman of his dreams was quite literally wrapped around him, his erection was hard enough to drive nails, and he was supposed to be gay. For the first time in his life, he wished he were. He blew out the breath he’d been holding and bet that even a gay man would have a difficult time in his position. He wondered how many nights a man could go without sleep and sex and stay sane while sharing a bed with a woman like Gina. Right now, he’d settle for two.

The scent of her perfume filled his head, along with the scent of hot, wet woman. She slid closer and the jersey she wore opened to show a huge expanse of chest. He shut his eyes and began counting backward from 1000 by threes. 997.

Gina bent her leg, causing her foot to press against his ass, which in turn pressed her pelvis against his. 994. If he woke her, the jig would be up, which could prove to be positive or very negative. With Gina, one never knew.

“Ohhh…”

Ben swallowed hard, she ground against him, and her foot trapped him. 991. Shit, he couldn’t think. All he could do was feel the heat of her body. He wasn’t sure if the dampness he felt was due to him or to her. He had to count backward by ones to figure out the next number, 988.

His heart pounded as he tried to figure out if he’d be able to extricate himself if he rolled Gina onto her back. That would put him on top of her and maybe then he could get out of bed and sleep on the floor.
Taking a deep breath, he rolled on top of her and immediately realized his mistake. Gina wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him down. Shit. When her arms came around his neck, he gave up and kissed her like he'd wanted to since he left her on the stoop of their Brooklyn brownstone. Gina sucked on his tongue like a Hoover, causing his erection to jump. He broke the kiss and gave her a shake.

“Gina, please tell me you’re awake.”
She ran her hands down his back and grabbed his ass. “Please tell me you’re not gay.”
“Fuck.”
She opened her eyes. “Is that a yes or a no?”
“What the hell do you think?” He ground his pelvis into hers. “Does this feel as if I’m gay?”
“No. You might be a liar, but you’re definitely not gay.”
He laid his forehead against hers and squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m sorry.”
“That you lied, or that you’re not gay?”
He raised his head to look her in the eye, which only pressed his very happy erection harder against her. He swallowed his urge to move and tried very hard to concentrate on the conversation. “I’m sorry I lied. I never meant for this to happen.”
“Ben?” Her hands ran down his back and beneath the waistband, then over his ass before sliding his pants down.
“Do you think we can discuss the whole lie thing later?” She must not have expected an answer because as soon as he opened his mouth, she stuck her tongue in it.
Damn, he never expected a wife to kiss like that, nor had he expected her to feel the way she felt beneath him. He never imagined marriage had any perks. Hell, he never thought he could think of the word marriage and still have a hard-on. With Gina, all things were possible.
He drew out the kiss, tongues and teeth clashing, warring for control. She tasted sweet and spicy, and hot all over. God, he wanted her.
She broke the kiss, licked her lips, and nudged him. “Um, we need protection. Ben, please tell me you have something close by.”
“What?”
“A condom, a rubber, a raincoat? I don’t care what you call it in Boise as long as you have one.”
“Right.” He tried to engage his brain. Did he have any in his bedside table? He never brought women to his grandfather’s house, so he didn’t think so. His shaving kit? Maybe. He stumbled out of bed, forgetting his pants were around his knees and he barely kept from falling as he kicked them off.
Gina didn’t bother hiding her laugh, but at that point, Ben didn’t care. He switched on the closet light and clawed through his luggage to find his shaving kit, which contained two condoms. “Thank you, God.”
The Bronco’s jersey she wore hit him in the chest as he turned toward the bed, her thong followed, and Ben found himself staring. She was simply amazing. “You’re incredibly beautiful.”
“And you’re still not forgiven. It’s going to take a whole lot more than two condoms to make up for the hell you’ve put me through this past month.”
“I promise, I’ll buy out a store tomorrow.”
She blew the hair out of her eyes. “Are you going to stand there staring at me, or are you gonna use those?”
Ben threw the condoms on the bed and sat beside her, not sure what part of her to sample first.
Gina ripped open the condom. Okay, she obviously knew what she wanted. He’d forgotten who he was in bed with. “Hold on, what’s the rush?”
“Rush?” She spit out something in Spanish, and not for the first time, Ben wished he’d paid more attention in class, but he also surmised the kind of Spanish she was speaking would not be taught in school.
“We have all night, and I for one don’t want to waste a second of it, especially not arguing.”
Gina looked perplexed. Obviously she was used to ordering men around in her bed. What she’d forgotten was that this was his bed, and he wasn’t the type of man to do as he was told. Gina was in for a real surprise. He pushed the pillows up behind him and lay back against them. “Why don’t you come over here?”
She rolled her eyes. “I want to get to the good stuff.”
“Sweetheart, with me it’s all good stuff.”
In an obvious attempt to humor him, Gina threw her leg over his, and sat on his thighs facing him.
“There now, that wasn’t so difficult, was it?”
“Don’t push your luck, cowboy.”
Ben could spend hours just looking at her and be satisfied. She, however, didn’t look as patient. He cupped the back of her head in his hand, his fingers scissoring through her hair as he ate her mouth, slow and easy. He nibbled her lips, exploring her mouth, chasing her tongue, wrestling for control.
Gina scooted up and her breasts brushed his chest. God, he loved kissing her. He moved from her mouth to her
neck and rolled them over. Ben expected her to fight him, but no, she went with it as he roamed her neck, nipping and licking, listening to her sighs and moans. He kissed a trail to her breast, and she took a deep breath and held it as he teased the first dusky peak. When he sucked her nipple into his mouth, she purred and anchored his head as if she thought he might move. No chance of that, he could do this all night.

Ben lay on his side, his hand exploring her soft skin, her other breast, and then blazed a path down her rib cage. Her hips rose with every tug of his mouth on her breast. Her moans grew louder and her scent grew stronger as her hand trailed down his chest, toward his erection.

Oh no, he wasn’t sure he could take that now. He moved lower, out of reach, kissing the underside of her breasts, trailing his tongue down over her stomach as his hand slid over her mound and teased the soft skin of her inner thighs. Ben pressed his erection against the mattress to keep from jumping her. He felt like a damn teenager. He was so close, it was embarrassing.

Taking her hips in his hands, he positioned himself between her legs and lifted her to his mouth, licking and sucking the hot, swollen flesh. Her legs spread, opening to him. His tongue speared into her, tasting, sucking, tormenting. Ben flattened his tongue against the sensitive bundle of nerves as she vibrated beneath him.

He slid one finger deep inside her, withdrew it, and then slid a second in. Her every muscle tightened around them as she grabbed his hair. She tasted like heaven, sweet and hot. He curled his fingers inside her as his tongue continued its torment.

She screamed his name before she came hard and fast; it took both of them by surprise. There was intense heat and wetness, his fingers slid in and out, her inner muscles flexed, drawing them deeper as he let off the pressure of his mouth, letting her ride out the climax to the fullest. When he raised his head to look at her, her face and chest were rosy and her eyes looked almost gold. “You’re so beautiful.”

Gina couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t think, all she could do was stare at Ben, stunned. She’d never been with a man whose only agenda seemed to be pleasing her. Ben pulled her into his arms, held her close, and stroked her lazily. When she recovered enough to move, she rolled toward him until they were nose to nose and kissed him, tasting herself on his tongue and lips. Just one kiss and she wanted him even more than before. The incredible orgasm he’d given her hadn’t sated her in the least. She smiled as she sucked his earlobe into her mouth and bit down. She just wanted to eat him up.

Gina gave him a nudge and he rolled over onto his back. She kissed him softly as she scooted down his body. Ben reached for the condom but she just shook her head and stared at his erection. “There’s no rush, right, cowboy?”

She lowered her head and sucked on his flat nipple, eliciting a groan from him.

“It’s not fair to use my own words against me.”

“No one said we had to play fair.” Her tongue trailed down his chest, tracing the contracting ridges of his stomach muscles.

“Gina, sweetheart, I’m kind of on the edge here.”

“Oh good. I love to see a man lose control.” Wrapping her fingers around his erection, she nuzzled it, taking in his musky scent and traced the throbbing vein from base to tip with her tongue, tasting him. She swirled her tongue around the head before sucking him deep into her mouth.

Ben’s hand cupped her head as he groaned.

Tightening her grip at the base, she stroked the length of him, her mouth following her fist, taking him deep. His erection throbbed against the back of her throat.

Ben’s hips raised off the mattress, and when she cupped his balls in her hand, he pushed her away. “Gina, stop or it’s going to end before it even gets started.”

She lifted her head and licked her lips. She loved the feeling of power, she loved the taste of him, and she wanted to see him lose control. “Don’t tell me you’re a one-shot wonder. If you come, we’ll just play around until you’re ready for round two. It’s all good. Remember?”

“Oh no. I want to be inside of you, and I want it now. I’m sorry, sweetheart, but this time I’m on top.”

Gina wasn’t quite sure how he managed it, but before she knew what happened, she was flat on her back looking into the eyes of one very determined man. Ben’s jaw clenched as he rolled on a condom. His mouth covered hers, stealing the air from her lungs, breathing the breath that escaped as he entered her in one long, slow thrust. Ben stilled, staring at her, searching for something, as if he wanted to see into her soul. Too close, too much. She closed her eyes, shutting him out and kissed him. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she moved beneath him.

“Gina, look at me.”

Her eyes locked on his as she reminded herself this was just sex. The fact that they were technically married didn’t make a bit of difference.

He slid out slowly and thrust back filling her to the hilt. “God, you feel so good.” His kiss stole her thoughts and filled her with feelings she couldn’t name, feelings she didn’t want. All she wanted was more. More of him. She
sucked on his tongue, urging him on to no avail. He kept up a slow, almost leisurely pace, tormenting her, driving her up, and keeping her on the edge of madness.

“Ben, please.”
“Tell me what you want.”
“I want it all.” Her nails bit into his shoulders, she swiveled her hips and dug her heels into his back. He grabbed the headboard above and let loose. Her orgasm crashed around her as his hips pistonned. One orgasm rolled into the next. She’d never experienced anything like it. It was unbelievable. “Oh God. Yes!”

Gina met him thrust for thrust, and every time, he seemed to go deeper, hitting her cervix, filling her with a combination of pleasure and pain. Her whole body spasmed, she arched her back as his control snapped. His jaw clenched, his face shined with sweat, and his muscles quivered. Ben groaned out her name and came, thrusting again and again until he collapsed on top of her.

She held him as mini-explosions shot through her. He was heavy, but a good heavy. Her body felt as if it melted into the mattress, and when he tried to move, she stopped him. “Stay for a little while.”
“I’m crushing you.” He rolled them both over as if she were weightless. She scooted lower, feeling him grow inside her as he tried to hold her still. “Gina, if you’re ready for round two, I have to get rid of the condom.”
“No, I’m just getting comfortable. I’ll behave.”
“Right, like I believe that one. I was born, just not yesterday.”

His hands massaged her back and her ass, causing sparks to shoot up her spine and her breath to catch. She looked up at him and smiled. “You keep that up, and I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

He eased himself out of her and left her feeling empty. “Promises, promises.” He gave her a sweet kiss before he scooted out from beneath her and walked naked to the bathroom. Her eyes closed and she listened to the water running. She must have fallen asleep and awoke with a start when she felt the warmth of a wet washcloth gently wiping her off. Her eyes shot open and heat ran to her face as embarrassment hit her. “What are you doing?”
“I hogged the bathroom, I thought you might like to freshen up.”
“I can do it myself.”
“Sure, but why should you?” He actually looked mystified.

She didn’t know what to say to that, so she just took the cloth from him and ran into the bathroom, grabbing his shirt on the way. When she returned to bed clad in his jersey, he was waiting for her. Why couldn’t he just fall asleep after sex like every other man? There was no escape.

**Madre de Dios,** what had she gotten herself into?

“Are you coming back to bed?”
“Where else is there to go?” She really wished there was someplace. She wasn’t used to having a guy stay with her.

Ben looked concerned. “You’re not getting weird on me, are you?”
Gina sat down on the bed and pulled the covers over her legs. “No weirder than usual. I’m just not used to this.”

Ben scooted closer, pulling her into his arms. “What?”

Gina threw her hands up. “You know, talking after sex, sleeping with someone. All of this togetherness crap. It’s just not natural.”

He scooted down in bed pulling her along with him. “You slept with your sister.”

“Yeah, but you’re definitely not my sister. I don’t sleep with men.”

Ben pulled her against him so they were spooning, his arm cushioning her head. “You slept with me last night.”

“That’s when I thought you were gay. Now I know you’re not.”

“And that’s a problem because?”

“Because you have an erection pressing against my ass and you’re talking to me. I don’t usually have conversations with men I have sex with.” She scooted back against him as his hand slid into the v-neck of her shirt, toying with her breasts. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Talking can be highly overrated.” He pinched her nipple and slid his erection between her legs, teasing her.

“Exactly.”

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Ben awoke slowly, reached over to grab Gina—wishing he’d brought more than two condoms with him—and encountered nothing but cold sheets. He cracked his eyes open, wondering if she’d gone to the bathroom, but the door was open and the shirt he’d ripped off of her within minutes of her putting it back on was still lying on the floor. “Shit.”

He got out of bed and stomped to the bathroom. The shower was still wet. She couldn’t have gone far. He brushed his teeth, threw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and went looking for his wife.
He walked bleary-eyed to the coffee pot and poured a cup.

“Your wife is in the office.”

Ben looked up to find Kate standing beside Buck, a long-haul trucker who had been trying to win Kate’s affection for as long as Ben could remember. “How’s it going, Uncle Buck?”

Buck, a bear of a man, twirled the ends of his red mustache. “Pretty good, Ben. Though Kate’s not too happy.”

Ben nodded and smiled at Kate. “I take it you met Gina?”

Kate had her arms crossed looking like a bear ready to roar. “She made coffee. No one makes coffee in my kitchen but me. She and your grandfather have had their heads together all morning. They’re like peas in a pod, those two. They wouldn’t even let me fix them breakfast. They said they were too busy working.”

Ben’s hackles rose. What was Gina doing with his grandfather? He and Gina were supposed to be on their honeymoon, for God’s sake. She was supposed to be in bed with her husband, not getting involved in the family business. “What the hell are they working on?”

Kate shrugged her shoulders. “Beats me. All I know is I have better things to do than wait around for all of you. I’m making breakfast. If you’re too busy to eat it, that’s your problem. You can just tell that to your grandfather and your wife.”

Ben held up his hands in surrender. “They’ll stop what they’re doing to eat whatever you serve. I’ll make sure of it.”

Buck finished his coffee and rinsed the cup before setting it on the drain board. “I better be off; the truck won’t drive itself.”

Ben nodded to Buck and left them alone to say their good-byes. He stepped inside the office, and sure enough, Gina sat at the desk wearing another ridiculous cowboy outfit. This time it was painted-on jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt that fit her like a second skin. She had cat’s-eye, rhinestone glasses perched on her cute little nose and was running her long, red fingernail down the column of a spreadsheet.

“Here’s your problem, Joe. The receivables are off. See?” She moved closer to his grandfather and highlighted the line.

“Ben, hi. I was just helping your grandfather with one of his underperforming companies.” Gina rose and started talking with her hands, which meant she was uncomfortable. Well good. She should be.

Ben caught the title of the spreadsheet. Oh, yeah. He’d looked the very same spreadsheet over two weeks ago and told his grandfather the exact same thing. What was the old man up to? “I see.”

Gina wrapped her arms around his waist so he bent down for a kiss.

“I was up early and you were sleeping so soundly, I didn’t want to wake you. I got up because I needed coffee. I think I might have made a bad impression on Kate, though. I take it she doesn’t like anyone in her kitchen.”

“She’ll get over it. She’s making breakfast. If you want to get out of the doghouse, you’d better eat. Kate’s a little sensitive about that.” He looked at his grandfather. “Gramps, you know better than to piss Kate off first thing in the morning.”

“Well, shit, son, what’s the point of eating? That woman won’t feed me anything but tree bark anyway.”

“At least someone is listening to your doctors.”

Gramps took off his glasses and smiled. “Gina’s got one hell of a business head on her shoulders. Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t hire her?”

“Because she has a job she loves in New York and she’s not here to work. We’re on our honeymoon, remember?”

Gina stiffened in his arms. “Joe just asked me to look over a few things. I’m not working. I’m just not used to sitting around doing nothing.”

“If you were in bed with me when I woke up, you’d have your hands full, believe me.”

Gina rolled her eyes.

“Breakfast is ready,” Kate yelled down the hallway. “Come and get it before it goes cold.”

Ben turned toward the door. “We’re on our way.” He took Gina’s hand. “Come on. I hope you’re hungry.”

Kate had gone all out on a traditional Irish breakfast. There were two plates set for Gina and Ben and a bowl of bran flakes, a glass of tomato juice, and a pill sitting at the head of the table just waiting for Gramps. No wonder he wasn’t looking forward to eating.

Gramps sat, pushed the bran flakes away, and snarled. “Give me a damn plate, Kate. I can’t eat this crap.”

Kate stood beside him and huffed. “You’ll eat what I serve you and you’re lucky to get it.”

Gramps leaned over and whispered something in Gina’s ear that had her laughing as she served herself a plate full of bacon, sausage, potatoes, and eggs and moved her plate closer to Gramps. Every time Kate’s back was turned, Gramps would steal a bite of Gina’s food, leaving Ben feeling like the odd man out. He told himself he was being ridiculous, but shit, it rankled him to see Gina getting along better with his grandfather than she did with him.
Gramps stuffed a piece of Gina’s sausage in his mouth and swallowed it before Kate turned around. The old guy was lucky he didn’t choke.

“Ben, what are your plans? Are you gonna take Gina up to the ranch?”

“I have to call Delbert to make sure the bridge is passable, but yeah, I’d hoped to. We need to do some shopping before we go, though. Gina didn’t come prepared to go up to the mountains.”

Gina took a sip of her coffee and set her cup down. “I packed exactly what you told me to—jeans, boots, shirts I can layer. I even brought a jacket.”

Ben sat back in his chair and tried not to laugh at her. “Sweetheart, you brought boots with four-inch heels. You won’t last an hour wearing those in the mountains. No, you need a whole new wardrobe.”

Gina’s brows drew together and she squinched up her nose. “Don’t expect me to wear ugly clothes.”

Gramps stole a piece of bacon off her plate and pointed it at her. “Shit, Gina. You could wear a damn potato sack and make it look like it just came off the rack at Saks Fifth Avenue.”

Kate stepped over to him, took the bacon right out of his hand, and pushed the bran cereal in front of him. “Kate, would you let me be? Can’t a man steal a little bit of bacon from his granddaughter?”

“Not if you’re gonna use it as a pointer. You’re gonna have to be quicker than that. You’re getting slow in your old age.”

Gramps threw his spoon on the table. “Tell me about it. You ain’t gettin’ any younger either, Kate.”

She smacked his shoulder right before she took a bite of the bacon and walked toward the stove. “Smart-aleck woman.”

“Ornery old goat.”

Ben took Gina’s hand. “You about done there?” He really hoped she was because all he could think about was kissing her everywhere.

She pushed her plate closer to Gramps, nodded, and wiped her mouth on her napkin, taking off all of her lipstick. Ben pulled her out of her chair. “You look good like that.”

“Like what?”

“You wiped off your lipstick.” He stole a kiss. “You don’t need it.”

“You need glasses, cowboy.”

Ben picked up their breakfast dishes, leaving Gina’s for his grandfather, and took them to the sink. “No, but we do need to clean our room before Kate sees it. She’ll start yelling about how she’s not a maid.” He rinsed them and put them in the dishwasher.

Kate went back to the table, gave Gramps a cup of coffee—probably decaf knowing Kate—and took Gina’s plate away from him. “At least one man in the family has a few brain cells left. Of course, it’s because I pounded it into him. You need to tell Gina about the time you had to clean the entire house for a month after that party you threw while your grandfather was out of the country.”

Ben shushed her. “Kate, I thought we had a deal.”

“Ha, shows how much you know. I called him the very next morning and told him all about it.”

Gramps threw his napkin down on the table. “I’m old, but I’m not deaf. Don’t be talkin’ about me like I’m not here. And hell, I was proud of the boy. It was about time he loosened up and had a little fun. You were what, fifteen?”

“Sixteen. I hated having to clean the house, but it kind of grew on me.”

Kate winked at Gina. “You can thank me later. I made sure all my boys pulled their weight around the house. They’re all great cooks, they clean, and Ben even seems to enjoy it.”

Gina laughed and leaned on the counter beside him. “That’s a load off my mind. I was wondering how I was going to clean a five-story brownstone. Now you’ve given me ideas. I’m sure Ben’s going to look great wearing an apron.”

If someone was gonna’ dress up, it certainly wouldn’t be him. But he’d have no problem with Gina putting on some of that lingerie he’d seen peeking out of her suitcase and drawers. Ben grabbed Gina’s hand and pulled her from the kitchen, hurrying her to the bedroom. Kate’s and Gramps’ laughter followed them down the hall. He pulled Gina into the room, kicked the door shut, and backed her up against it before he slid his mouth over hers, lifting her off her feet.
Gina let Ben pull her into the bedroom and kiss her like a man just released from ten years in solitary confinement. Once his lips slid down to her neck, she took a breath. “I thought you wanted to clean and go shopping. You’re getting me all worked up here when there’s not much we can do until you hit the nearest drugstore, cowboy.”

“You just don’t have as good of an imagination as I do.”

Gina tightened her legs around his waist; his hands grabbed her ass as she wiggled against his erection. Damn him. “I have a great imagination, but I don’t have sex without protection. Ever.”

“But you’re on the pill.”

Gina dropped her legs from around his waist. “How do you know that?”

“You threw them on top of your makeup case. They’re pretty hard to miss.”

He still hadn’t put her down. “Just because I’m on the pill doesn’t mean I’m going to sleep with you without protection.”

Ben shrugged. “Shit, Gina, we’re married. I’m clean, I assume you are too.”

“Of course I’m clean. But our marriage is temporary, remember? That hasn’t changed just because you’re not gay. As far as I’m concerned, nothing has changed.”

Ben finally put her down and stepped back. “How can you say that after last night?”

Gina shook her head. “Do you actually think our having sex changes anything?” When he just stared at her, she knew she had to be honest. “Ben, sex with you is great, but it doesn’t change anything about our deal, except that we’re having more fun than we expected. That’s all it is, meaningless fun.”

“As long as we have protection.”

The look on Ben’s face made her want to take a step back. She couldn’t tell if he was angry because she’d refused to sleep with him or because she’d made a point. Still, it wasn’t her problem.

“Fine, then. I’m going to take another cold shower. I cleaned out the drawers on the left hand side of the dresser if you feel like putting your clothes away, go for it.” He went into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Crap. She picked up her phone and dialed Rosalie. When she answered, Gina took a deep breath. “Thanks a lot for selling me down the river. Some best friend you turned out to be.”

“Ah, I assume you’re calling me from Idaho. How’s the honeymoon going?”

Gina threw herself on the bed. “You were right, Ben’s not gay.”

“And it took you a month and a half of marriage to figure that out? I guess you’re not as bright as I thought you were.”

“He lied to me.”

“He did?”

“Well, not technically. But he didn’t tell me I was wrong when I said he was gay.”

“That’s a lie, but it sounds like you forgave him. So, was it fun?”

“What?”

“The sex?”

“I’m not going to talk to you about sex.”

“Why not? You always have before. Even when it was with my own brother, remember? I had to stick my fingers in my ears and sing loudly.”

Gina laughed. “Yeah, but that was just because I wanted to watch you make an ass out of yourself.”

“You would. So, if everything is so rosy, why are you calling me?”

Gina rolled over on her stomach and pulled her feet up over her butt so she didn’t get her boots on the covers.

“We kinda had a fight.”

“What did you say now? Didn’t I tell you to be nice?”

“He knows I’m on the pill.”

“So?”

“So, he found my pills and just assumed I’d sleep with him without protection.”

“Sheesh, Gina. You are married to the man. As long as you’re both disease free—”

“Don’t you think that’s just too… I don’t know… intimate?”
“Gina! You’re having sex with him. Hell, I know you’ve examined his tonsils not to mention his… well, I’m assuming you’ve inspected the other interesting parts of him too. But having sex without a condom is too intimate? Are you serious?”

“You think I’m being—”

“Ridiculous? Yeah. I do.”

“Come on, Rosalie. Don’t hold back. Tell me what you really think.”

“Look, why don’t you get off the phone with your best friend and go apologize to your very cute but temporary husband. You might as well enjoy him while you have him. Oh, and be nice. You need to practice being nice.”

“I’m always nice.”

“Except when you’re not, which is usually. Look, I’m not lounging around on my honeymoon; I actually have work to do. It sounds as if you might too. Now go try to be nice, please.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “I guess we’re going to his ranch, so if I have cell reception, I’ll call you.”

“You’re on your honeymoon. Tell me, did I call you during my honeymoon?”

“No. What’s your point?”

“My point is, oh Slow One, when you’re on your honeymoon, you’re not supposed to call your friends. You’re supposed to have copious amounts of sex and spend time with your husband.”

“Maybe in a real marriage, but ours is not real. Besides, I’m not even sure I like him.”

“Gina, use your head. Ben is funny, gorgeous, rich, and probably great in bed. What’s not to like? Oh, and in the eyes of the law, your marriage is as real as mine. Try to enjoy yourself and for God’s sake be nice. I have to go back to work. Bye, I love you.”

Rosalie disconnected the call. Gina hit end and tossed her phone on the bed. She really had to re-think the whole best friend thing. Weren’t best friends supposed to tell you what you wanted to hear and make you feel better? Then she thought back to what she’d said to Rosalie about Nick when they were dating. Gina figured she hadn’t told Rosalie what she wanted to hear either—not that Gina would ever admit it. Still, no matter what Rosalie said, this was different. She and Ben may have had sex, and they may be married, but that didn’t change the fact that they were just bed buddies. Nothing more.

Gina nodded to herself and threw her suitcase on the bed to unpack. She yanked open the top drawer a little too hard and pulled it right off the rails. Okay, she was angry. She couldn’t believe Ben had the nerve to be pissed at her because she insisted on using protection. The boy was just going to have to get over his bad self. She slid the drawer back on its tracks and pulled her socks and underwear in before slamming it shut. It would serve him right if last night was the first and last sexual experience they ever shared. It would be a real shame though, because he rang her bells like St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Christmas morning. Madre de Dios, if the first and second time they had sex were that astounding, she could just imagine what it’d be like after the break-in period. She sat back on the bed and swore her nipples perked up at the thought. What was wrong with her? She liked sex as much as the next person, but she never sat around thinking about it, no less getting herself all hot and bothered. Gina threw her nightgowns in the next drawer, turned around, and found Ben walking toward her wearing nothing but a towel. She had to hand it to him. He sure looked good.

Ben opened his top drawer, took out a pair of boxer-briefs, and dropped the towel.

He looked really, really good.

“Are you almost ready to go? Or should I just write down your sizes and buy what you need?” He bent over and pulled on his boxer-briefs, giving her a great view of his ass. Gina was never an ass girl; she was more of the broad-shouldered, thin-waist lover. Unfortunately for her, Ben had it all.

She blinked her eyes and reminded herself she was pissed at him and he was pissed at her. “I’m not the one standing around in his underwear. I’ll go but only because there is no way in hell that I’m going to trust you to buy me clothes when you’re in such a lovely mood.”

Ben pulled on a pair well-worn Wranglers leaving the fly unzipped as he pushed his head through the collar of a white T-shirt, buttoned, tucked, and zipped. “Suit yourself. I’d rather have you with me anyway. God only knows what would happen if you and my grandfather are left to your own devices.”

Gina grabbed her jeans and went to the closet to hang them. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Ben joined her in the walk-in closet and cornered her against the wall. “Just what I said. I wake up to find that you’ve slipped out of my bed and the next thing I know, you’re conspiring with my grandfather.”

“Paranoid much?” Gina pushed her pants into his arms and gave him a shove back before she took a hanger off the rack and hung them. She took the next pair out of his arms, and holding them by the waistband, gave them a snap before folding them over another hanger. “Do you honestly think I have any interest in your grandfather’s companies?” When Ben didn’t say anything, she gave him a hard look. “He asked me to take a look at the spreadsheet because his eyes weren’t as sharp as they used to be. Not that I believed a word of it. There’s nothing
wrong with that man’s vision or brain, which is more than I can say for yours.”

Ben straightened the two pair of jeans she’d hung and hung the last pair himself. “Okay, I admit I overreacted.”

Gina watched him separate each hanger by one inch on each side; the man was too neat for words. Shirts hung equidistant from each other, all the blue oxfords together, blue striped, whites, yellows, pinks, reds, and red pin stripes. She hadn’t even started on his suits and blazers. His shoe racks were full of everything from shined loafers and oxford dress boots, cowboy boots, and what she heard someone at Shorty’s refer to as shit-kickers. She shook her head. Ben’s closet looked as if it belonged to someone with multiple personalities. She just didn’t get him.

He pulled a light sweater off the shelf, tossed it over his head, and slid his arms through the holes, making sure he straightened the suits his hand had hit. When he finished brushing invisible dust off the shoulder of one of his suit jackets, she faced him. “Look, Ben, what goes on between you and your grandfather is none of my business. I just don’t want to be pulled into the middle of it.”

“Okay.” Ben held her waist and tugged her closer but she put her hands on his chest and stood firm.

“And just a warning, cowboy. You had better think twice before you ever accuse me of something again. I don’t like it.”

Ben tugged her closer still; she left her forearms resting on his chest, separating them. “I didn’t accuse you.”

Gina gave him a little shove; he didn’t move a millimeter. “Yeah, right. When you use the word conspire, no matter how you slice it, it’s an accusation. I’m giving you a pass this time, but this is no baseball game. You’re not gonna get three strikes with me. If you want to put an end to all this marriage bullshit, fine. I’ll hop the first bus home and have my lawyer call yours. If not, then you live up to your end of the deal and let me live up to mine.”

Gina stepped away and went to finish unpacking.

Ben followed her out. “I said I overreacted. I’m sorry.”

She didn’t know what to do with him. No matter where she went, he was in her way. He either had his body crowded close to hers, or he was touching her as if he did it unconsciously. The whole touchy-feely thing was a little disconcerting, not to mention arousing.

“Your threat is unnecessary.”

That threw a wet blanket over the warm and fuzzy feeling she’d been fighting. She poked him in the chest to get his attention. “Make no mistake, Ben. That wasn’t a threat.”

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Ben glanced at Gina who was doing a good job of pretending to ignore him as he drove down Castle Rock Road to the sporting goods store. Normally he’d have walked down the hill, but with Gina wearing those boots, he wasn’t sure she’d make it. Besides, Ben planned to buy too much to carry. He checked his watch, pulled his cell off his belt, and dialed Delbert in Three Whores Bend.

“Yeah?”

“Del, it’s Ben. How’s it going up there?”

“Good, are you coming up?”

“I’m thinkin’ about it.” The tricky thing about Delbert was ascertaining his state of sobriety. He could be three sheets to the wind and sound as if he were sober as a judge—well, a judge that wasn’t Trapper. Ben wiped the thought of Trapper out of his head. That was just one more headache Ben didn’t want to think about or see anywhere near Gina. “Is the bridge passable?”

“It was about a month ago when I made my last trip to town for liquor.”

“Are you sober enough to make a run to the bridge in the next hour or so?”

“Have you ever known me not to be sober enough?”

“No. Okay. I’ll take a run down to the bridge. I was at the bar all night and no one said nothin’ about the bridge being out. Of course, no one was there who actually uses the bridge that often. You should have seen Twyla doing shots. She took her teeth out and left them on the bar. I tell ya, if that woman was twenty years younger—”

God, the last thing Ben wanted to think about was Twyla with no teeth. It was bad enough thinking about her at all. “Call me in the next hour and I’ll stop at the liquor store on the way.”

“You got it, Benji.”

Ben disconnected the call and pulled into a parking spot. “Are you ready to shop?”

“I don’t know why you insist on buying me clothes when mine are just fine. I’ve walked all over New York in these boots. If they can make it there, they’ll make it anywhere. I’m sure they can handle a mountain or two.”

“Yeah, Sinatra probably said that before he ever saw any real mountains. If you don’t want to break an ankle,
you’ll get a good pair of hiking boots with decent support.”

“Do they have any with at least a four-inch heel?”

Ben took the key out of the ignition and couldn’t help but smile. No matter how irritated he was with Gina, she could always make him laugh and make him hot, even when she threatened him. “I don’t think so.”

“Then I can’t wear them. I’ve been wearing high heels since I was old enough to swipe them from the Salvation Army. If I don’t wear heels, I’m going to rip my calf muscles.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“My calf muscles are shortened. Think about it. It makes sense.”

Ben got out of the car and walked around to open the door for her. “Let’s buy a pair and you can try wearing them. That’s all I’m asking.”

Gina raised an eyebrow. She was right—that’s not all he’d ask of her. If she was trying to make him feel guilty, it wasn’t working. She looked him up and down before she shrugged. “Fine, if you want to waste your money, that’s your prerogative.”

“You’re right, it is.” It always came down to dollars and cents with Gina. It didn’t matter whose, she hated to see anyone’s money wasted. She walked ahead of him to the door and he couldn’t keep his eyes off her ass. It would be a real shame to cover that with baggy pants, unfortunately, that’s probably what he was about to do. They entered the store and Ben felt as if he had to literally push Gina ahead of him.

She pointed at the rack in front of her. “If you think I’m going to wear any of that stuff, you’re sadly mistaken.”

He put his arm around her and led her to a rack of convertible cargo pants. “What size are you?”

“Depending on the cut, between a one and a four; but I’m not wearing those.”

Ben pulled out three pairs in her sizes. “Just try them on.” He picked out a few shirts off the rack, gauging her size and added them to the pile.

“God, I’ve died and gone to wardrobe hell.”

Ben shook his head and handed her the pile of clothes. “The dressing rooms are over there. Why don’t you get started and I’ll grab a couple pairs of hiking boots. What size shoe do you wear?”

Gina blew her bangs out of her eyes and looked over at the shoe wall. “A seven. What is it? Do they have some strange law in this state that makes it illegal to use any color but brown and tan?”

Ben gave her a nudge toward the dressing rooms. “You’ll have to ask Trapper about that. He’s the judge.”

Gina huffed across the store and slammed the dressing room door shut behind her.

He asked the sales clerk to get several pairs of hiking boots in Gina’s size as well as a half dozen pair of woolen socks. A pair of pants flew over the door. “Did they fit?”

“No, they fell off me. I’ll try the smaller size.”

A minute later she stepped out and Ben couldn’t believe his eyes. He hardly noticed her. Gina blended into the woodwork. As if that wasn’t bad enough, she looked ill. “Are you okay?” All the color had drained out of her face.

“No, I just look as if I’ve been dead three weeks in this color.”

He couldn’t deny it. She looked like hell. Not only that, but that hot little body of hers disappeared under all that cloth. She looked as if she was about twelve years old. God, it made him feel like a dirty old man. “Okay, you’re right.”

“I told you so.”

“We’re still taking the pants, but we’ll forego the shirts and buy you a couple of jackets to wear over the shirts you brought.”

Gina smiled with relief as she rubbed her hands together. “Sure, let’s hit the mall. You do have one of those around here, don’t you?”

“Yes, we have a mall with stores and everything, but I was talking about those polar fleece jackets.” He pointed to a round rack beside her. “They have some blue ones. Is that okay?”

Gina threw the ugly shirt she’d had on over the top of the dressing room door and it landed on his head. “Ben, in case you haven’t noticed, it’s almost summer.”

Ben shook off the shirt. “Not in the mountains, it’s not.”

She shut the door as he leaned against the wall beside it. “If you get cold enough you will. Believe me.”

Gina threw the ugly shirt she’d had on over the top of the dressing room door and it landed on his head. “Ben, in case you haven’t noticed, it’s almost summer.”

Ben reached over the door, waiting for the hanger. “Not in the mountains, it’s not.”

She placed three of them in his hand. “It’s almost summer everywhere in the northern hemisphere.”

“You go ahead and believe that if it makes you feel better.” He hung up a shirt and stuck it under his arm.

“I’m just going to make sure you have the right clothes when reality hits.”

Gina came out of the dressing room looking like herself again. “Where are you taking me, anyway?”
“To the ranch in Three Whores Bend.” Ben walked back to hang the shirts on the racks.

“Did you just say whores? As in whores on Seventh Avenue?”

He put his hand on her lower back leading her to the boots. “Yup. There’s nothing wrong with your hearing.”

“What kind of name is that?”

“I’m not sure if I should tell you until we get up there. I don’t want you to change your mind about coming.” He handed Gina one of the boots he’d chosen for her.

“I have a choice?”

Ben shot her a warning look and caught her teasing grin.

She passed the boot between her hands. “How much do these boots weigh? Wearing them will be like having cinder blocks tied to my feet. The Cosa Nostra could save a lot of time if they threw people in the East River wearing these.”

“They weigh about two pounds, they’re hardly cinder blocks. Once you break them in, they’re like wearing bedroom slippers. Come on, let’s try them on.”

Gina backed away from him. “I don’t see you trying anything on.”

“I have a good pair of hiking boots. You don’t.”

“I have several good pairs of boots. Just not ugly ones.”

“Gina, would you please sit down?” He pointed to a chair. “I’m going to buy you boots so you might as well stop arguing.”

“Only if you tell me about Three Whores Bend.”

“Fine,” he muttered as she sat. He threw her a pair of socks. “Put these on.”

When she did, he took the chair beside her and tried to figure out what exactly to tell her. She began lacing the boots the wrong way. He took them from her and did it correctly, moving over to the seat across from her.

“Three Whores Bend was on a trail that ran between two mining towns back in the late nineteenth century. The whores would make the trip from the mine in Atlanta, across the pass to get to the mine in Rocky Bar every payday.”

“Makes sense, you gotta follow the money.”

“Exactly.” He pulled her sock up tight, making sure there was no loose material and helped her step into the boot. He took her booted foot, stuck it between his knees, and finished lacing it. “So one day in May, the three whores, Dutch Em, Annie, and Ann, headed toward Rocky Bar and a freak spring blizzard hit. Two of them froze to death just outside what is now Three Whores Bend. Annie had her dog with her. The dog kept her warm enough that she only lost her leg.”

Gina’s eyes went wide. “They froze to death? What, they couldn’t start a fire?”

“I guess not.” He helped her into the other boot and continued. “When the men found them, they had to cut Annie’s leg off and get Dutch Em and Ann back to Atlanta for burial. They carried Annie down and the others built a toboggan and laid Dutch Em and Ann’s bodies on it like logs, tied them to the sled, and headed down the pass.”

“Those poor women. You know, that doesn’t happen in New York.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Right. Anyway, the guys were going down the pass. Sliding the bodies down on the toboggan wasn’t such an easy thing to do. The trail follows the river and is really steep. They were slogging through four feet of snow and ice. The story goes that close to where the country club is, at a sharp bend in the river, the trail went right, the toboggan went left, and the whores flew over the cliff and into the river. They never found the bodies. From that day forward, that area was known as Three Whores Bend.” Ben finished tying her boots and set her foot down.

Gina didn’t move. “You’re shitting me, right?”

Ben stood and pulled her out of her chair. He’d forgotten how short she was without heels. The boots probably added another couple of inches to her height, but it wasn’t the four or five he was used to. “Nope, that’s the God’s honest truth. One of Annie’s customers made her a makeshift wooden leg; they called her Peg Leg Annie after that. It’s even on her gravestone. A few years ago, I found an old miner’s diary. He was one of the men who brought the women down to Atlanta. I can show it to you when we get home.”

“Sheesh, what a story.”

She was acting awfully upset about two women who died over a hundred years before. He took her hand and stepped away from the chair. “How do the boots feel?”

“What?” She looked down and stared at her feet as if she’d forgotten she even had them on. “They’re fine.”

“I picked out a couple others that would work. If you hate them less, we can try them on. The ones you have on are the best, though.”

“Can we just go? Shopping is no fun when I don’t get anything I want.”

“What do you want?”
“Other than condoms, nothing comes to mind.”
“I need to pick up a few things at the liquor store for Del and there’s a drugstore right down the street.”
“Can I take these boots off before we go?”
“Yeah, sit down. I can take care of that for you.” Ben expected her to say she’d do it herself; instead, she just sat and held up her booted foot.
“Fine, take them off.”
When they returned to the house, Ben said he was going to pack for their trip to Three Whores Bend. He was a lot more eager to leave Boise than Gina was. She hoped the name of the town wasn’t a bad omen. She’d seen firsthand what happened to whores, but when she asked to hear the story, she expected it to be a comedy, not a tragedy. What a total psych-out that had turned out to be. At least she knew they had a country club, so the place couldn’t be all that bad. She hoped not anyway. She wasn’t sure she’d fit in at a country club, but she’d pulled off her first dinner at Tavern on the Green so it shouldn’t be too much worse than that.

Gina decided to spend a little time exploring the house. So far, all she’d seen was Ben’s bedroom, the hallway, Joe’s office, and the kitchen. All the rooms were nice, but not extraordinary. She would have thought a guy worth seven billion dollars would live in a castle. Not Joe Walsh. No, he was as down-to-earth as they came.

When Ben took her through the front door into the foyer, she couldn’t believe what she found. There were three, three-quarter life-sized statues of geishas and two horses made of what looked like ivory inlaid with beautiful stones she figured had to be jewels. After all, why would somebody glue plastic on ivory? The statues were stunning, etched, and bejeweled. Gorgeous. She’d never seen anything like them, not even at any of the museums she and Tina always visited whenever they had time.

The house itself was huge. When she saw it in the daylight, she realized how very large it was. It stood like a sentry on the top of a foothill overlooking the city of Boise. It had beautiful views from every window. Last night, after Ben had fallen asleep, Gina stared out at the lights of the city for what seemed like hours before she could stop thinking about her search for Rafael, and quiet her mind enough to finally curl up next to Ben and sleep.

The fact that she used to be an independent woman and now she was kept bothered her more than she thought it would, and she had expected it to bother her a lot. She kept telling herself that finding Rafael would be worth the mess her life had become since she met Ben. Still, there was no telling how long it would take to find him, or if she even could.

The thought of marrying for money had her riding the sharp edge of panic. Now that she and Ben were having sex, everything had gotten worse. Somehow not sleeping with him meant she hadn’t crossed the line in the sand that separated her from her mother. It made her feel less like a whore. Last night had changed that. And to make her even more uncomfortable, ever since last night, she’d caught Ben looking at her as if he were trying to read her mind. For his sake, she hoped he was unsuccessful. He wouldn’t like what he found there. Hell, she wished she could take a mental vacation from it herself. She was a total hypocrite. She’d always looked down at her mother and now was following in her footsteps. She just hoped it was worth it.

Gina explored the front rooms of the house and found what looked like priceless works of art everywhere. She stared at a small Monet in the dining room, and she was sure it wasn’t a reproduction from the Frick Museum.

“Taking inventory?”

Gina turned to find Kate taking her measure like a brawler fishing for her next victim. “Excuse me?”

“Ben told me all about your plan. I know why you married him.”

Gina crossed her arms to keep from fidgeting. “Because he asked?”

Kate took a step toward her. “Because he’s paying you.”

Gina smiled; she liked Kate even if the woman hated her. “When you’re right, you’re right. I’m not going to belabor the point.”

“If you hurt him, you’re going to have to answer to me.”

Gina stood her ground. “I’m not going to hurt Ben. We have a contract, he gets what he wants, I get what we agreed to. Nothing more.”

“Do you know he proposed to Karma first? He only asked you because she refused him.”

Gina didn’t let her astonishment show. She was getting so good at hiding her emotions, she sometimes wondered if she had any emotions at all. “I guess that’s her loss, and by the way you’re talking, yours too. I’m sorry if she let you down. I met her last night. She was really nice.”

“She didn’t let me down. I don’t want anything from Ben or Joe Walsh. But I’ll be damned if I’ll stand by and let you take them for a ride. I wish Karma had married Ben. Anything would have been better than marrying a total stranger who’s just doing it to pad her bank account.”
Gina heard Rosalie’s annoying voice in her head telling her to be nice. “Look, Kate, I know why you’re doing this, and I understand where you’re coming from. You love Ben, that’s obvious. I can tell you not to worry about him, but since you don’t trust me, it would be meaningless. I stand warned. Can we just leave it at that and go on with our lives?”

Kate looked shocked.

“What? Is there something else you wanted to say?”

Kate’s brows furrowed. “You’re not going to defend yourself?”

“There’s not much to say, is there? I didn’t go looking for this. Ben approached me. If I had to do it all over again, I’m not sure I would.” So far, it had been a complete bust, Tina refused the money, and Gina still hadn’t heard one encouraging word about Rafael.

Kate put her hands on her hips and looked down her short nose at Gina. “What do your parents think about this?”

Gina was quickly tiring of this conversation. She wanted to tell Kate to stuff it, but she was really trying to be nice. “I don’t have parents. They’ve been gone for a long time.”

“I’m sorry.”

Gina shrugged. “I’ve been taking care of myself and my sister since I was a kid. I put myself through school, got my masters, and a career I love. I don’t need Ben. He needs me.”

“What happened to your parents?”

Gina took a step back. “Look, Kate. I’m really trying not to be rude. My best friend just gave me a lecture this morning about practicing being nice. So don’t take this the wrong way but it’s none of your business.”

“Fair enough. Ben said he’s taking you to the ranch. I’m just concerned because he’s never taken a woman to the ranch.”

Oh, that’s just great. Either he’s doing this to torture her or he’s doing it to get closer to her. Neither of which she was interested in exploring. “Yes, he’s packing now. I thought I’d take a look around the house. It’s not quite what I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. It’s a whole lot different than the house Ben twisted my arm to buy. It’s a five-story Romanesque Revival mansion. It looks like a museum. This house is homey, comfortable. Ours, not so much.”

Kate nodded. “Ben’s always had expensive taste. I don’t know where he got it. When he left for NYU, you wouldn’t have been able to tell him apart from my three boys. He came back wearing clothes with designer labels and Italian shoes. I blame the girl he met on campus; she was all about clothes making the man. Ben even minored in art history to be close to her. The relationship didn’t last long, but Ben fell in love with art and he’s never been the same. He really likes New York. Not that he’s willing to give up his life here, but he wants both. His parents were never like that. That’s why they turned their back on the family business and moved up to the ranch. Joe wasn’t happy about it, and he lost his only son because he was too damn stubborn to let him lead his own life. I don’t want to see Joe make the same mistake with Ben.”

Gina wasn’t the most demonstrative person, but she found herself reaching out to touch Kate’s arm. It seemed to shock Kate almost as much as it shocked her. “Ben loves Joe, you, and your whole family. He’s not going to let this or anything else get in the way of that.”

“I hope you’re right. Thanks.” Kate let out a sigh and patted Gina’s hand. “Don’t think for a second just because I like you that I trust you. I’m keeping my eye on you.”

“I’d expect nothing less.”

Kate walked back toward the kitchen. “I have more coffee on if you’re looking for another cup. I know how you New Yorkers love your coffee.”

Gina smiled and followed Kate back to the kitchen. A cup of coffee sounded good, she just wished they had an espresso machine. She could really go for a caramel macchiato after this run-in. Hell, she’d rather face down an angry Rosalie before she’d face down Kate again.

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Ben finished packing his clothes and threw his duffel bag by the door. He laid out all the clothes he bought Gina on the bed and went in search of her.

Since Del had called to tell him the bridge was passable, he wanted to get a move on. It was a three-hour drive and he wanted to make it to the ranch before nightfall. Driving along the Middle Fork of the Boise River on a one-lane road with no guardrails and hundred-foot drops was no fun after dark.

Ben went to the kitchen to pack a cooler. He’d asked Kate to buy enough food to last them a couple of weeks. She’d gone shopping while he and Gina were getting clothes, booze, and condoms.
He shook his head thinking how stupid he’d been to push Gina that morning. He knew she was skittish, and he’d gone ahead and pushed anyway. In his mind, going without a condom didn’t make a difference as long as they were both healthy and she was on the pill. Obviously, her mind was wired differently. He wasn’t sure why that bothered him, but it did. He wished he knew why. He thought she would trust him enough to know he wouldn’t lie about something as important as his or her health, but then he’d lied about being gay. He wanted to kick himself for about the hundredth time for that one. He should be thanking his lucky stars she hadn’t held it against him. Not much anyway, or maybe just not yet. With Gina, he never knew. She made no sense to him. He wondered if that was a woman thing, or just a Gina thing.

When Ben made it into the kitchen he found Gina sitting with Kate drinking coffee. “Hey Gina, I don’t mean to break up your coffee klatch, but you might want to go finish packing. We need to leave.”

She stood up and gave him the evil eye. “What do I need to pack?”

“Everything.”

“Then why did you have me unpack this morning?”

Kate got up and grabbed the cooler from the mudroom. “Ben, why don’t you go and help Gina, and I’ll get started in here.”

Kate and Gina gave each other a look that mystified Ben. He knew all of Kate’s looks, and this was a new one on him. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

“I don’t mind. You two go on.”

Ben followed Gina back to the bedroom and when he entered, she turned on him. “You could have warned me that Kate was in on this whole matrimonial fiasco. I don’t appreciate being blindsided by your surrogate mother.”

“What?”

Gina tossed her clothes out of the drawers and onto the bed. “You heard me.”

“I didn’t think she’d say something to you. Kate figured it out on her own. I should have known I couldn’t get anything past her, and I couldn’t lie to her.”

“You probably should have thought about that before you proposed to Karma. And that’s just one more thing you blindsided me with, or Kate did.”

“Whoa, I told you I asked a family friend.”

“Yeah, but Karma is a whole lot more than a family friend and you know it. Is there anything else I’m gonna get hit with? If there is, you’d better tell me now because I’m quickly losing my patience.”

“No, that’s it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s no wonder Kate hated me on sight. Men like you should come with warning signs.”

Gina began throwing all her clothes from the drawers into her bag. With everything he’d bought her earlier, her bag was way too small, not that she seemed to notice or care.

“Here, let me give you a duffel bag to use.” He rummaged through the closet and came out with a bag and the jeans she’d hung up earlier. He felt like a real ass. He hadn’t expected Kate to say something to Gina and wished he knew what went down. He’d ask Gina, but she didn’t look like she was in the mood to do anything except maybe make his life miserable. Not that he blamed her.

Ben took over folding her clothes and placing them neatly into the duffel bag while she went to retrieve her toiletries. By the time she returned, he’d re-packed most of her things. She tossed her makeup bag on top of her clothes and he grabbed her before she could get away from him. He pulled her close and she stood board straight, with a don’t-fuck-with-me look pasted on her cute little face. He wanted to kiss it right off, but since she looked as if she might bite him, and not in a good way, he didn’t. “I really am sorry. I screwed up. All I can say is I’ll try not to do it anymore.”

“See that you don’t.” She turned away from him and zipped the duffel closed. “I’ll go help Kate while you pack the car.”

Ben took her hand. “You don’t have to.”

Gina just raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, I do. I like Kate. I’d feel better if she didn’t hate me. Just let me go and help her, okay?”

“Sure, but Gina, she doesn’t hate you. She’s probably more pissed with me than anything.”

Gina shook her head. “She might be pissed with you, but she loves you. It’s different, she doesn’t know me from Adam, and now she thinks I’m a whore trying to separate you from your money. I didn’t sign up for that.”

“Hey, Kate would never think that.”

“Yeah, right. Think about it, Ben—what makes me so different from any other whore?”

“Everything. I came to you. It’s a business transaction. Besides, I had to talk you into it.”

Gina nodded. “Yeah, and I put up a hell of a fight, and now…” She shook her head. “Before, you were gay and I wasn’t sleeping with you. I had my own reasons for taking the deal but now, even I’m questioning my story.”
Ben wrapped his arms around her. “Hey, it’s not like that. You’re not a whore. You’re my wife. We’re legally married. You’re getting no more money than any woman I married would and it’s not as if I’m leaving it on the bedside table. I’ve never had to pay anyone to sleep with me.”

Gina blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Don’t worry, cowboy. You’re rep is safe and sound. No one has accused you of being a John.”

“If anyone insinuated that the only reason you’re sleeping with me is because I’m paying you, that’s exactly what they’re doing.”

“No, Kate said I married you because you paid me. It’s not the same thing.”

“Yet, that’s how you took it.”

Gina didn’t say anything; she stared at him as if he was insane. He couldn’t stand it anymore; he bent down and kissed the creases that formed between her brows before he trailed his lips down to her ear. “I can’t be in the same room with you and not want to make love to you. Even when you’re pissed at me, I want you, but I never want you to feel cheap.”

Gina just laughed and pulled away, grabbing her own neck and trying to massage away the tension he’d felt running through her. “Don’t worry about it, Ben. At $35,000 a day, I hardly feel cheap.”

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After Gina helped Kate pack up more food than two people could possibly eat in a month, she said good-bye to Joe who insisted on giving her a hug. Heck, even Kate hugged her. Gina endured it by shooting imaginary darts at Ben’s head. She was sure he’d said something to Kate. Frankly, Gina would rather have Kate’s blatant dislike than forced affection. Before Gina got in the car, Kate ran out and gave her a pair of gloves. She said it would be cold up there in the mornings. Where the heck was Ben taking her anyway? The tundra?

Ben received another hug and kiss from Kate before he got behind the wheel of the Land Rover. It felt really weird to be in the front seat of a car. As a matter of fact, she couldn’t remember a time when she’d ever ridden in the front seat. In New York taxis, the passengers almost always ride in the back.

Gina took control of the radio, something she’d never had the opportunity to do. She flipped through the pre-set stations, looking for something that fit her mood. After going through them twice, Ben handed her his iPod.

“You might as well see if this has anything on it you feel like listening to. We’ll have a hard time getting a decent radio station once we get farther into the mountains anyway.”

“We have a hard time getting a decent radio station now.” Gina had, of course, seen people with iPods. Heck, everyone she knew had one except her. When she didn’t move as fast as he deemed acceptable, he set the radio, put the iPod on the docking station, clicked something, and music poured out of the speakers. Nifty. She just hoped he didn’t have crap taste in music. What came on was an eclectic mix; there was country to rock, new age, jazz, and everything in between. “How many songs do you have on here?”

He touched a button and pointed to the space over the picture of the album cover. It said one of twenty-two thousand six hundred forty-three.

“You have over twenty-two thousand songs?”

Ben flipped his turn signal on as he stopped at a stop sign. “Sounds about right.”

Gina turned in her seat toward him. “Do you mean to tell me you have twenty-two thousand dollars tied up in music?”

Ben shrugged. “I had a large music collection before I downloaded everything, but I guess over the years, I’ve spent that much. It’s not as if I sit on iTunes and just buy whatever I see.”

“You could buy a car with that much money, and it’s all sitting here on your iPod.”

“Yeah, I guess. What’s on yours?”

“My what?”

“Your iPod. What kind of music do you like?”

“I don’t have an iPod. Spending money on music you can get for free on the radio seems like a waste.”

Ben raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

“Where I come from, people don’t have money for food yet they walk around with iPods and cell phones. I’ve never understood it. They can’t feed their kids but they have big-screen TVs. Not me. I bought food, clothes, paid my rent, and utilities. I didn’t get a computer until I had to for school. I probably still wouldn’t have one if the company hadn’t paid for it. An iPod isn’t something I have a hard time living without.”

They drove on, following a river until they came to a huge dam and just beyond that, a beautiful reservoir named Lucky Peak surrounded by treeless foothills. After a few miles, they hit the tree line and the road narrowed. They’d been climbing steadily for a half hour, and Gina couldn’t believe they kept going higher. Lodge pole pine rushed by
on one side, and a raging river on the other. The road turned into a well-trimmed gravel surface and followed the river even higher.

“How much longer?”
Ben smiled. “It’s about three hours.”
“Down a road like this?”
“Up a road like this… well, a few miles up, it turns into a logging road.”
“What’s a logging road?”
Gina heard a huge pop inside her head, and a swooshing sound. She pulled on both her earlobes and wiggled her jaw. “Oh my God! What just happened?”
Ben handed her a stick of gum. “Your ears just popped. It’s the altitude.”
“How high are we?”
“About twenty-five hundred feet and climbing.”
“And just how far are we climbing?”
“Three Whores Bend is at about seventy-five hundred feet above sea level.”
“I’m guessing that’s higher than the Empire State Building.”
Ben turned on the heat. “Yup, way, way higher.”
“Madre de Dios.” The road narrowed again, and soon the gravel disappeared and turned into a narrow, dirt road, not wide enough in many spots for two cars to pass. She looked over the side of the road, which dropped about a hundred feet or more down to a raging river the likes of which she’d never seen outside a movie theater. “Ben, can you move over?” She inched closer to the center of the car, hugging the armrest.
Ben looked over at her. “You’re not afraid of heights, are you, sweetheart?”
Holding onto the armrest with a death grip she usually only reserved for her caffeine fix, she peered out the window. “Heights, no. Driving off cliffs, yeah, very, very afraid.” The road took a sharp turn to the left and Gina grabbed Ben’s arm. If she wasn’t mistaken, she might have even screamed.
He put his arm around her. “Calm down, I’ve driven this road a hundred times at least. I haven’t driven off a cliff yet.”
Gina elbowed him in the ribs. “Would you stop feeling me up and put both hands on the wheel?” By this time, she was practically sitting on the center console. “Ben, is it like this all the way up?”
His smile did nothing to alleviate her fears.
“It’s going to get worse than this?”
“In about a half hour, you’re gonna want to close your eyes.”
“Crap, Ben. You need to turn around.”
He looked at her and not at the road. “Where?”
Something darted in front of the car. “Stop!”
Ben hit the brakes and dust blew up everywhere. “What is it?”
“A dog!” Gina released her seat belt, climbed over Ben, opened his door, and jumped out of the Land Rover. “Where is he?”
Ben was behind her when a little puppy slid down into her arms. Catching it threw her off balance and back into Ben, who tried grabbing them both. The two of them landed on him as he fell on his back onto the road.
The puppy landed on Gina, knocking the wind out of her. She lay there, holding the wiggling dog and heard a very strange sound.
“Get up! Now!” Ben scrambled to his feet, pulling her alongside him as she tried to hold onto a very unhappy and scared dog. When she looked up, she saw a huge eighteen-wheeler barreling down the mountain toward them. The driver blew his horn, scaring the puppy even more. It jumped from her arms as Ben dragged her toward the car and around the other side.
“The dog is out there!”
Ben pulled her to the edge of the cliff. Holding her by the waist, he wrapped one arm around a small tree growing on the edge of the road as the truck sped past, barely missing the car. Ben held her so tight she couldn’t breathe.
“If the damn dog is still alive, we’ll find him.”
Gina fought against Ben, trying to get to the puppy. Once the whine of the diesel engine and brakes lessened, Ben relaxed his hold. “Damn it, Gina! Don’t ever do anything that stupid again. You almost got yourself killed.”
Ben’s face was white. He opened the passenger door and threw her into the car. “I’ll look for the puppy. You sit here and don’t move.”

“What am I going to do?”

Ben closed his eyes and for once in his life prayed for patience. “Where have I heard that before? Stay.” He shut the door, went around the car, and pulled the key from the ignition before locking her in. He leaned against the car trying to catch his breath. Gina had just scared the life out of him. He saw that truck barreling down the logging road and all he could think of was that he was going to lose her too. He wiped the sweat and grime from his face with a shaking hand. “Fuck.”

Gina rapped on the window. So much for staying put, she’d already climbed into the driver’s seat.

Ben looked across the road. No sign of a puppy and no road pizza to be found. At least it didn’t look as if the truck got it. Ben thought he heard something, so he got down on his knees and looked under the car. Sure enough, the shaking, filthy pup cowered behind the wheel. Ben crawled under the car and grabbed the little guy by the scruff of the neck. It yelped in fear as Ben dragged him out. Gina opened the door and jumped from the car, landing a hair’s breadth from the family jewels. She skipped from between his legs as he slid out from under the truck. He looked up to find her reaching for the damn dog. “I thought I told you to stay in the fucking car!”

She pulled the wet and dirty dog into her arms. “Shhh. You’re scaring him.”

Shit, that was no him. “It’s a her.” Just what he needed, another female. Hell, he couldn’t handle the one he had. Gina held the shaking pup, not caring that it was covered with dirt and God only knows what. Puppy paw prints covered her shirt and jacket.

Ben walked to the back of the car and opened the tailgate. He moved the bags around, found an old towel, brought it to her, and wrapped it around the puppy. “You’re already covered, but maybe this will keep the inside of the car from getting too dirty.”

“Isn’t she beautiful? Look at that face.”

Beautiful wasn’t the word Ben would have used to describe the mutt, but it was obvious Gina was in love with her. There was going to be hell to pay if they found the puppy’s owners. “Get in the car. There’s a campsite about a mile up. Maybe she got away from her owners there.”

Gina didn’t look happy, but what were they going to do with a puppy? Even if the thing cleaned up well she wasn’t going to be a pocketbook pup most women use as accessories. From the looks of her, she was a pointer mix, all black with what might be white spots, and big paws she’d yet to grow into. The little thing couldn’t be over three months old.

“She doesn’t have a collar. How are we going to know if whoever is there is really her owner?”

“Sweetheart, why would someone lie?”

She just shrugged and climbed into the car, pulling her seat belt around both her and the now quiet puppy. Ben pulled the critter from her arms. “The seat belt goes around you. Then you hold the puppy. Got it?”

“Fine.” She gave him a dirty look before reaching for the dog. “Poor baby, he’s usually not this mean.”

Ben slammed the door. “Yeah, only after near-death experiences.” Ben felt as if he’d been having near-death experiences ever since he married Gina.
By the time Ben rounded the car, Gina had the dog flat against her chest. The puppy’s front legs were on Gina’s shoulders, her little doggie face tucked under Gina’s chin, and her tail curled under her skinny little butt, with her back legs straddling Gina’s waist. It would take a crowbar to separate the two.

Just what Ben didn’t need. He didn’t know which would be worse, finding the owners or adopting a dog. From the look on Gina’s face, he knew either way there was going to be trouble. He started the car, the music came on, and scared the pup who jumped and whined. Gina quickly turned off the radio and quieted her by singing a song in Spanish. Ben didn’t know what she was singing about, but whatever it was, it worked. She had a really lovely voice… Gina, not the dog.

A few minutes later, he pulled into a campground. It was empty, but it hadn’t been for long. Either they dumped the pup or they lost her. The next campground was miles up the road; there was no way the puppy could have made it that far on her own. No, she’d be a sitting duck with all the wildlife around there. Ben hadn’t remembered passing a camper or even a truck with a camper shell since leaving Boise. From the feel of the fire pit, the past residents had been gone for hours. Great, it looked as if Gina had just adopted a dog.

The only good thing about having the puppy was that Gina was so busy mothering the damn thing she hadn’t looked out the window once. For that, Ben was grateful. By the time they made the bridge into Atlanta, an old mining ghost town close to Three Whores Bend, the puppy was asleep curled up against Gina. Ben would never admit it, but he missed having his wife’s hot little body pressed against his, even if she was only doing it to stay away from the edge of the road, or cliff as it were.

He couldn’t wait to get her into the cabin and out of her dirty clothes. The economy-sized box of condoms sitting in the jockey box was calling his name. Strangely, it came out sounding like Gina’s voice.

Gina turned toward him for the first time in what seemed like hours. “Are we there yet?”

He looked over and saw her cuddling the puppy to her chest. “Why are you whispering?”

“Jasmine is asleep.”

“Jasmine?”

“The puppy. She looks like a Jasmine to me.”

“You’ve named her?”

“Well, I have to call her something, don’t I?”

Ben shook his head. “No. Sweetheart, I know you like her, but have you thought this out? Do you really want to adopt a puppy?”

“Why? Don’t you?”

“Hold on. How did I get involved in this whole adoption process?”

“You saved her. What do you want to do, just drop her off somewhere?”

“I’m sure we can find her a good home.” Ben shot her his most charming smile as he broke out in a cold sweat.

His smile was not well received. Gina straightened her shoulders and set her chin in that determined angle that never failed to piss him off and turn him on at the same time. “She has a good home. Mine. I’ve been thinking about getting a dog and Jasmine is perfect.”

Well wasn’t that just great? She’d gladly take in a mutt to live with her but he had to practically bribe her to let him stay the night.

Gina held the puppy like a baby, cooing for all she was worth whenever the thing made a peep.

He blew out a breath, knowing he was treading on thin ice. Still, he was the man, he needed to assert himself, he wasn’t sure why he felt the need, but it was there all the same. “She’s not sleeping in my bed.”

Gina turned up her cute little nose and held the pup a little closer. “That’s fine, she can sleep in mine.”

Like hell. He didn’t come all this way to sleep alone, not after last night anyway. Oh no, he had plans. “Sweetheart, all the beds are mine, and you and I are sleeping together.”

“Either Jasmine sleeps with us or you can sleep alone.” Gina looked down at the big soulful brown puppy eyes. Shit, he was so fucked. She ran her hand over the puppy’s crusty belly. “Just as soon as we get home, I’ll draw you a nice hot bath and we’ll get you all pretty again.”

Ben stopped at the only place in Atlanta where he might be able to get dog food. He’d be damned if the puppy
was going to eat their food.

The establishment, if you could call it that, was more of a bar than a store, but they did carry a few necessities. Lord knew, there weren’t many mini-marts in this neck of the woods. Luckily, there was a bag of puppy chow available and rope that would serve as a temporary leash and collar. He paid the man behind the bar and was glad Gina had stayed with Jasmine. He could just imagine what she’d say if she saw this place. He thanked the guy and headed to the car wondering where Gina had come up with a girly name like Jasmine. He figured it could be worse; she could have called her Fifi or something equally offensive to his Y chromosome.

Ben tossed his purchases in the back, threw the Defender into low gear, and headed up the mountain.

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Gina waited for Ben. As soon as he left, she locked the doors and watched the few people come and go. The town itself looked like a rougher version of the ghost town she’d seen on an episode of The Brady Bunch. Unfortunately, they weren’t on a Hollywood set.

She told herself that Three Whores Bend couldn’t be this bad. After all, Ben said they had a country club. She could only hope that the people there didn’t look as if they’d just escaped from jail.

He rapped on the window, pulling her from her thoughts. Even though she was still mad at him, she was relieved to see him. The people staring at her gave her the creeps. As far as she was concerned, the sooner they got out of this place, the better.

“I was able to get puppy chow and some rope.”

“You’re not planning on getting kinky, are you? Because if you think I’ll let you tie me up with that, you’ve got something coming to you.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “I got it for the dog. You’ll need a leash, and since they didn’t have any sequin-covered designer leashes available, we’ll have to make do with the rope. As for tying you up, I packed silk ties so you have nothing to worry about.”

Leave it to Ben to say the perfect thing to put her usually dormant hormones into overdrive. She had to admit, that hot, unshaved, mountain man getup really worked for him. It still weirded her out a little, though. It was as if he were two people. In New York, he was a self-assured businessman who wore suits that cost more than she grossed in a month, and lived in a gorgeous loft apartment over his art gallery. But when he crossed the Continental Divide, he turned into a hot Jeremiah Johnson. Ben put a young Robert Redford to shame. It just wasn’t natural.

Unfortunately, her hormones didn’t seem to care.

Gina tried to ignore him and her screaming hormones by looking out the window. There was nothing to look at but mountains, trees, river, and sky.

She’d heard the term Big Sky Country, but she never really understood it until she stepped out the door that morning. The sky was huge, she’d been staring at it almost the entire drive, and she still couldn’t get over it. It was so bright and clear, she could still see the moon and there wasn’t a cloud in sight. All day. She hadn’t even seen a plane. The only things she’d seen were birds. Ben had even pointed out a bald eagle once, not that she believed him. The only place they had eagles anymore was in zoos. She rolled her eyes. When she told him that, he just laughed at her, which pissed her off.

All this empty space made her feel uncomfortable. What she wouldn’t give to see a substantial building. Where was a nice high-rise when she needed one?

Ben turned the car off what looked like a path and headed straight up a mountain. Gina grabbed the armrest as the steepness of the incline threw her and the puppy back into the seat. She saw nothing but sky through the windshield. “Ben?”

The engine roared as they crawled up what no mountain goat, no less a vehicle, should be able to climb. She pictured them rolling over backward and tumbling end over end like a Hot Wheels car under the control of a daredevil four-year-old.

After a few minutes of climbing, the Land Rover leveled out. Gina opened her eyes to find them on the edge of a precipice. “We’re going to die!”

“Calm down, you’re scaring the puppy. We’ll be fine. You just have to know how to drive off-road.” Ben patted her hand, which had a death grip on the armrest as he let off the brake and let the car roll over the edge.

Gina screamed again and prayed as the seat belt tightened uncomfortably across her chest. It was the only thing keeping her from flying through the windshield. They headed straight down. Her hand flew to the dashboard, the other holding a squealing Jasmine. And even though she’d never driven, her foot smashed against an imaginary brake pedal.

Ben had both hands on the wheel, but when she looked down, his feet were nowhere near the brake.
“We’re gonna die, we’re gonna die, we’re gonna die!” She would have crossed herself if she had an extra hand. The engine whined as they rolled down the unbelievably steep mountain.

“No, we’re not. It’s under control.”

“Would you please step on the brake?”

“Only if you want us to roll. We’re in low gear; the engine is doing the braking. If I stepped on the brake, we’d go ass over teakettle. Relax. I know what I’m doing.”

Madre de Dios, the man looked as if he was on a Sunday drive through Central Park. “Ben, if I survive this trip, so help me God, I’m gonna kill you.”

“Well, that would be an interesting start to the honeymoon.”

At the bottom of the mountain, they turned and Gina’s shoulder hit the door panel hard. They went up and down a few more death-defying hills and stopped in front of a small cabin. “Where’s the ranch?”

He turned off the engine. “We’re here.”

She leaned closer to the windshield and peered out. They’d parked in front of a small, two-story cabin, though the second story couldn’t have been much more than a loft. The place was built of unpainted, weathered barn wood. The windows were trimmed in white and there where what looked like hitching posts outside the front door. She did a double take. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You married me for this?”

“Isn’t it great?”

She looked at Ben’s excited face, and then back to the house. The man was deadly serious.

“Just look at that view. Tell me this isn’t the most beautiful place on earth.”

She looked out the side window and all she saw were mountains. Sure the mountains were pretty, but it’s not as if they actually did anything but stand there looking majestic. Gina had never seen mountains like this. They were so steep, even trees didn’t grow on most of them. They were huge rock mountains.

“Tomorrow I’ll take you to the meadow. You should see the wildflowers. They’re incredible this time of the year.”

Ben hopped out of the car and Gina followed more slowly. He went and opened up the house while Jasmine frolicked in the front yard, not that there was anything as civilized as grass growing. It was more like stones, weeds, and pine needles. Jasmine went potty, which just reminded Gina of her own need to use the facilities.

She walked into the cabin looking for the bathroom. To the left was an eat-in kitchen with a weird looking large, metal stove. She figured it must be one of those AGA stoves. She’d never seen one in person, but from what she could remember about them, it seemed to fit the bill. To the right was a sitting area. Beyond that, there was a hallway with a few doors. She peered into one and saw a bed, the headboard and footboard made out of trees, with some of the bark still on it. Cute. The next door was the bathroom, thank God. She lifted the toilet bowl lid. “Ben, I think we have a problem.”

Ben came in behind her. “What?”

“It’s the toilet. Please tell me it’s not some kind of backwoods ice bucket.”

“Why?”

“Because there is the world’s largest ice cube in there.”

Ben groaned. “I’m gonna kill Delbert. He was supposed to bleed the pipes.”

“Bleed the what?”

“The pipes. You have to drain the pipes or they’ll freeze in the winter.”

“Okay, but it’s not winter now. It’s almost June.”

Ben shook his head and wrapped his arms around her. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. But you’re going to have to use the outhouse until the pipes thaw.”

“Did you just say outhouse?”

Ben nodded. “It’s just like a real bathroom, only you don’t have to flush.”

“Oh joy! I’ve always had such a problem remembering to flush.”

He took her hand and led her out the front door and about fifty yards away stood a very small house she had thought was a shed. Shows what she knew.

He unlatched the door and handed her a roll of toilet paper. “There you go. I’ll start unloading the car.”

“Why? We can’t stay here without a toilet and water.”

“Sure we can, you’ll see. It’ll be fine.”

Gina couldn’t believe she was peeing in an outhouse! She didn’t know outhouses still existed, no less were used. If Ben had told her last week she’d be using facilities that were nothing more than a hole in the ground, she’d have called Bellevue to see if they had an open bed in the psych ward. And if he thought for one minute she was going to stay somewhere she couldn’t bathe, well, a psych ward was where he belonged.

She finished up, turned to flush, and remembered she didn’t have to. Gross. There was also no sink to wash her
hands. She went back to the car, dug through her purse, and found hand sanitizer. She looked around to see where he’d run off to when she noticed Ben had tied Jasmine to the hitching post. Jasmine lay on her side, stretched out in the sun with her puppy belly sticking out. Gina walked over, bent down next to her, and the puppy didn’t move.

“Ben?”

Ben came out of the cabin and looked over at them.

“There’s something wrong with Jasmine.”

“She’s okay, I fed her. She’s just full. Since it’s probably been a while since she’s had a meal, I gave her a handful of kibble so she wouldn’t make herself sick. She inhaled it. I tied her out here just in case it doesn’t all stay down.”

Ben reached for her hand and Gina found herself forgetting all about the outhouse issue as he helped her up. How could she be mad at a guy who stopped to get her puppy food without having to be told? Especially when the thought hadn’t even crossed her mind, which said more about her puppy parenting skills than anything. Then he was sweet enough to feed Jasmine while Gina had only thought of herself and her own creature comforts. Put another X in her unfit for puppy parenthood column.

“Don’t worry, she’ll be fine. We’ll just feed her small, frequent meals, until she realizes she’s going to eat regularly and stops imitating a power-vac.”

Gina leaned into Ben and blinked away moisture. “Maybe you’re right. We should find her a better home.”

Ben turned to her and bent so he was at eye level, making it impossible to avoid his. “What? Are you kidding? I thought you loved her.”

“I do, but you’re right. I haven’t thought it through. I don’t know why I thought a person like me would be able to take care of an animal. She deserves better than someone who didn’t even think to give her food and water.”

“Whoa, slow down here, Gina. What are you talking about? A person like you? Jasmine is the luckiest dog around. She was not only rescued, but she was rescued by you. I only wanted to make sure you’d given this some thought. It’s hard to consider the cons when you have a cute little puppy in your arms. I never for a second thought you were incapable of caring for her.”

Gina shook her head and crossed her arms. “No, come on, let’s go. We can, I don’t know, put an ad in the paper or something.”

Ben didn’t know what was going on with Gina. All he knew was that he hated to see her looking defeated. She’d been so happy when she found the little mutt, and now she looked like Karma did when she was six and the pony she’d been given for Christmas days before had gotten out of the barn and was lost. Ben had scoured the foothills looking for the pony until he’d finally found the damn thing. He’d been Karma’s hero from that day on. He wasn’t sure what he could do for Gina, especially since he didn’t know what was behind her sudden about-face. Then he remembered the conversation they’d had about children and suddenly the picture was becoming clearer.

“Sorry, sweetheart, but we’re not going anywhere. Gramps thinks we’re on our honeymoon. How is it going to look if we come back the same day?”

Gina shook her head. “We’ll just tell him there’s no running water. What are we supposed to do?”

Ben walked her into the cabin, looked over at Jasmine who was still sleeping, and checked the area around the house.

“What are you looking for?”

There was no way he was going to tell her about the occasional mountain lion sightings, not to mention the wolves in the area. He’d definitely have to slowly ease her into mountain life. “Nothing. We still have an old-fashioned pump in the kitchen just in case the power goes out and we can bathe at the country club. As a matter-of-fact, we can take a run down there as soon as Jasmine wakes from her food coma. Then we can give her the bath you promised her.”

“They let you bring pets in?”

Ben shrugged. “Sure, why not? And when we get back to town, if you still want to find a home for Jasmine, then that’s what we’ll do. Okay?”

From the look on her face, the last thing Gina wanted to do was give up that puppy, but for some reason she either didn’t feel as if she deserved her, or perhaps she didn’t trust herself to take care of anyone else. At least Ben had a few weeks to show her how wrong she was. And with a woman as hardheaded and stubborn as Gina, there was no time to waste.

While Gina went into the bedroom to unpack, Ben pumped out a pot of water and started a fire in the stove to heat it. He hadn’t been in the cabin since fall of last year so an inch of dust covered every surface. He swept and dusted
the front room, and once the water was warm, scrubbed down the counters and the table. With the water that was left, he mopped the floor. He’d already unpacked the food, so he took the cooler, stashed it in the car, and checked on Jasmine.

She stirred when he let the door slap shut behind him. She looked up at him, tucked her tail beneath her scrawny legs, and drank more of her water before Ben untied her. The two of them walked around the yard so she could do her business. When Gina stepped outside, Jasmine turned into a wiggly, happy puppy. She ran as fast as her little legs could take her and jumped on Gina. The two greeted each other; the puppy’s tail thumped against the ground as Gina gave Jasmine her first lesson in manners.

Ben waited until the girls were through. “Why don’t I run in and get us a few towels and toiletries? We can go to the country club. I think we could all use a nice hot bath. Sound good?”

Gina pulled her tight shirt away from her body to examine the stains. “Yeah, do you want to get me fresh clothes?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t know what the dress code is at the country club. I didn’t bring anything but jeans and the stuff you made me buy.”

Ben was back in the house before he thought to explain. Maybe it was better that way.

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“This is the country club?” Gina looked down from the path she’d traversed which followed the rushing Middle Fork of the Boise River and blinked her eyes. On the river’s edge was a small waterfall flowing down the side of steep cliff into a pool. It looked as if God had taken a spoon and dug out the center of a gigantic boulder. The pool left behind had had to be ten feet around.

“Yeah, isn’t it cool? The waterfall runs at about ninety degrees, though the pool is at a very comfortable eighty-five all year round. Come on, let’s go in.”

Was he absolutely nuts? “I didn’t bring a suit.” Gina stared at the pool.

“You don’t need one. I threw my fresh shirt on the old stump up there. It’s as good as a do not enter sign. It’s like putting a hanger on the outside doorknob of a college dorm room. No one will come down.”

The waterfall and pool were pretty, but really, skinny-dipping? When she turned around Ben had settled on a boulder and was pulling off his pants.

“Come on, I’ve got the soap.” He took Jasmine’s leash from her and watched her expectantly.

“Fine, but I’m not bathing with Jasmine no matter how cute she is.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take her down to the river where the tub water runs out and get her cleaned up. Hand me your shampoo.”

Gina handed it off to Ben before he took off down the path as naked as the day he was born with Jasmine trotting beside him. She couldn’t complain about the view. Gina did a three hundred sixty-degree turn, checking to make sure no one else was around, before pulling her clothes off and laying them beside Ben’s. She tiptoed over the worn, flat stones that looked like a manmade walk. Once she reached the pool, she climbed to the top of the boulder and dipped a toe in. Sure enough, it was warm. How it was so warm, she wasn’t sure, but Ben was too busy with Jasmine to ask.

Gina sank below the surface, found a spot that served as a seat, and watched Ben try to bathe Jasmine. She wasn’t sure which of them got soapier. When Ben tried to rinse Jasmine off, the puppy thought they were playing as she jumped and splashed. Ben finally dragged her out of the river and Jasmine shook her little body, splashing water all over him. Amazingly, he didn’t seem to mind.

Gina rested her head back against a rolled up towel, closed her eyes, soaked in the sun, and let the water soothe her.

“Jasmine is all clean.”

Gina opened her eyes to see Ben holding Jasmine against his chest. He carried her up and tied her leash to a rock. Jasmine lay in the sun on the edge of the pool watching them as Ben stepped in. He ducked under the water and floated toward Gina. “Your turn.”

Gina felt herself being pulled under the water and dunked. She came up sputtering and wiped her eyes.

“Turn around.” She would have if he had given her half a chance. Instead, he spun her around in his arms and poured shampoo onto her hair. When she tried to wash it, he brushed her hands away and did it himself.

“I’m more than capable of washing my own hair.”

“Sure, but I want to. Come on, Gina, relax. I’ll be gentle.”

He pulled her back against him as he washed her hair, massaging her scalp, before moving down to her neck and
shoulders. He did have great hands.

“Okay, rinse.”

She slipped under the water, ran her hands through her hair, and surfaced before slicking her hair out of her eyes.

Ben watched, holding a bar of soap in his hands. “Now we get to the fun part.”

“You’re right.” She took the soap from him and lathered his chest, running her hands through his chest hair, sliding over his nipples, and up to his strong shoulders.

Ben stepped down into the center of the pool. Gina wrapped her arms around his neck and held on. Since he was tall enough to stand in the center and she wasn’t, her legs slipped around his waist. He dunked them and came up kissing her. Gina forgot all about the soap as she explored his mouth.

The man could kiss. He started slowly, nibbling her lips, teasing her with the tip of his agile tongue, and when she couldn’t take it anymore, she sucked his tongue into her mouth. Their tongues tangled, breath mingled, and hearts pounded. Ben set her back on the shelf she’d lounged on earlier as his mouth traveled down her neck to her breasts. One kiss had her pressing her thighs together and wanting to do just the opposite. She rested her head back against the towel, as she floated on the sea of sensation he created with his mouth, hands, and body. His erection rubbed the inside of her thighs as he tortured her. What the man could do with his mouth was worthy of a Tony at the very least. Gina’s breath grew choppy as she pulled him closer with her legs. “Are you sure no one will come down here?”

“Hmmm?” He kissed her neck before nibbling on her earlobe. “Positive.”

His erection slid between her legs and over her folds as she grabbed a hold of him. “Do you have a condom?”

“Right behind you.”

“I love a man who’s always prepared.”

She slipped off the shelf and grabbed the condom. “Here, let me.” Ripping open the packet, she pushed Ben back against the seat, and rolled the condom down.

Ben pulled her onto his lap, straddling him.

“Have you ever done this before?”

“Made love? Yeah, just last night, remember?”

“No. I mean, here.”

Ben shook his head before he kissed her. She slid over him, breathing in his breath as she sank down, taking him in. She bit her lip and slid down farther. God she felt so good.

Ben tried to stay still, fighting the urge to grab her and bury himself to the hilt. She was so tiny, he was almost afraid he’d hurt her. She was so tight, he almost lost it right there. “Are you okay?”

Gina smiled “Oh yeah, I’m just great.” She grabbed his shoulders, her nails digging in as she lifted herself off him and slid back down, sending water rushing up between their bodies. She slowly drove him mad. He took her hips in his hands, hoping to speed things up, but she kept up the torturous pace, teasing, keeping him right on the edge. Her body tightened around his, pulling him in. Her moans filled his head; her breasts brushed his chest with every stroke, her breath quickened, but her pace never varied.

Ben couldn’t take it anymore. He held her tight and slid off, turned, and set her down on the edge of the bench, cushioning her butt with his hands. He slid his mouth over hers, sucking in her air and ravished her mouth. Her legs spread, opening herself to him as he slammed into her, taking her up and sending her over. Her body milked his, driving him past the point of sanity. God, he just couldn’t get enough of her. He slowed, teasing her orgasm, making it last before picking up the pace again. When she screamed and bit his shoulder he lost whatever control he’d held and thrust his hips, pulling her down farther onto him, and pressed in deep. Her climax sent him over the edge and he came, sinking into the water, unable to do much more then hold both their heads above the surface.

Ben wasn’t sure how long they’d floated in each other’s arms, listening to the soothing waterfall, and enjoying the warmth of the sun and the heat of the water before he was able to get the two of them back to the bench. He set her on the ledge before pulling out of her. He kissed her and smiled.

“You are such a liar. Don’t tell me you never made love in here before.”

“I haven’t until today. I’ve never brought any girl to the ranch, well, except Kate and Karma, and I definitely never made love to them.”

“So you just instinctively knew this bench was the perfect height for making love?”

“I tried it and it worked. I guess we’re just lucky that way.”

“Sure, that was just dumb luck.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were jealous.”

Her eyes went wide. “I am sooo not jealous.”

“Right.”

She slipped from between his body and the bench and went to the other side of the pool, grabbed the soap and set
to finishing her bath.

Ben wasn’t going to let her get out of this one so easily. He went over and helped wash her back, her front, and just about everything in between. “Except for the gay thing, I’ve never lied to you.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “You told me there was a country club here.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “This is the country club. That’s what everyone calls it. It never occurred to me to redefine it. That was a mistake, not a lie.”

Gina rinsed off. “You say tomato, I say tomato.”

Ben grabbed her around the waist and hauled her into his arms before wading out of the pool. “You always have to have the last word.” He tugged on Jasmine’s leash and the puppy trotted behind as he carried Gina over to their clothes, kissing her before setting her down. He dried off and pulled on his clothes before running back to clean up the mess they’d left at the pool. By the time he picked up, the water had circulated and was crystal clear again. He couldn’t help but smile, one trip to the country club with Gina had beat all his memories of playing there the entire time growing up, even with her picking a fight. Things were definitely looking up.
Chapter 12

Gina walked Jasmine outside the cabin. The puppy obviously hadn’t been potty trained before she was rescued, but Ben had been great and helped Gina clean up the mess. She told Jasmine no, and Jasmine shook in fright. Gina ended up sitting with her on the floor and pulling her into her arms to calm the poor thing.

Someone had not treated the puppy nicely. Maybe Jasmine hadn’t gotten lost after all, maybe she’d just escaped a bad situation. How many times had Gina contemplated doing the exact same thing? If it hadn’t been for Tina, she would have escaped much sooner than she had. As it was, she had to wait until she was eighteen to break out of her prison so she could take Tina with her.

She and Jasmine made their way over to a clearing and she held up her cell phone trying to get a signal. Nothing. She was completely cut off from civilization. She couldn’t call Tina and check in, she couldn’t call Rosalie to bitch her out, and she couldn’t even contact the detective she’d hired to find Rafael. She wouldn’t hear a word about their progress, if there was any, until she got back to Boise. She knew it was a long shot, but if all the stars aligned, there was at least a miniscule chance Rafael had been found. And right now, a miniscule chance beat the hell out of any chance she’d had for the last twenty-one years.

If that wasn’t bad enough, she’d checked every room in the cabin and found no TV. There would be no episodes of NCIS, no Dancing With the Stars, no reality TV. What the hell were they supposed to do up here with nothing but time on their hands? Okay, there was one thing they did well together, but how many times a day could they have sex? From the look on Ben’s face earlier, she had a feeling she was about to find out.

Ben stuck his head out the door. “Dinner’s ready.”

She supposed they could eat, but she wondered what Ben was cooking on that weird stove of his. She’d offered help only to be shooed away. It wasn’t as if she couldn’t cook. Granted, she was no gourmet like Ben. She’d never in her life had a spinach and goat cheese whatever until he’d fed it to her. Mac and Cheese, even homemade, was definitely something she could get behind, and even pull off on occasion. “Come on, Jasmine. It looks as if your daddy wants to feed us.”

She headed into the cabin and saw a bottle of wine set on the counter to breathe. It probably cost more than her prized Coach bag. He’d set the table with big, round wine glasses and candles. Normally she’d think he was trying to be romantic. Here, she wondered if the candles were a necessity. She hadn’t tried to plug anything in yet. She looked around to see if there were electrical outlets.

“What do you need, Gina?”

She spun around and smiled. “Oh nothing. I was just wondering if there was electricity. I mean, with the candles, I gotta wonder. The stove runs on wood, right?”

Ben crossed his arms and nodded as if she’d just asked the stupidest question known to man. “My mom liked it, so Dad never bought an electric stove. But yes, we have electricity. We built a hydro-electric generator years ago and it works fine.”

“You built it?”

“My dad and I did, yeah. I was only five at the time so I handed him tools, but I learned enough to keep it up and running all this time.”

“What can’t you do?”

Ben went back to the stove and lifted the lid on a pot, stirred it, and fanned the lid toward him so he could smell its contents. Why, she hadn’t a clue. “I don’t sew. I tried in Boy Scouts, but all the patches were crooked and Kate had to re-do them. I heard so much bellyaching about how hard it was to rip off all the patches, I never had the guts to try it again. After that I’d just ask her really nicely to sew them for me.”

He bent down to get something from the oven while Gina admired his ass. He really had a nice one. She turned her back to him. No use becoming attached to something she couldn’t have… for much longer. “You’d be SOL with me. I don’t sew. It’s a good thing this marriage is only temporary.” The last thing she wanted to do was forget that. Having a man cook and clean for her was fun—especially when that man was Ben. He had crap taste in women’s clothes, but it wasn’t as if she had to take him shopping, and he sure as heck knew what he looked good in. “After we’re divorced, you can find yourself a little Sally Homemaker and I can go back to the mean streets of the city where I belong. All this space makes me nervous. It’s just not natural.”
Ben placed what looked like a rib roast surrounded by root vegetables on the table. Her mouth watered. “You’ll get used to it. In a week, you’ll never want to leave.”

Gina peeked into one of the pots. She wasn’t sure what she was looking at but it smelled heavenly. “A week? We can’t stay here for a week. There’s no cell phone service. No TV.”

He picked up the pot and emptied the contents into a serving bowl. “It’s polenta with porcini mushrooms and parmesan cheese, in case you’re interested. If you need to make calls, I have a satellite phone you can use, and as for the TV, you don’t need one here. Half the fun of coming to the ranch is that you can get away completely. There’s plenty to do. You’ll love it, just wait.”

“I won’t live that long.” She carried the salad to the table and sat while Ben brought over that porridge stuff with the mushrooms and cheese. She hoped it tasted as good as it smelled because it looked really strange.

“What? Don’t you like polenta?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Ben sat beside her. “With that look on your face, you didn’t need to. Try it, you’ll like it.”

“You keep saying that, but so far, nothing you’ve promised has panned out.”

Ben gave her a look that was hot enough to make her panties damp. Damn him. “Fine, you got me, the sex was okay.”

Ben stopped with a fork piled with meat hanging in the air. “Excuse me, did you just say the sex was okay?”

Gina dipped her fork into the creamy looking stuff and lifted it to her lips, stuck the tines in her mouth, and sucked the contents off. She nodded and stifled a moan. This stuff, whatever it was, was fabulous. Oh God. The man was better in the kitchen than he was in bed, and that was saying something, especially since he was cooking on a wood stove and he was a virtual god in bed and hillbilly hot tubs. When she opened her eyes, he was staring at her.

“You have about five seconds to take that back.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Gina cut into the meat; it was done to perfection, nice and rare. She dipped it into the creamy stuff and slid it between her lips. Yup, definitely better in the kitchen. And she’d die before she’d admit he was the best lover she’d ever had. Lord, it would so suck if he was the best she’d ever have. The thought made her pause. Her life might very well be downhill from here—at least when it came to food and sex.

Ben sat back in his chair and rocked it on two legs cradling his wine glass in his hand. “You haven’t taken it back.”

Gina took a bite of a carrot and chewed slowly while she stared at him. “I don’t plan to. Lord only knows what would happen if your head got any bigger. Besides, it’s not as if I said you were a bad lover.”

“Yeah? Well, from the way you screamed at the country club, me and everyone in Three Whores Bend knows you’re a liar.”

Gina was just yanking his chain so he yanked back. Gina’s face turned a lovely shade of red that matched the wine she gulped after she choked. He knew no one heard her, but she didn’t. Still, it didn’t affect her appetite. At the rate she was eating, they’d never last the two weeks he’d planned to stay without going down for more supplies.

When Ben finished the food on his plate, he sat back to enjoy watching Gina. The puppy nudged his leg. He picked her up and held her against his chest. Her puppy breath fanned his neck as he rubbed her back. A moment later, Jasmine was asleep.

Jasmine was growing on him, just like Gina. It was a good thing she’d reminded him this was temporary. As difficult as the woman was, she was a lot of fun to fuck with—literally and figuratively—and he planned to take full advantage until it was over. He was sure he’d have her out of his system by then, and have no problem moving on. After all, most women were fun to have around for a week or two; it was at about the one-month anniversary he’d lose all interest. Since he and Gina had really only been together three days, there was still plenty of time to enjoy her. By the time they tired of each other, she’d be back in New York and he’d be back to doing the same thing he always did. He slid Jasmine down off his chest, held her like a baby in his arms, and ignored the fact his happily ever after didn’t seem so attractive.

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

Ben blinked. “Sorry, I was just thinking, I wasn’t staring on purpose.”

“Yeah?” She took his plate and piled it on her empty one. “You look like my sister did the first Christmas my parents didn’t bother to buy presents. I had to tell Tina there was no Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy were all lies too.” She tilted her head and kept up the pressure. “What were you thinking about?”

“How old were you?”

Gina shrugged, looked him square in the chest, and stuck her hands in her pants pockets. “I don’t remember. But you didn’t answer my question.”

Gina rarely brought up her parents. The few things she did say left him wondering about all the things she didn’t mention. He hoped she’d told him the worst of it, but he had a very strong feeling she hadn’t. “Nothing so tragic.
Jasmine is asleep and I don’t know where to put her. I have dishes to do.”

Gina hauled the plates to the counter and returned to take the serving plates. “I’m more than capable of doing dishes, especially since you wouldn’t let me help cook. Stay with the puppy and let me handle it.”

Ben stood and shoved the puppy at her. “I have a pot of water heating for the dishes. That thing is as big as you are. Let me take care of it and the dishes, you take baby duty.” He picked up the meat and what little was left of the polenta. Damn, the woman could definitely pack the food away. He was surprised she could move. “I’ll let you make it up to me later. We’ll see if we can improve on the sex. I’m a man who won’t settle for just being okay.”

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Ben did the dishes while Gina sat on the couch holding the puppy and staring off into space. There was something going through that amazing mind of hers, something she was nervous about. She set the puppy down to sleep on the couch, and paced back and forth across the front room.

“Want to talk about whatever it is that’s bothering you?”

She shoved her hands in the pockets of her too tight jeans. “No, nothing’s bothering me.”

She was lying. He’d spent the last three days glued to her, on top of her, or inside her, and he’d learned a few things. Whenever she out-and-out lied, she couldn’t look him in the eye and she always tried to find something to do with her hands—like shove them in her pockets. Still, there wasn’t much he could do to help if she wasn’t willing to talk to him. “If you change your mind, I’m here.”

She threw herself on the couch. “I just need to make a phone call.”

“So use my phone.”

She dug a business card out of her pocket. “It’s two hours later on the East Coast, after business hours.”

“If something is worrying you, call tomorrow.”

“I’m not worried.”

Yeah, right. “I’m sure Rosalie has everything under control at the office.”

“I know. Look, it’s nothing. I guess I’ll just call tomorrow and check in.”

“Good.” He folded the towel he’d used to dry the dishes, and tossed it on the counter. “Come on, let’s take Jasmine for a walk and check out the stars; they’re amazing here.”

Gina allowed him to pull her off the couch. “Hate to disappoint you, but I’ve seen stars before. We do have them in New York too, you know.”

“Not like this you don’t.”

Gina rolled her eyes as she slid the rope around Jasmine’s neck. “Right, everything’s bigger out West.”

Ben just smiled, “Pretty much.” He got one of her new jackets off the coat rack. “Here, put this on.”

She looked at him as if he was nuts. “Why?”

Ben let out a slow breath, wondering why she insisted on questioning everything he said. “Because once the sun sets, it gets really cold at this elevation.”

She shrugged the jacket on and took Jasmine’s leash back from him. He grabbed his coat and followed her out.

“Wow!” Gina stood in front of the cabin with her mouth hanging open. The moon was full and the stars were about the size of dimes sparkling overhead.

“Told ya, everything’s bigger out West.”

Looking him up and down, she stopped at his fly. “Not everything.”

“Very funny, I didn’t hear you complaining earlier. You were too busy screaming in ecstasy.”

She walked away laughing. “Yeah, keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel better.”

Ben wrapped his arm around her as they strolled toward the back meadow. “Sweetheart, if I were any bigger it wouldn’t fit. I think our sizes are damn near perfect.” He chose to ignore the fact that she’d yet to stop cutting him down and instead be thankful that sex was never far from Gina’s mind. It was comforting because whenever she was around, it was never far from his either. He had the perfect evening planned—a good meal, a moonlit stroll, making out in front of the fire, and then off to bed.

Jasmine did her thing, not that Gina noticed. She was too busy staring at the stars. She looked beautiful in candlelight; in moon and starlight, she was simply breathtaking. She was also shivering.

“Come on, let’s put the baby to bed and curl up by the fire.”

A picture of Rafael popped into Gina’s mind. For the few days her parents had kept him, Gina would take him to bed with Tina and her so that she could care for him when he needed to be fed and changed. She’d heard her father complaining about having another mouth to feed and Rafael’s crying. Gina thought as long as Rafael didn’t bother him, he’d be safe, but she’d been too young and naive to ever see it coming.

Ben wiped a tear from her cheek she hadn’t known was there. “Gina, what’s wrong?”
“Nothing. When I get cold, my eyes water.” She needed to get herself back under control. Ever since she hired that detective to find Rafael, memories she’d long since locked away came back full force. It had been ages since she’d allowed herself to revisit them. Still, she couldn’t help but wonder if by doing so, she’d remember something else that would help in the search. Lord knows, a name wasn’t much to go by.

Ben tipped her chin up with his warm hand and stared into her eyes. “I can help. Whatever you need, I can help.”

He looked so sincere. For a moment, she almost let herself believe him. But then, what would he think of her? Shame she hadn’t felt in years flooded her. No. Ben had no idea what he’d offered or even asked of her. His was a different world; it was nice and neat and so far away from hers. “I need you… to rub my calves. These boots you bought are killing me.”

Gina let herself be pulled into Ben’s arms. He felt so solid, and big, she leaned against him and allowed him to hold her and take care of her for a minute. She breathed him in, his familiar scent comforted as much as excited her.

“You can trust me with whatever it is, Gina. I promise.”

No, she couldn’t, but she could lose herself in him and the feelings he set off in her. She hugged his neck. He straightened to his full height and her feet swung more than a foot off the ground. She wrapped her legs around his waist, feeling the ever-present bulge in his jeans as she nuzzled his ear with her cold nose, raking her teeth over his earlobe. “It’s too cold to make love under the stars, so you better take me home.”

With every step Ben took, Gina’s body ground against his erection making the trip, like Gina, both exhilarating and maddening. When he finally got the three of them hustled into the cabin, he dropped Jasmine’s leash, kicked the door shut, and pinned Gina against it. Her eyes went wide as he took her mouth. He tasted emotion, the hidden vulnerability he’d come to recognize, and her need. He wanted it all, her attitude, her energy, and her secrets. He wanted to possess her, and he would. He’d find the lock she had on her emotions, her past, and her heart, and pick it open. She wouldn’t shut him out again. Gina tugged the zipper of his jacket down and off his shoulders. He freed one arm, wrapped it around her waist before releasing his other arm, letting the jacket drop to the floor.

“Let me down.” Oh, so she thought she was running the show here. Of course, the last three times they’d made love, it had been on her terms, but not this time.

Ben carried her to the fireplace and laid her down on the rug beside it. He gripped the edge of her jacket and shirt, and without warning pulled them over her head leaving her looking stunned. He took full advantage and unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans. As Gina arched her back to help remove them, he cupped her in his hand, sliding two fingers deep inside her as he sucked her breast into his mouth through her bra, and sent her over.

Watching Gina unravel in his arms had him groaning. Her physical need sated, he had plenty of time to work on her emotional ones. He’d attack her the way she did him, from all sides.

Ben took his time admiring the hot-pink bra that lovingly held her breasts out to him like a buffet, the peaks of her nipples darting the fabric. Ben traced the lace edge with the tip of his tongue before sliding the bra strap off her shoulder with his teeth. Kissing the path down to her taut nipple, he traced her areola while he released the front clasp, and sucked her breast deep into his mouth. She groaned as he pulled, flattening his tongue, drawing the nipple between it and the roof of his mouth. Her nails raked his scalp sending a shot of need right into his balls, and his gut clenched. It was a damn good thing he still had his pants on or he’d be lost. He dragged in a breath and dug deep for control, but all he got was the scent of clean mountain water, shampoo, and Gina; it was as intoxicating as any narcotic.

Gina reached for his pants and tugged on the button and zipper. “I want you.”

He smiled as he rose to take his pants off. “Sweetheart, I’m yours for the taking.”

Before he could return, she was on his knees, her hand grasping his erection tight, and her hot wet mouth taking him in. Ben was sure he’d lose it right then and there. The sight of Gina on her knees coupled with the feeling of her sucking on him was the most erotic thing he’d ever experienced. His knees nearly buckled and his dick throbbed.

“Oh, no. Not tonight.” It almost killed him, but he stepped back, lowered himself onto the rug, and pulled her into his arms. He ravished her mouth, explored her skin, and laid her down beneath him. Everywhere he touched she trembled, the firelight danced over her naked body as his mouth stoked and chased other flames. Every time she got the chance, she tried to turn the tables and he blocked her advance. Finally as his lips and tongue trailed from her bellybutton down, he felt her release a breath, and finally surrender. She was his. He plunged his tongue inside her, tasting her, driving her up, and holding her there with his mouth and hands.

The tugging on his hair made him look into Gina’s eyes. The promise he saw there had Ben kissing his way back up her body. Gina’s mouth met his, her hand held him in place as her legs tightened around his waist. Without moving, he slid into her fist-tight sheath. Heaven, a rush of slick warmth surrounded his cock and the first flutter of her orgasm clamped down on him setting him off. Never had he felt such intense heat, friction, and the wetness.

Alarm bells rang through his muzzy brain. “Gina. No condom.” Fuck, he tried to pull out but her legs were snaked around him tight. With every movement, he ground against her.
“Don’t leave. It’s okay. Just love me.”
“I do.” The second he said the words it was as if time stood still. He couldn’t call them back and realized that not only did she hear them, but scarier still, he’d meant them. He wasn’t sure when it happened or how, but his wife had gone and wrapped him around her little finger. The worst thing was he’d said it aloud. He’d given her all the information she needed to destroy him. He waited like a man with his neck on the guillotine.

Her eyes went wide and then softened before she pulled him down and kissed him with such sweet tenderness, she stole what was left of his heart. She moved beneath him, urging him on, her nails digging into his shoulders, her heels pressing against his lower back, as she rocked against him, deepening their connection. Her orgasm crashed though him, hot, hard, and insistent. She buried her face in his neck and cried out.

Caught in the swirl of emotion, he lost his fight for control as he came holding her tight never wanting to let her go.

Shit. He was so fucked. He was also so spent he could hardly move. All he could do was roll over taking Gina along for the ride. He made it onto his back when she jumped off him and flew into the bathroom. “Gina?”

He hoped she remembered that the bathroom hadn’t yet defrosted enough to use. He pulled on his jeans, took a deep breath, and went after her. He tried the door. It was locked so he knocked. No answer. “Gina, are you okay?”

“Just fine and dandy.” She blew her nose and she didn’t sound anywhere near fine. Then again, neither was he.

“Would you please come out?”
“No.”
“Why not?”
“What happened to my right to privacy?”
“That goes right out the window when you make love to someone and then practically run away from him right after he tells you he loves you.” The door opened a crack and all he saw was a part of her blotchy face. Damn, she was crying. He hated when women cried, he really, really hated it.

“You did not say you loved me. It was just…” A hand flew up in front of the crack in the door. “…one of those things people say when they’re having sex. Right?”

“Wrong. I’ve never said that to anyone before.” And with the way this experience was going, he’d probably duct tape his mouth shut to make sure it never slipped out again. “Either you come out or I’m coming in.”

Ben peeked through the crack and saw tears cascading down her face. She was not a pretty crier; she was red, swollen, and botchy. She blew her nose. “Gina?”

“What?” She wrapped a towel around her before opening the door. “You look yummy and I look like something Jasmine puked up.”

Ben pushed through the door and took her in his arms. “No you don’t. Now tell me what’s wrong?”

She looked as flummoxed as he. “I… I… don’t know.”

“Shh. Come on. He pulled her along with him into the bedroom, turned down the bed, and lay beside her. Once he wrestled the towel out from around her, she pillows her head on his shoulder and finally relaxed against him, but the waterworks still hadn’t stopped. Good thing he wouldn’t melt. “When Karma was a kid and started crying, I used to bribe her to get her to stop. I take it that won’t work with you.”

Gina sniffled and poked him in the ribs. “Don’t you think I’d stop if I could? I’m mortified, and I’m ugly, and blotchy, and snotty.”

“Well, sweetheart, if you’re trying to scare me away, it’s not working.”
Chapter 13

Gina couldn’t stop crying, and for the life of her, she didn’t know why she started in the first place. Right now, though, it was all she could do not to bust out in another torrent of tears. She was dying of embarrassment.

Ben’s hand ran up and down her back, just like he’d done to Jasmine earlier. “Feeling better?”

She cuddled closer to his side, trying to hide her blotchy face in his neck. “Why can’t we just pretend this never happened?”

“Because there’s obviously something bothering you, and if that something has anything to do with the fact that I love you, we have a problem.”

“There’s no problem. This crying jag is nothing. I have no idea why it started or why it won’t end, so it has no place in my reality.”

“I love you.”

Why did he keep saying that? He was insane. Maybe it was mountain fever or it could be cabin fever, she’d heard of that somewhere. Maybe it was insanity caused by being in the middle of nowhere. Gina poked him in the ribs again. “No you don’t. You might think you do, but you’re wrong. Stop saying it, and sooner or later, you’ll come to your senses.”

Ben pulled her on top of him and kissed her through her tears. All she could think of was how gross she looked and felt. Her head ached, her eyes were puffy, her face felt tight and sticky from God only knows what, and she had turned into one big red blotch. She slid down his body to get away from his mouth only to encounter Mr. Happy. He stiffened even more and groaned. “You can’t seriously be horny again.”

“You’re naked and on top of me. That’s about all it takes, but then just being in the same room with you usually does the trick.”

His erection pressed incessantly against her. “I thought sex started getting old once you got married. Not that this marriage is real or anything. But still, you’d think there’d be some carryover.”

“Not yet, I guess we’ll see if it wears off, but I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.” Ben’s hands rounded her waist and pushed her down onto him, raising his hips and gliding smoothly into her, filling her in one swift motion.

As if holding her breath was an option, hell, she could barely catch her breath around him. His body cradled hers, arousing and comforting. He caught her gaze and looked as if he could read her mind. She hoped he’d be more successful making sense of the storm of emotions and feelings swirling through her than she was. She tried to turn off her mind and just concentrate on feeling the rush of his pulse under her lips as she kissed his neck, the quickening of his breathing as her hands slid over his chest, the thundering of his heart beneath them. But it was the look on his face when she pushed herself up to ride him that shook her. She’d never had any man look at her the way he did. She was used to having men want her, and he wanted her, all right; but there was something more, deeper, scarier. Whatever it was, it was her undoing. Her orgasm took her by surprise, paralyzing her.

Ben rolled them over as one climax rolled into another, drowning her in emotion. He breathed her breath and took her back up pushing her over the edge of sanity before he stiffened and groaned out her name. She wasn’t sure if it sounded more like a curse or a prayer. Whatever it was, Gina was too tired to do anything more than sleep.

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Ben caught his breath and rolled his sleeping wife onto her side facing him. Jasmine whined; her cold nose poked his bare ass. He lifted her off the ground and set her down on the foot of the bed. The two of them watched Gina sleep.

His phone vibrated on the dresser. Ben rose, called the puppy, and grabbed his pants before leaving the room to answer the call.

“Trapper, what the hell do you want?”

“Other than to be in your position, not much.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.”

“Why? Problems in paradise?”
Ben sank down on the couch. “I’m so fucked.”

“Oh yeah, you have a little sex kitten warming your bed and absolutely no ties after the two of you part ways. My heart’s just bleeding for you, bro.”

“I love her.”

There was dead silence. After a moment, hysterical laughter. “And here we were worried about Gina. Oh God, this is beautiful! Who’d have thought that little bit of a thing would take down Big Ben. We all thought you were one of the last remaining untouchables.”

“Hey, you should talk. I don’t recall you ever taking the plunge.”

Silence again, but this time it wasn’t followed by laughter. Ben checked his phone to see if he lost the signal. No such luck. “You there?”

“Yeah, man. I’m here. Did you share your little epiphany with Gina?”

“Yeah, it didn’t go well. She started crying—”

“God, I hate it when women cry.”

“Tell me about it. In between crying jags she told me I was crazy. She said if I ignored it, it would go away.”

“You’re kiddin’ me.”

“No, I wish I was. But Trap, the thing is it’s not going away. What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

Trapper laughed. “I guess since you’re already married, you could try the whole happily ever after thing.”

“Not if she still wants a divorce.”

“Well, you just have to make yourself impossible to leave.”

“How the hell do I do that?”

“Beats me, bro. If I knew that, I wouldn’t be single.”

“What? You never—”

“Look, I just called to tell you Hunter and I were coming up your way to check the rafts after winter. I thought we’d stop by, but maybe not.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt. Maybe you could try to make me look good. Just keep your damn hands to yourself.”

Jasmine sat in front of the door and whined.

“What the hell is that?”

“Gina adopted a puppy on the way up the mountain.”

“Did you just say a puppy?”

“Yeah, she named her Jasmine and it seems as though she has no problem falling in love with a dog, she just doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

“Dogs are easy. You, my friend, have never been easy.”

“Thanks for all the help. Now I have to take Jasmine out so I don’t have another puddle to clean up… or worse.”

“Good luck, Ben, with both the women in your life. It sounds as if you’re gonna need it.”

“Thanks. Just do me a favor, give me some warning before you come up and don’t stay long. And you might want to bring a present, like a leash and collar for a fifteen-pound puppy. Be sure to tell Gina it was all my idea when you do.”

“Got it. See you soon.”

Ben ended the call, tossed his coat on as he put Jasmine’s collar around her neck, and headed out into the cold. He shivered as Jasmine sniffed every rock and stone in the area before taking care of business. He figured it wouldn’t be long before Gina needed to make a trip out in the cold too. She certainly wasn’t going to be happy about it.

He could kill Delbert for not winterizing the cabin. He just hoped the pipes would defrost by tomorrow. If not, he was going to have a hell of a time keeping Gina at the ranch; and right now, he felt as if their entire future depended upon it.

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Gina awoke with her head resting on Ben’s chest, nose to nose with Jasmine. For all his bellyaching, it didn’t look as if Ben minded having a puppy in bed with them. He was just a big softy.

That’s when she remembered Ben had told her he loved her. Or thought he did anyway. God, even after her meltdown, he kept saying it. Love terrified her. Those three little words were so easy to say, but did anyone actually live up to them?

Sure Tina and Sam were solid, they’d only been married a year and a half. Nick and Rosalie looked as if they had the real thing, but they’d been married for what, a year? No marriage she’d ever seen lasted more than five years, and from what she could tell, most of that time was spent in that lovely place where they teetered on the brink of divorce. As far as she was concerned, love did nothing but bring sorrow and heartache. She’d had enough of that in
Ben stared at her again as if he could read her thoughts. “Are you talking to me or Jasmine?”

“You. I was up with Jasmine three times since 6 A.M. We’ve already exchanged morning greetings.”

“Sorry. You should have woken me.”

“I didn’t mind.” He leaned over and kissed her full on the mouth.

Gina pushed him away. “I haven’t brushed my teeth yet.”

“So?”

“So, I don’t kiss anyone without first brushing my teeth and downing a cup of coffee.” Actually, she never kissed anyone good morning, ever. “Not to mention, I really have to pee.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

Gina got up and looked around. Her clothes from last night were hanging neatly on the chair beside the bed. She pulled them on. “I’m fine going out on my own but it would be lovely if the pipes would hurry up and defrost. All this becoming one with nature crap is really getting on my nerves.”

“Yeah, not to mention the fact that it’s about 20 degrees this morning.”

“You’re kidding.”

Ben shook his head as he stepped into his jeans and pulled on a sweatshirt. “You might want to put on those wool socks we bought yesterday.”

“It’s practically summer.”

“Sweetheart, we’re in the mountains. It’s not summer here until after the Fourth of July, and even then, there’s still snow on the ground in some places.”

“Right.”

Ben tossed her a jacket before he bent to put Jasmine’s leash around her neck. Gina opened the door and couldn’t believe her eyes. “Ben, tell me that’s not snow I see flying.”

“Shit. I better call the guys.”

“What guys?”

“Trapper called last night. He said he and Hunter might stop by on their way to check out the rafts. They better wait to see how much snow we get.”

“Oh, come on. It’s almost June. Surely it won’t be more than a few flurries.” She ran all the way to the outhouse and swore she’d take her blow dryer to the pipes before she pulled her pants down out of doors again. Damn, it was cold. She never peed so fast in her life.

She bundled back up and pulled Ben’s phone she’d nabbed off the dresser out of her jacket pocket. Dialing the number on the card, Gina was put through to Dick, the private investigator’s voice mail. If she were him, she’d have her name changed. She left a message telling him to only call back if he’d learned something before ending the call and running back to the cabin.

By the time she got back inside, there was a good inch of snow covering everything. The sky was dark with clouds and it looked more like January than June. For the hundredth time, she wondered what Ben ever saw in this place, and for at least that many times, what he saw in her.

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Ben went back into the bedroom to get his phone to call Trapper and the ranger station to ask for an updated weather report, but his phone was missing. He looked high and low, checked his jacket pocket, but swore he remembered leaving it on the dresser before getting back into bed with Gina last night.

She came running into the cabin, stomping her feet. “It looks like a blizzard out there.”

“Yeah, I was just going to call the ranger station for an updated weather report, but my phone is missing.”

“No it’s not. I have it. I had to call… and check in.”

“Everything okay?”

She shrugged and looked away. “I left a message and told them to call me if they had an emergency.”

Ben rubbed the back of his neck to get rid of the prickly feeling that settled there. Why would she lie about that?

He took the phone and called the closest ranger station in Stanley. The forecast wasn’t good. It didn’t look as if he’d have a problem keeping Gina in the mountains. As far as he could see, there would be no way to get down without a helicopter. He wasn’t going to mention he could get one to come up after the storm passed. What she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her, and could only help him. It looked as if they’d be stuck there for the next few days at the very least, with or without a working bathroom.

Gina sat on the couch with Jasmine in her lap watching the snow fall.
“Are you hungry? I could cook up some flapjacks.”
“What?”
“You know, griddle cakes, pancakes. I make great breakfasts.”
“Don’t you think we should pack up and leave?”
“Nope, if we wanted to leave, we should have done that before the storm hit. We’re snowed in.”
“In May?”
“Yup. Once it passes, the snow won’t last long, at least not where the sun can get to it. It’s unusual. They haven’t had a storm like this since before they started keeping records in 1955. The average snowfall this month is under an inch. It’s kind of nice though, huh? I always loved the snow. I have snowshoes, if you want to give them a try. We can take a hike to the meadow. Make a snowman, or we could just curl up in front of the fire.”
“How much snow are we expecting?”
“A foot, maybe more if the system sticks around longer. Up here, you never really know.”
“Oh, God. It’s like that story you told me about those women who froze to death. It was a bad omen. I knew it. We’re trapped here.”
“You’re exaggerating. We have plenty of food, we’re safe, and warm—”
She stood and paced across the room. “As long as you don’t have to use the outhouse. Warm is not a word I’d use to describe that experience.”
He got in her way and grabbed her before she could turn. “With any luck, the pipes will thaw. I have the heat up so it shouldn’t be much longer.”
“How much longer?”
“I don’t have an exact time, Gina. Just think of this as an adventure.”
She blew her bangs out of her eyes and drilled a hole in him. “An adventure is walking through Bedford Stuy at night. This is a nightmare.”
“Oh, come on.” He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “You and me in a cabin for a week, and nothing to do but eat and make love. It sounds like heaven.”
“There’s no TV, no Internet, no communication other than your phone. And what if you—I don’t know—have appendicitis?”
“There is life flight in Boise. If we needed to be medevaced, I’m sure they’d come in as soon as the snow stops.”
“Oh, that makes me feel so much better.”
“Good, glad I could help.” He kicked off his shoes and went to the kitchen. If she wasn’t hungry now, she would be just as soon as she smelled his flapjacks. While he was beating the egg whites, the secret to making light, fluffy flapjacks, he called Trapper to make sure he’d heard the weather report. It was unnecessary. Trap and Hunter knew better than to go into the mountains without first checking the weather.
“So, you’re snowed in? Lucky you.”
“Yeah, Gina doesn’t see the upside yet, but I’m hoping that’ll change after a good breakfast.”
“So you have everything you need?”
“Who do you think you’re talking to? Of course I have everything…but except a real leash. We’re making do with a rope.”
“That might come in handy with more than just the dog. I’m sorry I’ll miss it.”
“Very funny. There will be no unholy triangle with Gina. No way.”
“Aw come on, Ben. I was looking forward to it, as long as you follow the rules.”
“God, we were drunk. You still remember the rules?”
“What rules?”
Ben turned to find Gina standing right behind him. “Look, Trap. I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.” Ben disconnected the call and cursed. He picked the worst time imaginable to forget how small the cabin was.
Gina’s eyes shone with interest. “Were you just talking about what I think you were talking about?”
Ben groaned and gathered the rest of the ingredients. “No, well, okay, yes, but Trap was just joking. Besides, I’m not into sharing. I want to keep you all to myself.” Forever, but he didn’t think she was ready to hear that yet. He really hoped that would change, even more than he hoped the subject would change.
“Have you ever—”
Ben shook his head. “No, we got drunk one night and ended up going after the same girl. A mistake she quickly corrected by leaving our sorry asses at Humpin’ Hannah’s.”
“But not before you discussed rules.”
“Actually, she left before we discussed rules, but then we were drunk.”
She jumped up to sit on the counter next to where he was working. “So, what are the rules?”
“It’s not going to happen, so what’s it matter?”
“I’m just curious, and it’s not as if we have anything better to talk about. I’ve always wondered what would possess two guys who were straight to go for one girl.”

“Probably the same thing that possesses two straight girls to go for one guy.”

She wrinkled her nose, which just made him want to kiss her. He had it bad.

“I never got that either.”

“I think the answer is mass quantities of alcohol.”

“Back to the rules. Spill. Inquiring minds want to know.”

Ben laughed. He so didn’t want to give her any ideas. “It’s never gonna happen.”

“Come on, Ben.” She rubbed her hands together. “Look at you, you’re turning red.”

“I am not.”

“There you go, lying again.” Gina grabbed his phone. “Either you tell me, or I’ll call Trapper. I’m sure he’d be more than happy to share.”

She was right, damn it. Trapper would just love that.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh wouldn’t I? Let me see, he’s the last person you called, right?”

He tried to grab the phone but she held it away from him. “Okay, you win. I’ll tell you about it after breakfast.”

Gina swung her feet. “You’re just hoping to get the phone away from me. No, either you tell me now or I hit redial.”

Ben measured the flour, part buckwheat and part white as Gina’s finger hovered over the redial button. He was so screwed. “Let me see. There were six. I can’t believe you’re making me do this.” He counted them off on his fingers.

“No belittling.

No sword fighting.

No eye contact.

No friendly fire.

No small talk.”

Gina laughed through the entire list. If she hadn’t been leaning against him, she’d have fallen over.

“And rock paper scissors to see who gets first pick of…”

“What?”

“Use your imagination.”

“Oh, I am. I could just picture you and Trapper—”

“Oh, no you don’t.” He picked her little butt off the counter and carried her toward their bedroom. “The only man I want you picturing making love to you is me.” And he was going to make sure that image was forever burned into her memory if it was the last thing he did.

She giggled and nipped his ear. “What about breakfast?”

“It’ll wait.”

***

The snow fell for the rest of the day. After making love and then breakfast, Gina and Ben laid on the couch reading with their legs entwined. He had a pretty good library for a guy. She picked up Pride and Prejudice. She’d heard so much about it but hadn’t read it because she’d never before had the time to read anything that wasn’t required for school or business. When she cracked the cover, she saw Ben’s mother’s name written in a bold hand. It had been hers. Gina moved to return it, feeling as if she were stepping on someone’s grave, but Ben stopped her.

“You don’t want to read it?”

“It was your mother’s, I wouldn’t feel right.”

“No, go ahead. It was her favorite book; she’d want you to read it.”

She started to say no, but the way he looked at her made her stop. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

“Gina, I love you, and my mom would have loved you too.”

She tried to laugh it off, but he looked so serious, she couldn’t. Damn him. She opened up the book and did her best to ignore him and all his talk of love. Still, the way he said it made it almost impossible. Thank God the book was so good, she was swept into a world she’d never experienced before. Kind of like this one, only different.

A few hours into Pride and Prejudice, water began spurting out of every open faucet in the house. Ben jumped off the couch and almost fell on his face since his legs were still entwined with Gina’s. “We have working plumbing.”

“Oh, thank God. I have to use the bathroom. Check and see if the toilet is working.”
Ben ran from the kitchen sink to the bathroom and Gina heard the most lovely sound she could imagine—the toilet flushing. Ben came out with a triumphant smile. “Works like a charm.”

Gina ran to the bathroom and slammed the door in his face. The seat was still a little cold, but nothing like the wood one she’d sat on earlier. She took her time and then ran hot water in the tub, rinsing it before putting the stopper in.

“There’s room in there for two.”
Gina looked over her shoulder. “Don’t you knock?”

“Why should I? With all the splashing you were doing, I figured you weren’t playing in the toilet.”
Ben and Jasmine both looked at her expectantly. “Come on, I’ve been wanting to get you wet and naked since we left the country club yesterday.”

“That long, huh?”

She reached past him to get her toiletries. He took them and held them behind his back. “Let’s see if we can get through a bath together without you getting into a snit.”

Gina pulled the shirt she wore, one of Ben’s flannels, over her head. “Oh, yeah, like that’s going to help your chances.”

Ben unbuttoned the fly of his jeans. “And for the record, I’ve never made love in this bathtub.”

“If you keep traveling the road you’re on, you never will.” She lay back against Ben once he settled in the tub behind her. Jasmine jumped up, her paws clawing the side of the tub.

Ben pushed her down. “Oh no you don’t, Jasmine.”

When Jasmine barked, Gina shushed her. “Don’t worry, you can have your bath later.”

Jasmine lay beside the tub, crossed her front paws, and let out a whine that sounded like a pout as Gina soaped up a washcloth “What else is there to do around here besides enjoy water sports, freeze our asses off, and read?”

He took the washcloth from her and dragged it under her breasts. “There’s lots to do. We can go for a hike.”

“In the snow?” Ben surrounded her with his big body, which usually bothered her. She tended to feel claustrophobic, but not with him. He made her feel safe, which was something she really didn’t want to think about.

“The snow will melt by tomorrow. We can go fishing.”

“Fishing for what?”

“There are rainbow trout in the river. Bass in the lake. I’ll take you out to see the fort my dad and I built. We can take a picnic to the meadow and watch Jasmine run around the wildflowers.”

“The flowers are covered with snow.”

“They’re mountain wildflowers. They’re hardy, a little snow won’t hurt them. My mom always used to take me to play in the meadow. She’d sit there on a blanket and read while I ran around.”

“I’ll be wearing the blanket.”

“Just wait, you’ll see. It’s gonna warm up.”

Gina took the washcloth out of Ben’s hand and started washing her legs. This was probably a mistake because Ben began nibbling on her neck.

“Ben, did you come in here to get clean or to make love?”

“Can’t we do both?”

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After a few days at the cabin, Gina understood why he loved the place so much. He was as at home there as he was on the streets of New York. She, on the other hand, was not so comfortable, though things had vastly improved now that the indoor plumbing worked.

At first the utter quiet made her nervous. After a few days she got used to it, now she almost enjoyed it. They’d spend their nights reading by the fire, eating, and making love. Mornings were lazy and afternoons were experimental.

Before the snow melted, they built a snowman along with a snow dog for Jasmine. The snow was gone by the next day. They took a short hike in her new hiking boots. Heck, if she was going to ruin a pair of boots in the snow, it wasn’t going to be a pair she actually liked. Ben took her to the fort he and his dad had built when he was a kid. On the way back, Jasmine went nuts and Gina experienced her first wildlife sighting. At first she thought they were horses, until she saw the spikes coming out of their heads. Ben informed her they were elk, and it wasn’t spikes but antlers. Who knew antlers shed in the winter and then grew back? Okay, other than Ben? A small herd of elk watched them from a distance. Gina couldn’t get over how huge they were. The way they stared with those dark eyes of theirs gave Gina the willies. She walked a little closer to Ben until they were well away from where the wild things roamed.
Every day Ben had her try something new and massaged her aching calves every evening. One day she tried fly-fishing and caught a few, though even with Ben’s teasing, she refused to touch the fish. Ben did all the manly things like holding the flopping fish, removing the hook, cleaning, and cooking it. Gina had to admit she’d never had better fish in her life.

They spent time at the country club, had picnics in the meadow, and made love just about everywhere. Gina was disappointed when Ben told her he had to get back to town for a meeting.

They cleaned the cabin and Gina took Jasmine out while Ben packed the Land Rover. He shut the tailgate and lifted the puppy in before offering to help her. “Hold on, I just want to go through the cabin one last time in case I forgot something.”

The sun was shining in his hair and off the beard he’d been growing during their time there. He smiled and Gina was amazed at how, even after a week of almost non-stop sex, one look from him could elicit a physical reaction. He gave her a quick kiss, something he seemed to do often without thought, and climbed in the car. “I’ll wait out here.”

Gina knew she hadn’t left anything, but for some reason, she felt the need to take one last look. She took a mental picture to carry with her because she knew that once she left Boise, no matter how Ben thought he felt right now, or how she might feel about him, the real world would interfere and they’d live up to their commitment to divorce, and go their separate ways. She took one last look around and, for the first time in her life, left someplace wanting never to forget the time she’d spent there. As she closed and locked the door, she reminded herself she was good at leaving. This time it just seemed harder.
Ben waited for Gina to come back out of the cabin. He’d expected her to spend extra time in front of the mirror this morning putting on her makeup but she hadn’t. He’d wondered how long it would take her to remember she hadn’t worn any since the day they arrived, not that she needed it. The lack of makeup made her look softer, and she was, or at least she seemed to be with him.

He waited for her to transform herself to the street-smart woman he married, but when she returned sans makeup, she just looked melancholy. She silently climbed into the Land Rover, buckled up, and held Jasmine in her lap, watching the cabin disappear through the back window.

“We can come back any time you want.”

She nodded, but by the set of her jaw and the way her lips were drawn tight, Ben knew that for some reason she didn’t believe him.

The farther from the cabin they drove, the more distant Gina became. He tried talking but she didn’t add much. Finally, she fell asleep, a minor miracle considering how nervous she’d been on their drive up. A lot had changed in the week or so they’d been gone. The only thing he didn’t get is what had changed since they’d left the cabin that morning.

Ben pulled into the garage at Gramps’ and kissed Gina awake. He loved watching her mind start to work, from the uncensored smile that crossed her face and the light shining in her eyes when she first came awake to the cool control she slipped on like a mask. He bet he was the only person who saw the transformation. He was one sick puppy. He was the only man he knew who spent most of the night just watching his wife sleep. “We’re back to civilization.”

Gina wiped her face with her hands and yawned. “Great.”

“What’s the matter? I thought you’d be happy to be back to your cell phone, computer, and TV.”

“Nothing’s the matter. I was just thinking that since we’re back, I should probably get home myself.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I need to get back to work too. I’ve never been away from the office for this long.”

“We have plenty of time to talk about that later.” Or avoid talking about it. He definitely wasn’t ready to let her go yet, if ever. He got out of the car and opened the tailgate to unload it. He’d figure something out, even if it meant working from New York. It wasn’t as if there was a shortage of room in the brownstone. If he remembered correctly, there was office space on the lower level. The trick would be talking Gina into living together, not to mention staying married, and maybe having a kid or two. Hell, they already had a dog.

The door to the house opened and Kate came out followed by Joe. Jasmine practically jumped out of Gina’s arms and ran for them.

Joe pulled Gina into a hug and winked at Ben. “How was the trip to the ranch?” Jasmine jumped on his leg. “And who is this little bit?”

Ben tossed a bag over his shoulder. “That’s Jasmine, your new great-granddog. We found her on the logging road heading to the ranch.”

Joe picked up Jasmine. “Aren’t you a pretty little thing?” He put his arm around Gina. “Let’s let Ben unload the car while you ladies come with me.”

One look at Joe and Gina knew the old guy had something up his sleeve. She’d much rather unload the car than deal with Joe while she was still groggy from the trip. Gina was thankful Kate managed to hand her a cup of coffee before Joe led her out of the kitchen.

“So, how did you like the ranch?”

Gina followed him to his office, took a seat opposite his desk, and thought back to how hard it was to leave the cabin. “I liked it much more than I ever expected to, especially after the pipes thawed out. I don’t think I’ve ever spent so much time relaxing in all my life.”

“Good, good. That’s what I was waiting to hear.” Joe threw a manila envelope across the desk. “This is for you.”

“What is it?”

“Your wedding present. I thought I should do something special for my new granddaughter.”

He looked like a peacock she’d seen strutting around the zoo. Every warning signal she had went off as he
watched. “Maybe we should wait for Ben.”

Joe waved his hand. “He’ll be along any moment. Go ahead.”

Gina unwound the string on the envelope before lifting the flap, almost afraid to open it. She couldn’t figure out what Joe was up to, but it was something.

Ben walked in. “Gina, we need to talk.”

Ben’s tone of voice sent a shiver through her. Why would he be angry?

He crossed his arms and the muscle in his jaw twitched. Oh, the only time she’d seen that was when they were at Shorty’s and he was pissed about Hairy. He glared at her and then at the envelope. “What’s that?”

Gina shrugged. “I’m not sure. Joe says it’s a wedding present.” She wanted to give it back; she had a bad feeling about this whole thing. Actually, it began when they’d left the cabin. Her chest tightened. She slid the document out of the envelope onto the desk. It looked official and she really didn’t want to touch it. She just wanted to go back to the cabin and get away from everyone except Ben.

Ben unfolded the bundle of papers and paged through it. “It’s the deed to the ranch.” He looked from his grandfather to her and back again.

She didn’t understand the weird vibes bouncing between the men. This is what Ben wanted, wasn’t it? Joe would sign the ranch over to him, and then they could get a divorce, and go back to their regularly scheduled lives. This in theory sounded a whole lot better to her than in actuality. She’d been right. When they left the cabin, the real world would interfere and things would never be like they were at the ranch. “That’s good, right? Isn’t that what you always wanted?” She hated herself for being happy that he looked so upset. Maybe this wasn’t the end. She wasn’t sure what it might be, and she was afraid to even think that far ahead, but then the thought of never seeing Ben again certainly didn’t sit well with her either. God, this was all so confusing. She was used to black and white, right or wrong, good or bad, but this emotional stuff was every shade of gray imaginable.

“This says…” Ben opened the document to the last page, “that you, Gina Reyez-Walsh, are the sole owner of the ranch at Three Whores Bend.”

“What?”

Ben glared at his grandfather and then turned that same look on her before he dropped the paper on the desk and walked out of the room.

Joe sat there looking smug. No doubt thinking he’d just won some battle of wills when in reality he may very well have driven the last nail in the coffin of her and Ben’s relationship. “Oh that’s really gonna help. Good going, Joe. From the look on Ben’s face, that might just be an end of a marriage present.”

Gina followed Ben out and slammed the door to Joe’s office behind her. She ran down the hall after him. “Ben, wait.”

Ben walked into the bedroom and spun around crowding her against the bed. “I guess you got everything you wanted, Gina. Congratulations. You planned this from the beginning, didn’t you? Well, I gotta hand it to you, you really had me snowed.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She’d never expected Joe to pull this stunt no less planned it. How could she? “What are you talking about?”

“Give it up, Gina. I got the message loud and clear.”

Ben held up his satellite phone and hit a few buttons. A voice Gina recognized was on the speakerphone. “Gina, it’s Dick. I did a title search and traced the deed. I think we just struck gold. Give me a call. We need to talk about our next step.”

Ben clicked off the phone. “How long did it take that private investigator you hired to figure out how much the ranch was worth?”

“What?”

“Oh yeah, it’s worth a whole hell of a lot considering the mining rights, but then that’s no surprise to you, now is it? You lied to me, you played my grandfather, and now you’ve gotten everything you were after.”

Gina sat on the edge of the bed stunned.

Ben was so mad he shook. A vein popped out of his forehead and he looked like he was about to throw an embolism. “I told you I loved you, and you used me. You told me not to trust you. You said everyone had an agenda. I should have taken your advice.” He tore his gaze away from her, almost as if he couldn’t stand to look at her. He turned and jerked on a jacket before storming out of the room and slamming the door behind him. He left her sitting on the bed trying to figure out what the hell had just happened. She didn’t understand any of it. Why was her private investigator researching titles? Why had Joe signed the ranch over to her, and how could Ben think she would ever do anything so awful?

The sound of the door slamming reverberated through her head and the look on Ben’s face filled with hate had her hugging herself. She should have known she couldn’t trust him, but over the last weeks, she’d let her guard down.
She almost believed all those pretty words he said. Almost. God, she was so stupid. Tears streamed down her face and a sob escaped her closed throat. She swallowed in it for a minute, before she remembered who she was. Gina pulled herself up off the bed, then wiped the tears from her face on the sleeve of Ben’s flannel shirt before tossing it in the hamper and heading to the bathroom.

She shouldn’t have been surprised; she’d known all along it would end. She just never imagined it would end like this. Gina took a deep breath, which ended in a hiccup, grabbed her bag, and rummaged through her makeup. She needed to go home. Everything made sense there. Looking at her blotchy face and swollen eyes, she slapped on makeup until she recognized herself again. Once her control was firmly in place, she picked up her phone and called Dick. “Dick Sommers, please. It’s Gina Walsh.”

“Hi, Gina, did you get my message?”
“No, well, not all of it. What’s going on?”
“I think I found Rafael’s trail. I tracked down the lawyer who worked the sale; his secretary was willing to share some information for a fee. I’m not sure if I’ve found the right baby, but the timing works. If we have the right kid, Rafael went to a family out of California. The name on the check was Hutchins. I haven’t been able to trace them yet, but I found a piece of land purchased in Oregon in the name Michael R. Hutchins. I’m going to go and check it out.”

“So that’s why you were investigating titles?”
“Yeah, why else would I be sifting through all this crap?”
“Thanks, Dick. From now on, use my cell phone number only. Okay?”
“Will do. I’ll be in touch.”
“Good. I’m going to head back to New York today.” Gina ended the call and dragged her bags to the kitchen. Kate and Karma sat at the table with their heads together and stood as soon as she walked in.

Kate pulled Gina into a hug. “I’m sorry, sweetie. We weren’t listening but Ben has a big mouth. We couldn’t help but hear the whole thing.”

Gina couldn’t remember ever getting a hug like that from a woman. At first it was nice but she wasn’t letting Gina go.

“Ben’s a man. That Y chromosome makes them act like asses sometimes. He’ll come around.”
Gina shook her head and she blinked a few times, trying to hold back tears. It was one thing to cry when you didn’t have makeup on. Crying with makeup was a disaster. She stepped away from Kate. “I just need to go home.”
Karma pushed her mom out of the way and hugged Gina. God, all this sympathy was difficult to take.

“Tell us what you want to do, and we’ll help you.”
Gina patted Karma and stepped away. The two of them were definitely cut from the same cloth. She hugged her arms around herself trying to hold it together. “I just need to leave and I need to take Jasmine with me. Do busses accept dogs?” Great, now she was a single mother. She’d have to remember to feed and water Jasmine all on her own, not to mention walk her.

Karma shook her head. “I’m sure Grandpa Joe would fly you back in one of the corporate jets.”
Gina backed away. “I don’t want anything from him. I never have and I certainly don’t want to fly. I just need to get a bus. There is a bus station in town, right?”
Kate poured her a cup of coffee. “I think we can do better than that. Buck is on his way over before taking a load back east. You’re not afraid of trucks, are you, Gina?”
“No, I’m good with trucks, cars, trains, and busses.”
Karma smiled. “Uncle Buck is perfect. He might even teach you to drive.”
“Who is Buck?”

Karma flipped her hair over her shoulder and grabbed the phone. “He’s sweet on Mom. You’ll love him and I’m sure if Mom asked him real nice, he’d be happy to take you back to New York.”
Within an hour, a mountain of a man with red hair, mustache, and a beard walked in and poured himself coffee. He looked at Gina and smiled as a big gap peeked out between his front teeth. “So you’re the package I get to deliver to Brooklyn, huh?”

“I could really use a lift, if you wouldn’t mind. I’d be happy to pay you. Oh, and I have a puppy too.” She held up Jasmine to show him.

“Put your money away. I should be paying you. It’s not often I get to do a favor for Kate. She’s an independent one, my Katie is. Besides, you and that little pup will be good company. Are you packed to leave?”

“Yeah, I never unpacked.”
“Good, I’ll grab your gear and as soon as you ladies say your good-byes, we’ll hit the road.”
Gina nodded and looked at Karma and Kate. “Thanks for all your help.”
Kate shushed her. “Gina, I was so worried about Ben getting hurt. I never thought he’d hurt you. I was wrong. I’m
Sorry. I don’t know what got into him. I thought I’d raised him better than that.” She rubbed Gina’s arm. “You and Ben will work things out once he realizes what an ass he’s been. You can’t really hold it against him though. Look at his grandfather. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. He’s a good man. Just remember that when he comes crawling back to you.”

Gina’s arms were crossed and they were the only things keeping her from falling apart, which was just too embarrassing to even contemplate. “Kate, you can’t tell him where I’ve gone. Please just give me some time.”

Karma nodded. “Mom’s right. He’ll come around but after what he said to you, he deserves to stew in his own juices. Our lips are sealed.” Karma held up her hand to stall Gina’s escape. She ran out of the room and returned with the deed to the ranch. “Whatever happens, this is yours.” She stuffed the papers in Gina’s bag. “You’ll have plenty of time on the drive back to plan your next move. I wrote down both our numbers. Keep in touch. If you need anything just ask, and remember I’m happy to give you ideas on ways to torture Ben. It’s a hobby of mine.” She pulled Gina into yet another hug. “I’m just glad I finally have another girl in the family. With you and Jasmine, we’re almost even with the boys.”

Gina didn’t know what to say to that. She just shut her mouth and let Karma hug her. She really liked Karma and Kate. She was going to miss them. “Thanks for everything.”

Buck came back into the kitchen. “Come on, little lady. We’ve got a timetable to meet.” Buck pulled Kate into a hug. “I’ll see you when I return.” He kissed her cheek and gave her a smack on the ass.

“Buck!”

Gina and Karma exchanged glances. Karma moved over and whispered, “Mom’s the queen of playing hard to get. Me, I’ve never been really good at that.”

“I am, or at least, I was. Bye, Karma, thanks for everything.” Gina survived one more set of hugs before following Buck out to the pickup. She put Jasmine in and he helped her up into the cab. “My rig is at my place. Do you need anything before we leave town?”

“Could we stop at a pet store? I need to buy Jasmine more food, a real leash and collar, and a couple of bowls.”

“Okay. Buckle up, I know just the place.”

Gina put on her seat belt and held Jasmine close as she waved to Kate and Karma.

***

Ben stopped at Humpin’ Hannah’s and was disappointed when he didn’t see Karma behind the bar. She was always nice to him. He thought about who else he could go to. Trapper came to mind, but Trapper would have just told him how stupid he’d been to marry Gina in the first place. No, he was not the man Ben could turn to for support or advice on love, marriage, or Gina. Still, Karma’s absence didn’t stop him from pulling up a bar stool and ordering a shot and a beer. He was mad as hell and still wanted to punch something, but the fading anger only made him hyperaware of the pain. Sharp and powerful. He’s just been pummeled by a tag-team of the two most important people in his life—his wife and his grandfather.

He tossed his credit card on the bar and made sure he had plenty of cash for a cab knowing he’d have to be good and drunk before going back home. He wasn’t looking forward to facing Gina but he would. His only question was whether he’d be able to look at himself in the mirror afterward.

Even now, knowing what Gina had planned and accomplished, he wanted her. Sure, he hated what she’d done, but God help him, he still loved her. He was more pissed than he’d ever been, both at Gina and his grandfather, and God knew he was hurt, but he couldn’t help but think she must be in some kind of trouble to do what she had done. He’d known all along she was hiding something. He’d known every damn time she’d lied to him.

He rested his elbows on the bar and held his head in his hands. He couldn’t help but think that after this whole thing was over, he’d be lucky to come out of it with a shred of self-respect. If she had wanted the damn ranch, he’d have gladly given it to her. All she’d had to do was ask. He was as incapable of refusing her anything as she was of trusting him.

He tossed back another shot of tequila and followed it by a few gulps of beer. “Kevin. Line them up, will ya?”

The bartender looked up from polishing wine glasses. “Do you just want a bottle? I’ll keep your beers full, but man, you gotta pour the shots. I’ve got side work to do.”

“Sure, do me a favor. After I hit oblivion and before I pass out, call me a cab.”

Kevin handed him the bottle. “That bad, huh?”

Ben poured a shot and tossed it back. “Oh yeah.”

Ben kept drinking and people came and went, leaving him alone. When he stood to take a trip to the men’s room and had to hold on to the bar while the room settled, he knew he was just about there. “Kevin.” Hell, Ben wasn’t even sure if Kevin was still working. It had been a while. “Bartender, call me a cab.” Ben heard his speech slurring.
Yup, he was just about ready to go home. Someone came up beside him and took his arm. “I’ll get you home.”

It took Ben a moment to focus. “Hey, Trap. What are you doin’ here? I gotta take a leak.”

Trapper had been drinking with Ben since before the two of them could shave, and he’d never seen him so drunk. Damn, he sure hoped Ben wouldn’t puke in his car. Ben staggered to the men’s room and Trap shook his head while he gave Kevin a big tip and signed Ben’s tab. “Thanks for the call, Kev. I owe ya.”

Kevin waved him off. “No problem. Just take care of him. He’s in bad shape. Whatever it was really knocked him for a loop.”

“It was a woman.”

Kevin nodded. “It usually is.”

Trapper didn’t know which end was up. His mom had called saying that she and Karma were pissed at Ben about a fight he’d had with Gina. All Trapper knew was Ben was in a tough spot. It wasn’t as if Trapper hadn’t been on the receiving end of their shit enough times to know sometimes a guy just does something that pisses them off. It’s not as if he does it on purpose, or even that the reason they were pissed made the least bit of sense to the logical male mind.

He loaded Ben in the Sequoia, rolled down the window hoping the fresh air would do him good, and headed back to the house. He sure hoped he wasn’t the one stuck explaining this to Gina. If his mom and sister were pissed, it stood to reason Gina would be too.

He pulled into the garage and dragged Ben out of the car. “You need to take a handful of aspirin and drink a couple of gallons of water, buddy. You’ll still feel like death tomorrow, but you might avoid wishing you were dead.”

“I gotta talk to Gina.”

“Sure you do, but you might want to wait on that until you’re sober. It’s never a good thing to negotiate while drunk.”

Trapper knocked on Ben’s bedroom door, praying Gina wasn’t already asleep. When he opened the door, the room was empty and he let out a breath of relief. It would be easier to get out of there if all he had to do was give Gina a heads up.

Turning down the bed, Trap dropped Ben on it. “Off with your boots, Benji.” That was about as far as Trap would go. If Ben wanted to get undressed, he was going to damn well sober up enough to do it himself, or hell, let his wife help him. Speaking of which, he needed to hunt her down.

Trapper turned the light on in the bathroom in case Ben needed to get there quick and noticed the counters were free of all female accoutrements. “Aw, shit. She left him.” He checked the closet and sure enough, there was an entire section of empty hanging space. The only thing she’d left was a pair of very small hiking boots. No wonder Ben got shit-faced. The one time Trapper had fallen hard and lost, he’d stayed drunk for a month. He wouldn’t want to trade places with Ben and he’d done his damnedest to avoid it for the last—he calculated the date—almost five years.

He tossed a cover on Ben, set water and aspirin on the bedside table, and closed the door behind him as he left, still wondering what the hell had happened.

***

Gina had never ridden in a big rig before. It was nothing like riding in the back of a taxi; she felt as if she were on top of the world. It was nice except for the country music Buck had playing on the radio.

“You can talk about it if you want. I’m good at keeping secrets. I’ve been a trucker for a long time and I’ve heard a lot of stories. Besides, it’s gonna be a long drive and there’s only so much I can say to the dog.”

Gina didn’t know what to say, so she kept silent.

“You can confide in me, how else do you think I got my handle? They call me the Reverend—the Right Reverend Wrong.”

She searched Buck’s face to see if he was serious. He looked it. A week ago, Gina would have trusted her instincts implicitly, they’d never been wrong before. Those instincts saved her life more times than she cared to count. Today though, for the second time, her instincts had failed her. She couldn’t trust anything or anyone, not even herself. So even though Buck looked as if he were telling the truth, she didn’t know what to believe. She’d been wrong about Ben. Her gaydar had been off and once she’d trusted him and she let her guard down, look where it got her—she was out in the middle of nowhere, driving around in an eighteen-wheeler with a redheaded trucker who wanted to play Dear Abby.

Gina fastened Jasmine’s new collar on her skinny little neck, not exactly sure how tight it should be. Jasmine’s head was pointy, and Gina was scared to death the collar would slip off and she’d lose her too.
Buck glanced over as he shifted gears. “You’re supposed to be able to slip a couple fingers easily under the collar. You don’t want to choke the poor thing.”

Gina loosened the collar another two notches. Better to lose Jasmine than kill her. Gina had lost everyone she’d ever cared about except Tina and Rosalie. Now that they were both married, they didn’t need her anymore. They had their husbands and lives completely separate from hers. Sure Tina and Sam lived in the brownstone, but that was only temporary. What would happen when they bought their own place?

Buck patted the dog’s head. “There, I think you’ve got it.”

“Thanks, I feel so inept. I need to buy a *Puppies for Dummies* book.”

“I’m sure they have one out there, but I think you’ll find that taking care of an animal is easy to pick up.”

“Not for me, it’s not. I planned to find her a good home as soon as we got back to Boise, but now I love her, you know? I’m probably being selfish, but I can’t bear to lose her.”

“Gina, if you care enough to worry about it, you’re going to be great. Just use common sense and good judgment. I think you have both.”

“Ben said the same thing.”

Buck smiled. “He’s a smart man usually. But he must have really pulled a dumb stunt to get on Kate’s bad side. She adores that boy like he was one of her own. Sometimes I think she loves him even more to make up for all he’s lost. Did you know Kate and Ben’s mama were best friends?”

“No, I didn’t, but it makes sense. She’s very protective of him.”

“After Ben’s parents died, Kate adopted him and Big Joe, and, from the looks of it, you too. Yup, Ben must have done something pretty dumb to lose you and piss off Kate and Karma in one fell swoop. Pretty dumb indeed.”

Gina hugged Jasmine to her and patted her back. “Call it irreconcilable differences.”

Buck shook his head. “Nope, there are no such things. All differences can be reconciled with love. The only things that kill love is lack of trust and respect. But then without trust and respect, you can’t very well love the other person, now can you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been in love.”

“But you married Ben.”

“Don’t I know it. We had our reasons. At the time, it seemed to make sense.”

“God only hears the promises, Gina. You said the words. You promised to love, honor, cherish, and respect Ben in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad.”

“Yeah, I know what I did. I’m not proud of it. But I had reasons I think even God would understand. Besides, Ben was the one who left. He walked out without a word. I just didn’t wait to see if he would come back. In my experience, men usually don’t.”

Gina turned to look out the side window, afraid she’d start crying if Buck wouldn’t let it go. The last thing she needed to do was think about Ben Walsh. She just wished she could figure out how not to.
Ben rolled over and wondered why he was clothed. He slid toward Gina’s side, hoping that snuggling up to her would stop the banging in his head. When he reached the edge of the bed, he realized he was alone. Shit.

The events of the day came back to him. He groaned as he sat holding his head. The throbbing followed the beating of his heart, which was going double-time. He needed to find Gina.

The blue neon numbers of his clock burned his retinas as he stumbled to the bathroom. The sight of clean counter space had all the hair on the back of his neck standing at attention. “She probably took one of the guest rooms.” Yeah, it would be just like Gina to move out of their room. He splashed water on his face, did his best to brush his teeth without gagging, and wondered if he’d be better off just to throw up all the tequila he’d drunk. Going out and getting trashed had not been the brightest move, but at the time it was all he could come up with.

The nagging doubt had him searching for his wife. He’d definitely hit rock bottom. He wasn’t sure what he would say to her when he found her, but whatever it was couldn’t make matters any worse than they were. At least he hoped not.

Ben tiptoed down the hall and slipped into the first room. The bed was empty. So were the other three guest rooms. He tried the family room, the game room, the living room, and the office. When that didn’t pan out, he went over to Kate’s. Maybe Gina had gone over to her place.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to figure out your wife left you.” Kate sat at the kitchen table sipping tea.

“What are you still doing up?” Ben sat across from her. The look on her face was the same he’d seen the first day he came home drunk. She was pissed.

“I couldn’t sleep. Trapper and Karma just left.”

Ben didn’t bother asking why they’d been there. It was obvious. “Where is Gina? I know she’s not at the house.”

Kate got up and rinsed out her cup. “She’s gone.”

Between his fuzzy brain and the pounding in his head, he wasn’t sure he’d heard her correctly. “Did you say gone? She’s not here? Where could she go? She doesn’t drive and it would take an act of God to get her back on a plane.”

“She left. That’s all I’m telling you and more than you deserve. What were you thinking when you accused her of stealing that hunk of land? I raised you better than that. You know, you’re always complaining about the way your grandfather treats people and now you’re no better than him. Go home. I’ll talk to you in the morning. I’ve lost enough sleep over you tonight.”

“She’s really gone?”

“Yes, get it through that pickled brain of yours. Your wife left you. And the way it looked, she’s not interested in ever seeing your face again. I can’t say I blame her.” Kate wrapped her robe around her and walked out, leaving him in the dark.

Ben pulled his phone off his belt and dialed Gina. It went to voice mail. “Hi, leave a message and maybe I’ll call you back.”

“Gina, it’s Ben. Where are you? Call me. Please.”

Ben didn’t know what to do. He found himself pacing the dark kitchen trying unsuccessfully to come up with a plan. He always had a plan. Whatever he was going to do, standing in Kate’s kitchen wasn’t helping matters. He dialed Karma. Maybe she’d be more forthcoming.

“Hello?”

“Karma, it’s Ben.”

“I know who it is.”

“Gina’s gone and I don’t know where she went or how she got there.”

“Ah huh. You screwed up big-time.”

“Yeah, I know. I need to find her.”

“Sorry, Benji. You’re not getting any information out of me, so you might as well just go sleep it off.”

“Karma, look. You don’t understand.”

“I was there, Ben. I heard the whole thing thanks to your big mouth. You’re lucky you didn’t marry me. If I were
Gina, you’d be spending the night in the hospital. Where do you get off accusing her of stealing the ranch? As if she
would. I warned you, Ben. I told you this whole thing would come back and bite you in the ass.”
“Karma, is she over there with you?”
“No, so don’t you dare show up on my doorstep. You’re the last person I want to see right now.”
“You don’t mean that.”
“Oh don’t? You hurt her, Ben. I said you would, and you didn’t listen. Just leave her alone.”
When Karma disconnected the call, Ben dialed Trapper.
“Struck out with Mom, huh?”
“Yeah, Trap, Gina’s gone, and I don’t even know where to start looking for her. Is she there with you?”
Trapper laughed. “No. I might take home a lot of girls, but I steer clear of the married ones.”
“You have to help me. I need to find her.”
“Sorry, buddy, but you’re outta luck. Mom and Karma didn’t tell me anything other than Gina left this afternoon,
and she took the puppy.”
“She can’t take a dog on a bus, so how in the hell did she leave? She doesn’t drive.”
“Maybe she flew commercial. I know they put animals in the cargo hold.”
Ben shook his head and then groaned from the pain. “There’s no way Gina would put Jasmine in a cage where
they stow the luggage.” Nope. He’d need to check the airport in the morning to see if any of Gramps’ planes had
filed flight plans.
“I don’t know, man. And for once, I’m happy to be in the dark. I’m not about to get in the middle of a family war.
Good luck finding your wife.”
“Yeah, thanks for all the support.”
“Ben, it’s not like Mom to side with someone against you. You must have really screwed the pooch this time. I
just hope you know how to grovel. It looks like you have a lot of groveling to do in the future if you want to get
Gina back. Mom and Karma might calm down eventually. Still, I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”
“I’m going to New York in the morning. Trap, I’m worried about her.”
“Good. But use your head. Mom and Karma wouldn’t have let her do anything as stupid as say, what you did.”
“Thanks, I feel so much better now.”
“Anything I can do to help.”
Ben disconnected the call and went back to his room to pack. Gina could be God knows where, with God knows
who, doing God knows what. He called her cell again and left a message.
What was she doing with Jasmine? He couldn’t believe that Gina took Jasmine and left him.
Now he was the bad guy. He still wasn’t sure how that happened. He hadn’t said anything that wasn’t true, and it
wasn’t as if she defended herself. If she wasn’t guilty of what he accused her of, she would have said something,
wouldn’t she?
Ben grabbed the bottle of water on his bedside table and downed four aspirin. His head felt as if someone took an
ax to it and his stomach was sick. He wasn’t sure if it was the tequila talking or fear. He rubbed his bloodshot eyes
and tried to get the image of Gina lying dead somewhere out of his mind. Taking a hot shower hadn’t even helped.
He paced the house until five A.M. when he called the pilot and told him to get the plane ready to fly to New
York. He needed to find Gina.
She should have said something, not that he had exactly been in a listening mood. No, he was too busy leaving to
get drunk. He repacked his toiletries and tossed them in his suitcase. She hadn’t even left him a note. Nothing. She
just packed her bags and disappeared, but not before turning his entire family against him.

***

Gina sat in her bed at the Motel 8 all night holding Jasmine. She couldn’t sleep so she spent the night watching the
news—as if she wasn’t already depressed enough—and tried not to check her voice mail.
Ben had called seven times since midnight. She’d listened to the messages wishing she had the guts to delete them
or at least ignore them. Instead, she listened to them over and over just so she could hear his voice. He went from
sounding drunk and pissed, to concerned, and then panicked. She told herself he deserved it. After all, it wasn’t as if
he’d even apologized. Not that it would have changed anything.
Jasmine grumbled when Gina squeezed her too tightly. She told herself she was better off alone. She’d known
from the time she was a little girl that she was a relationship pariah. She just wished she hadn’t started to believe
those things that Ben had said.
Gina wiped the tears from her eyes. She’d never cried over a man before and swore to herself she never would
again. Her phone beeped announcing a text message. Of course it was from Ben. “I’m coming to N.Y. Call me.”
“Yeah, like that’s going to happen.” She was at least strong enough to delete the text. It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

At six o’clock the alarm she’d set went off—setting it had been a waste of time. She hadn’t even put on her nightgown, and wondered if she had the energy to shower. She wouldn’t have bothered if she’d been alone, but Buck might notice and she didn’t want to look any more pathetic than she already did.

Slipping on her shoes, Gina hooked Jasmine’s leash to her collar. “Come on, Jazzie, let’s go for a walk.” She carried the puppy and didn’t set her down until they were outside, a little trick Ben had taught her. Damn him, she couldn’t even walk her dog without thinking about him.

Gina stopped for coffee before going back to the room to feed the puppy and shower. Buck called to make sure she was awake, and offered to put Jasmine in the truck while they ate breakfast. Gina wasn’t in the mood to eat. Coffee was the only thing she could stomach, but she knew she’d have to order toast since Buck and Kate were monitoring her food intake.

Kate had called several times before they had even left the state, and was keeping track of their progress. Gina thought they were in Wyoming but it could be Montana; she hadn’t paid much attention. All she knew was there were lots of mountains, a huge sky, and she hadn’t seen a building taller than a two-story house since they left Boise.

There was a knock on the door. She put Jasmine on her leash and picked up her backpack before opening the door to Buck.

“Are you ready to go?”

“All set.”

“You don’t look like you’ve slept. I guess you could sack out in the back. I’ve got a sleeper back there.”

“I’m fine.” If she kept telling herself that, maybe she’d believe it. Her phone rang. She checked; it was Ben calling again.

“Are you going to answer that?”

“No.” She turned the phone off and tossed it into her handbag.

Buck held the door for her. “You’ll never resolve anything if you don’t talk to him.”

Gina walked past him out the door. “That’s the plan.”

***

After choking down her toast, they got back into the truck and headed through Yellowstone Park. It was spectacular. She saw where the buffalo roam, although when Buck told her they were bison, it kind of ruined it for her. They stopped at Old Faithful which just had her thinking about Ben since faithful is the last thing he’d be called. They had lunch at the Inn, not that Gina was hungry. She barely touched her sandwich.

Buck checked his cell phone. “If you don’t eat at least half of that, I’m going to have to tell Kate. She’s not going to be happy.”

“I don’t suppose you could lie.”

“Nope. I learned my lesson about lying to women a long time ago.”

“Fine.” Gina took another bite and thought for sure she’d throw up. “I guess you’ll just have to disappoint her, I can’t eat any more. I don’t know what it is. I usually eat like a butcher’s dog.”

“Yes, you’re in love. It happens to the best of us.”

“Oh no, I’m not. I don’t do love.”

“Really? Then why were you crying all night and you haven’t had a decent meal since you left your husband? If you’re not lovesick, I think we’d better get you to the doctor.”

“Maybe it’s a bug, or it could be traveling. I’m not used to traveling any farther than from Manhattan to Brooklyn.”

“You keep telling yourself that.” He felt her forehead. “No fever. Yup, you’re just lovesick.”

Gina got up and pulled her wallet out to pay the bill.

Buck waved the money away. “No woman pays the tab when they’re with me.”

“Buck, it’s not necessary. Buying lunch is the least I can do to pay you back for the ride. You’ve been really wonderful.”

He tossed an arm around her and gave her a hug. “It’s nice having the company, even a mopey passenger with a sweet puppy is better than driving alone. Besides, it’s fun showing you our great country. We’ll make a detour and I’ll take you to Mt. Rushmore and through the Badlands. Mt. Rushmore is only about eight hours away. We’ll do some sightseeing in the morning.”

“That would be great.” Thanks to Ben, she knew all the presidents whose faces were carved in the mountain. She
just wished she could get Ben out of her head.

***

Ben ran up to Gina’s door and rang the bell. Okay, he sat on the bell. A very tired looking Sam answered two minutes later. He did not look happy.

Ben stuck his foot in the door. “I need to talk to Gina.”

The look on Sam’s face turned from anger to fury. “I thought she was with you. Where the hell is she?”

“She’s really not here?”

“If she was, would I be considering getting my gun?”

Ben walked in, put Gina’s hiking boots up against the wall with the other shoes, and threw himself into a chair. “Maybe. Hell, I don’t know.” He held his head in his hands. He just went from worried sick to whatever was worse. He didn’t even know what to call what he was feeling.

Sam closed the door and stood in front of him with his arms crossed looking scary. Ben was too tired to be scared for anyone but Gina.

“Now would be a good time to explain.”

Ben wiped his face with his hands. “She left yesterday afternoon. I don’t know where she went. I thought she’d be here, so I took the first flight out this morning.”

“Why did she leave?”

“That’s personal.”

“So is your well-being.”

“She hasn’t called Tina?”

“If she had, do you honestly think I’d tell you?”

“If she had, you wouldn’t have been surprised that she left, and you probably wouldn’t be threatening my life, though, maybe you would. Hell, my family even turned on me. Why shouldn’t you?”

“If you’re expecting sympathy, you came to the wrong house.”

“That’s a shocker. Look, Sam. I’m worried sick. I just want to make sure she’s all right. I need to talk to her.”

“It doesn’t sound as if she wants to talk to you. I’m assuming you tried her cell?”

“She’s either not answering or she can’t answer. I’ve called her a few thousand times, left voice mail and text messages, I called home and no one will tell me a thing. Sam, she’s all alone, or maybe not, I’m not sure which would be worse.”

“Gina’s a smart woman. She can handle herself.”

“Yeah, she has no problems here in New York. You get her out of the city and she’s defenseless.”

“Ha, Gina is stubborn, hard as nails, capable, and irreverent, sure. Defenseless, never.”

“Have you ever seen Gina outside of New York?”

Sam shook his head.

“I have. All those street smarts don’t matter when you take her out of her comfort zone.”

Sam pulled up a chair and sat. “You might as well tell me what happened because I’m the only one here who is going to give you the benefit of the doubt. Tina sure as hell won’t when she finds out you lost her sister.”

Ben sat back in the chair and gave Sam a good long look. “Do you know why Gina hired a private detective to research land titles?”

“No.”

“Yeah, me either. I get a message from this guy because Gina called him from my satellite phone when we were up at the ranch. He said they struck gold and the next thing I know, my grandfather is signing the deed to my ranch over to Gina.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “I take it that wasn’t part of your plan.”

“No, and when I asked Gina what the private dick was after, she didn’t say a word.”

“So you added two and two, and came up with trouble.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

Sam held up his hand like a traffic cop. “Don’t try to drag me into your problems. I know Gina, and I know she’d never steal. I’m also sure she has a damn good reason for hiring a private detective. I don’t know what the reason is, but I know she has one.”

Ben stood to pace, took his keys out of his pocket and tossed them in the air, catching them before turning toward Sam. “If she’s in some kind of trouble, she could have come to me. Hell, I love her. I could give her anything she wanted or needed.”

Sam shook his head. “You got a lot to learn about Gina. When she’s in trouble, she takes care of it herself. In all
the time I’ve known her, she’s never once asked anyone for help. I’m surprised as shit she hired help. This would answer the question of why she married your sorry ass in the first place. I knew there had to be more to it than a house, even one as nice as this. She could buy a home of her own eventually.”

Ben continued to pace and toss his keys. He turned when he hit the fireplace and faced Sam again. “What do I do now?” He raked his hands through his hair and rubbed his unshaven chin. “I love her, and I’m afraid I’m gonna lose her, Sam. I need your help.”

Sam rolled his head and cracked his neck. “Fuck, okay, give me the name of this P.I. and I’ll see what I can find out.”

Ben took out his phone and scrolled down through his calls. “The guy’s name is Dick Sommers. Shit, a private dick named Dick. He should change his name.” Sam smiled which was a good sign.

“I know of him. He’s a quality guy, so that’s good. I’ll go and talk to him.”

“We can go together. Maybe he’ll tell me what the hell Gina is after.”

Sam held up his hands. “Whoa, there is no we in this situation. I’ll go on the QT, just to make sure she’s not in trouble, and I don’t think she is. Gina’s spent her life making sure she and Tina stayed on the straight and narrow. I’ll check it out on my own. I can’t play both sides of the fence on this one, Ben. I want to stay happily married.”

Pacing wasn’t helping so Ben plopped down in the chair. “Yeah, so do I. I need to know she’s safe. I just want to get her back.”

Stretching his legs out in front of him, Sam crossed his bare feet at the ankles. “Sorry, Ben, but there’s no way I’m crossing Gina. Not only because I’m scared to death of the woman, but because if I cross Gina, I cross Tina. Tina is the best thing that ever happened to me and I’m not going to do anything to jeopardize that.”

Sam got up and went into the kitchen. Ben trailed after him, accepted the beer Sam offered, and took a long pull.

Sam leaned back against the counter. “I don’t know what to tell you. Gina has sworn up and down she never wanted to get married. That’s why I was so shocked to see that honking ring on her finger. When she said you two had a deal to get divorced after you got your ranch, I thought it made a weird kind of sense. I still didn’t like it or you, for that matter, but the deed was done and like I said, Gina’s not one to ask for advice or help.”

Sam picked up his phone and texted someone. After a moment, he got one back. “Gina’s fine. She told me to throw you out of her house.”

Not surprising. Ben would deal with her anger later, now he just wanted to find her. “Did she say where she was?”

“No, but I wouldn’t tell you if she had. Any information you receive from now on is going to come from Gina. Finish your beer and then take off. I’m really not in the mood to throw you out.”

Ben took another swig of his beer. “You don’t know how much I appreciate that.”

When he finished his beer, Ben asked to use his own damn bathroom. Gina wouldn’t let him wait in their house, but there was no law saying he couldn’t wait in the park.

He found a park bench with a good view of the brownstone and sat in the late May sun wishing he’d thought to bring sunscreen. He took his blazer off, rolled up his sleeves, and made himself at home. He waited until they closed the park. When she didn’t come home, he sat in his car, drinking coffee, watching, and waiting. He was afraid every time he had to run down the street to use the restroom or get something to eat, praying he wouldn’t miss her.

At eight o’clock the next morning, someone tapped on his window. Ben rolled it down and was glad to see the cop was only Sam.

Sam handed him a hot cup of coffee. “Gina’s going to be a few days. I can’t tell you when she’ll be back, but I think we’re looking at least another four days.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, she didn’t give me an exact time or anything, but it’s a hell of a drive across country the way she’s going. You should know you are persona non grata. She wouldn’t spit on you if you were on fire, and those were her exact words. I just can’t stand to see your sorry ass hanging out here day and night. Go home, get some sleep. I’ll let you know when she gets home safely. But if you tell her I did, you’ll never know what hit you.”

“Thanks, man.” Ben pulled a card out of his wallet. “Here’s my cell number. Call me any time. And if you talk to her, tell her—”

Sam shook his head. “You’re gonna have to do that yourself. If she knew I was talking to you, she’d have my head.”

Ben nodded. “Thanks, Sam. I owe you.”

“Yeah, just don’t ever tell Gina and we’ll call it even.” Ben watched as Sam went into the house. Shit, what he wouldn’t do to be able to go inside his own home.

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Gina looked up at Mount Rushmore from a distance. It wasn’t much different than the pictures she’d seen in the books at school, just bigger. It certainly didn’t blow her skirt up. She listened to the park ranger rattle off information with half an ear as the cell phone vibrated at her hip. She checked to see who it was and wished she could remember how to block calls. Still, if she did that, she’d have nothing to listen to that wasn’t country music.

“Is that Ben again?”

Buck stared down at her with his gap-toothed grin when she nodded. “He sure is persistent. Maybe if you talk to him, he’ll stop calling you.”

“He’ll stop calling eventually. When I get home, I’ll change my number.”

“Talking to him might make you feel better. Ventriloquist is healthy. If he was so wrong, telling him off could only help. And just between you and me, you could use some help because, sweetheart, you’re not lookin’ too good.”

Gina tugged on Jasmine’s leash to keep her from eating a cigarette butt someone tossed on the only place dogs were allowed. “You sure know how to sweet-talk the ladies. No wonder Kate was so happy see you leave. And I thought she was just helping me out.”

Buck laughed and threw his arm around her. “Aw, honey, Kate adores me, she just don’t know it yet. Kinda like you and Ben.”

Gina rolled her eyes. She was too tired to tell him he was wrong. The man was maddening.

“I might just have to get you drunk tonight so you’ll sleep. That little body of yours needs a good rest, even if it is artificially induced.”

“I’m fine. Now that we’ve seen the mountain and hit every gift shop known to man, can we leave?”

“No not before we stop for lunch. Kate’s gonna want a report. I hope you’re hungry. I, for one, am tired of listening to her yell at me for your lack of appetite—as if I have anything to do with it. Besides, I’m gonna gain weight if I have to finish another one of your meals. I don’t want to lose my boyish figure.”

Gina knew to laugh on cue; she’d been doing it since she met Buck. “You’re really sweet to try to cheer me up, but I have no problem with feeling like crap.” She turned and walked Jasmine around the grass as Buck trailed along beside her. “I’ve definitely learned my lesson about relationships. It’ll take a long time for me to forget how awful they make you feel. I can’t imagine how bad it would be if I actually did love Ben. The way I look at it, I’m lucky I’m incapable of loving anyone but Tina, Sam, and my friend, Rosalie. From now on, I swear I’m not going to start relationships with anyone who doesn’t have fur.”

“Ha, it’s a good thing I’m a furry guy then, huh, Gina?”

“It’s a good thing.” She tugged on his beard. “You could use some manscaping though. When we get to New York, I’ll have Tina give you a haircut and trim that beard and mustache. Kate won’t be able to resist you once Tina’s worked her magic.”

Buck smiled, that gap in his teeth winking out under his bushy mustache, and stroked his beard. “Maybe I’ll give your sister a try. It’s been a while since I hit the barbershop.”

Gina tossed Jasmine into the cab winking out under his bushy mustache, and stroked his beard. “Maybe I’ll give your sister a try. It’s been a while since I hit the barbershop.”

“About thirty hours, give or take. We have another three days if we don’t stop somewhere else.”

“I’m in no rush to get home. Ben’s been hanging out in the park across from my house waiting for me. Maybe by then he’ll have given up.”

“I doubt it. I’ve seen that boy fish for twelve hours straight without a break until he caught something, though that’s when he was just a little tyke. His dad and me were buddies. If Ben is half the man I think he is, he’ll be there waiting for you.”

“He’s not.” If Ben was half the man Buck thought he was, he wouldn’t have accused her of stealing. If Ben was half the man Buck thought he was, he wouldn’t have accused her of using him and his grandfather. If Ben was half the man Buck thought he was, he wouldn’t have hurt her.
Chapter 16

Gina and Buck were in New Jersey when her phone rang; she almost didn’t look to see who it was. Ben had called her so many times, he had gone way past annoying. She checked her phone and saw it was Dick, the private detective. “Dick, what did you find?”

“The man I’ve been investigating, Michael R. Hutchins, turned out to be a blond-haired, blue-eyed, California boy who’d already found his birth parents. He’s not your brother.”

Gina couldn’t speak. She nodded and took a deep breath that came out sounding like a sob. She hadn’t realized how much she’d been counting on finding Rafael. The search for him had been the only thing keeping her sane.

“I’m sorry. I’ll keep looking. I’ll go back to the secretary and sift through her files again. It’s not over.”

“Yeah.” She sniffled and wiped her eyes. “I should have known it was too good to be true.”

“We’ll find him. I’m sorry I got your hopes up. I’m flying back on the red-eye, and I’ll be in the office tomorrow if you want to meet.”

Buck pulled into a rest stop and let the engine idle as she finished her call.

“I’ll call you tomorrow and we can go over our game plan. Don’t give up hope, Gina. This is just the beginning.”

She cleared her throat and forced the words out. “I know. Thanks for trying. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Are you okay?”

She nodded again. “I’m fine. I have to go.” She didn’t wait for his reply before ending the call. Buck put his arm around her. Gina turned her face to his chest and cried.

“It’s okay, just let it all out.”

As if she had any choice in the matter. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothin’ to be sorry about.” He handed her a napkin to use as a tissue. “You want to tell me about it?”

She shook her head. “I’ll be fine.”

“I know you will, darlin’, but you look as if you’ve been carrying the weight of the world on your little shoulders. Whatever it is that’s bothering you, I know it’s more than just this situation with Ben.”

She nodded. “This has nothing to do with Ben. This is my problem.”

“I’m a good listener and it looks to me as if you could use a sounding board. If not me, you might want to give Ben a shot. He’s been waiting for you. Kate told me he’s been outside your house since your brother-in-law has orders not to let him in.”

“Oh, so you’ve been getting information from Kate and not just giving it to her?”

Buck grinned. “I won’t mention a word you say to Kate or anyone else for that matter. I’ll swear on the Bible if it’ll make you feel better.” He opened a bag that sat beside his seat the entire trip and pulled out a well-worn Bible.

Gina shook her head. “I believe you. I’m sorry, Buck. It’s not that I don’t trust you. This is my problem. It’s something I need to work out on my own.”

Buck rubbed her back. “I appreciate your independence, but even Jesus had the Apostles helping him, remember?”

“Yeah, and one of them turned on him. Not really a good example.”

“Darlin’, Ben knows he screwed up. He’s been kicking himself over it since you left. Everyone deserves a second chance, don’t they?”

“I don’t think I can give him that, Buck. I don’t think I can take the disappointment again. It hurts too much.”

“Just promise me that you’ll listen to him, and more importantly, talk to him. Ben’s never been in love before. He’s new at this. And it didn’t help that the two of you started your relationship in an odd place.”

Gina raised her eyebrows. She’d never told Buck anything about that. Kate must have.

“Not many people marry first and fall in love later. Don’t throw a real chance at love away. Believe me, it doesn’t come around every day.”

“I didn’t fall in love, and neither did he. He just thinks he did.”

“Would you do something for me? Would you promise to hear him out and talk to him?”

Gina wiped her eyes with the napkin. “Is there any way you’ll take me home if I don’t?”

Buck grinned. “You’ll get there a lot sooner if you promise.”

“Fine. I promise.”
The closer they got to New York, the more fragile Gina felt. All she could do was pray they got there soon. She planned to shut herself in her room, close the blinds, and will everybody and everything away. She didn’t think she was strong enough to handle one more thing. She was going to shatter and she needed to be alone when it happened.

***

Ben watched Tina leave for work earlier and knew Sam would sleep until about one, so Ben sat on the stoop of the brownstone waiting in the shade. An eighteen-wheeler stopped in front of the house. The hiss of the air breaks and smell of diesel exhaust pulled Ben from his daze. The truck was one of Gramps’ and he recognized the driver’s red hair and beard. Ben walked across the street reaching the truck as Buck climbed from the cab.

“Hey, Ben, fancy meetin’ you here.”

Ben shook Buck’s hand and gave him a guy hug. “Uncle Buck, what are you doing here?”

Buck pushed the bill of his Mariners cap up and rocked back on the heels of his worn cowboy boots. “Kate asked me to drop off a package while I was in the area.”

Ben heard the other door slam shut and saw Gina come around the front of the cab. She looked through him, as if he didn’t exist, and the emptiness in her eyes mirrored the emptiness he’d felt since she left. He was shocked to see her like this. Her eyes were swollen and her face was red and blotchy. She’d been crying. A part of him hoped it was because she missed him as much as he’d missed her. He rubbed his chest, feeling as though someone had surgically extracted something necessary for him to live. She had bags under her eyes and looked as if she’d lost weight. But the thing that shocked him the most was that Gina looked lifeless. She’d lost that spark he’d fallen in love with. She tugged on a leash and a larger, plumper Jasmine ran around the front of the truck and right to him. He bent and picked her up, holding her to his chest, and received puppy kisses.

Gina shook her head, dropped the end of the leash, and walked woodenly to the house. Ben followed Gina as Buck returned to the cab and pulled out her bags.

Ben had spent the last five days planning every word he’d say to her, but every single one disappeared into the ether as soon as he set eyes on her. He drank in the sight of her, thanking God she was home and still in one piece. Buck followed them in with Gina’s bags, nudged Ben out of the way, and pulled her into a big hug. “Remember your promise. I’m going to drop off the load and I’ll be around for a day or two. I’ll call you.”

“I have plenty of space here. You’re more than welcome to stay.”

Buck smiled. “No, you have your hands full as it is, darlin’, but thanks for the offer.”

Gina nodded and held him tight, as if she were absorbing his strength. She got up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Remember, you have an appointment with Tina tomorrow.”

“How could I forget?” He turned away and Ben walked him to the door. Buck hugged Ben and patted Jasmine’s head. “You be gentle with her or you’ll answer to me.”

“Thanks for taking care of her, Uncle Buck.”

“Don’t thank me, it was my pleasure. I wish you luck, she’s a hell of a woman.”

“I know.”

Ben put Jasmine down. Gina called her as she walked through the swinging door into the kitchen and Ben followed, catching the door just before it rearranged his face. He knew it was going to be an uphill battle. He was ready for it, he hoped.

Ben pushed the door open slowly in case Jasmine was in front of it. She danced around Gina who had pulled a bag of kibble and two bowls out of one of Ben’s duffle bags. “Here you go, Jazzie. You’re hungry again, aren’t you?”

As Jasmine wolfed down her food, Gina rolled the top of the bag and put it in the pantry. With that done, she took out coffee and started a pot. “Are you just going to stand there staring at me or are you going to say something?”

Ben stepped behind her and folded her in his arms. He took a deep breath and for the first time since she left, he felt whole. He didn’t care that she stood as still and stiff as a statue. She smelled like Gina, and even though she didn’t melt into him, she felt good. “God, I missed you. Promise you’ll never leave me again.”

“I promise. Since there’s no way in hell I’d ever take you back, leaving you again would be impossible. The only reason you’re still here is because I promised Buck I’d hear you out.”

Thank God for Uncle Buck. “Gina, all I can say is I’m sorry. When I got that message and then found you and Gramps with your heads together, I jumped to the wrong conclusion. Believe me, if I had to do it all over again, I’d change everything I did and said.”

He couldn’t see Gina’s face, but she nodded.

“I love you.”
“You don’t know the meaning of the word.” Gina slipped out of his arms and reached for a coffee cup. It didn’t look as if he would be invited to join her. “I do too. But I also know you’re keeping something from me. I just don’t know what or why. Are you in some kind of trouble? Why did you hire a private investigator to research land titles?” “It’s my business and it has nothing to do with you.” “Anything that affects you, affects me. Talk to me. Please. I need to know what’s going on. Maybe I can help.” She turned and finally looked at him. “Don’t you get it? I don’t want your help. I just want you gone.” “You’re not getting rid of me that easily, Gina. I’m not going anywhere. I don’t care if Sam throws me out. I’ll keep coming back.” Gina took the deed out of her bag, opened it to the last page, and signed it. “Here, take your deed and leave.” Ben shook his head. “It has to be witnessed and notarized.” “Make an appointment, text me the time and address, and I’ll be there. You’ll get your ranch and I’ll get my divorce.” “I don’t want the ranch and I sure as hell don’t want a divorce. The only thing I want is you. Please, Gina, just give me a chance. I won’t disappoint you.” “You already have. I warned you. Against my better judgment, I gave you three chances and you blew it in too many ways to count. I don’t love you, Ben. I never will. Let’s just cut our losses and do our best to forget each other.” Ben leaned back against the counter and smiled in relief. “You’re lying.” Thank God. “You love me. I know you do. Whenever you lie you can’t look me in the eye and you shove your hands in your pockets.” She looked down, pulled her hands from her front pockets, and hugged herself. “Please just leave.” Her voice rose. “Please?” she shouted and all he could think was that finally, the Gina he loved was back. “These last six days have nearly killed me. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life without you. Gina, I love you. I can’t leave you.” Gina squeezed her eyes shut and shook. “No. You won’t leave. There’s a difference. You are certainly capable. You had no problem leaving me in Idaho.” She continued to scream at him. “What did you expect me to do, Ben? Just stay there to see if you’d come back?” She shook her head as her tears escaped. “You left me first. I just didn’t stick around. You left me. You’re just like everyone else. Now get out!” Ben took her in his arms as the door swung open, and he found himself on the receiving end of Tina’s glare. “Ben, get away from my sister or so help me, I’ll kill you where you stand.” Gina turned away from Ben and fell into her sister’s arms losing any semblance of control. She’d never cried in front of anyone before Ben. He seemed to have that affect on her. She should have known he was trouble. Tina led her out of the kitchen and up to her room, slamming the door behind her. “What did he do to you? Are you hurt?” Gina couldn’t speak; she just sank down in her bed and curled into a ball. “I’ll have Sam kill him. He knows hundreds of ways to kill a person. I’ll make sure he chooses one that’s slow and painful.” “He didn’t hurt me. Not physically anyway. Oh God, Tina. Everything is falling apart, I’m falling apart.” “No, you’re not. This is crying, people cry. Not you, but maybe it’s good. You’re going to be okay. We have each other. We’re fine. Or at least we will be once you tell me what you’re doing hiring an investigator.” “I can’t. I’m sorry, but I can’t. You’re going to have to trust me.” Tina lay down beside her like they had done since they were little. “Gina, tell me who you’re looking for. Who is he to you?” “Oh God, not you too.” “Sam talked to your investigator today. He said you have to tell me everything or he will.” “He knows?” “I guess so. He said I had to talk to you first.” “Why can’t you let me deal with this? Don’t you trust me? Haven’t I always looked out for you?” “Yes, but Gina, I don’t need you to look out for me anymore. I’m an adult and I want you to treat me like an equal.” “Oh no you don’t. Believe me.” Tina hugged her tighter. “You’re scaring me. Just tell me what’s wrong. We’ll deal with whatever it is together.” Gina sat up and hugged her legs to her chest. She couldn’t stop crying. Just the thought of saying the words had her gasping for breath between sobs. This was her worst nightmare come true. She’d spent her life protecting Tina so she would never have to know the truth of what her parents had done. “Please, don’t make me do this.” Tina put her arm around her and rested her head against Gina’s. “If you don’t tell me, Sam will. I’d much rather
hear it from you.”

Gina took a half dozen tissues from the box on her bedside table and wiped her face. She tried to get her breathing under control. “When you were two, Momma had a baby boy, she called him Rafael.” “Oh God, did he die?” “No.” Telling her that their brother died would have been easier than telling her the truth. Sam might know the facts, but he had no idea about the particulars. If he had, he never would have put her in this untenable position. She just had to get through this. There was no way to avoid it. She took a deep breath and said the words she’d never spoken to anyone before. “Things at home were never good, but when Mama was pregnant, it was really bad. We were living in a week-to-week dump of a hotel in Harlem. Papa was making Mama walk the streets to pay for his drugs, and when she got pregnant, he treated her like she’d cheated on him. Everyone knew the baby wasn’t his. After Mama brought Rafael home, she started drinking, and Papa was always using. I tried to take care of Rafael, but Papa hated him. Whenever he wasn’t stoned, all he did was say he wanted to get rid of the little bastard.” “What happened?” “Papa sold Rafael for drug money.” Tina crossed herself. “Oh God. No. People just don’t sell babies.” Gina stared at the wall and rocked. “Yeah, they do.” She stopped for a moment and tried to get the image of Papa ripping Rafael from her arms out of her head. “I did my best to take care of him, I really did. I fed and changed him when there was food and diapers. I tried to keep him quiet so Papa wouldn’t get mad. A week or two after Mama came home with Rafael, Papa got you and me dressed up in our best clothes. I still remember it like it was yesterday. I wore this little red dress Mama bought at the Salvation Army. It still had the tags on it from Macy’s. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. You had on a frilly pink dress you hated because the lace was scratchy.”

She took a deep breath and held Tina’s hand. She was shaking. “He had us stand next to the door when a man and a woman came in. They gave Papa a stack of hundred dollar bills and took Rafael from me. That’s when Papa tried to sell us too.” The tears started again and she swallowed hard. “I hit him and kicked him. I couldn’t let him take you too. I tried to get Rafael, but Papa threw me into the wall. My head was bleeding, my ears were ringing, and I couldn’t see straight, but I was able to grab you, run into the bathroom, and lock the door. I heard them say they didn’t want us because we were too old. When Papa came after us, he told me we were worthless, he couldn’t even give us away. He took the money and left. Mama just kept drinking. She never stopped after that.” “I can’t believe you never told me.” “I couldn’t. Don’t you see, this was all my fault?” “Gina, you were six.” “Maybe if I’d taken better care of him—” “There was nothing you could have done. You’ve been carrying this around all your life? You were a child. You never should have had to take care of anyone, not me or Rafael. Papa probably did him a favor, so stop blaming yourself. There was nothing you could have done.” “I never wanted you to feel like I did, like I do. I let him down. I couldn’t take care of him. I need to find him.” Tina rocked her, holding on tight. “Gina, I understand why you didn’t tell me when I was young, but you should have once Sam and I were together. He could have helped us find Rafael.” “I lost Rafael and I need to find him.” She grabbed another handful of tissues and wiped the tears away. “That’s why I married Ben. I knew that with the money, I’d be able to hire someone to find our brother. I just have to know he’s okay.” “We’ll find him together.” Gina heard Ben’s voice and wanted to throw up. She probably would have if she’d had anything in her stomach.

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Gina and Tina both turned white.

Ben ignored Tina who ran into Sam’s arms and they backed out of the door. Of course, Gina wasn’t that easy. “You didn’t think I’d stay downstairs when you were so upset, did you? Sweetheart, I love you. I told you I wasn’t going anywhere.” He wanted to pick her up and hold her. Ben was so mad he was shaking. He hoped her father was dead because if Ben ever found the bastard, he’d make it his life’s mission to string him up and watch him die a slow and painful death.

Ben sat beside her on their bed. “I’ll do whatever you need. We can hire a team of investigators. I promise I’ll find him.”
“The only thing I want from you is a divorce.” Gina was deadly calm, almost emotionless. “You can have your money back. Sam, Tina, and I can be out of the house tomorrow. Just let me sign the ranch over to you and end this.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Gina looked him in the eye. “I do. Now go. I’ll call my lawyer in the morning, have her transfer the deed to you, and send you a check. I don’t want your money, the house, any of it. I just want you to leave and forget you ever knew me.”

Ben didn’t know what hit him. She couldn’t mean this. God, but she looked him in the eye and said it. “Gina, please don’t do this to us.”

“There is no us. There never was, not really. Please, just leave.”

“No.” He shook his head and he wondered if he’d imagined everything they had together. “We can work this out.”

“There’s nothing to work out. You’ll get the ranch and I’ll get a divorce. That was the deal. Please, for once, live up to your end of the bargain.”

Ben knew he’d lost her, if he ever had her in the first place. He couldn’t give a shit about the damn ranch, the house, and the money. All he wanted was Gina, and nothing he said would change her stubborn mind. The only person who could do that was Gina.

“Fine, I’ll live up to my end if you live up to yours. You keep the money and the house. They’re yours. I won’t take them back.” He got up and took one last look at his wife. “I’ll have my lawyer draw up the papers.”

Tears streamed down Gina’s face and every one hit him like a bullet to the heart.

“I love you. That’s not going to change. Not ever. I might walk out that door, and since you’re insisting, I’ll give you a divorce, but I’ll never stop loving you.”

The last time Ben had felt pain this bad was when his grandfather told him his parents were dead. He never thought anything could beat that. This was too close to call. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs when he saw Sam.

“She wants a divorce. Tell her if she moves out of this house and sends me the money, I’ll hold up the divorce for all eternity. I don’t want her to ever worry about money. Do you understand me?”

Sam nodded. “Maybe she’ll change her mind.”

Ben shook his head in defeat. “Have you ever known Gina to change her mind?” When Sam didn’t answer, he nodded. “I didn’t think so. Take care of her for me, Sam. You have my number. If you or Gina ever need anything, all you have to do is call.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Ben, the phone works both ways. If you need anything—”

“The only thing I need is Gina. But thanks, Sam.” He turned and walked out before he did something embarrassing like start crying.

Gina watched Ben walk out for the last time. He closed the door softly behind him and she pulled a pillow to her chest and cried. Letting him go was the hardest thing she’d ever done, even harder than telling Tina about Rafael. It was the right thing to do. Ben deserved better than her. He was probably thanking his lucky stars, and even if he wasn’t, he’d forget her soon enough. They all did.

Tina knocked. Gina couldn’t take any more talking, she just wanted to go to sleep and never wake up. “Please, just leave me alone.”

“Gina—”

“I don’t love him. Do me a favor, take care of Jasmine for me, and go. I just want to be left alone.”

“Gina—”

“Tina, please. Just leave me alone.”

“I don’t do dogs. Jasmine is your problem. Sam and I will be downstairs if you need us.”

“I don’t need anyone, why can’t anyone understand that? Please, just go.”

She heard the click of the door closing; she picked Jasmine up, lay in her bed, and cried. She felt as if she’d been beaten. Everything hurt.
Ben drove back to the city. He walked into his apartment and looked around maybe for the first time since returning to New York and wondered how he’d ever lived here. It looked sterile.

“It’s about time you got here. I’ve been waitin’ for you, boy.”

When Ben heard his grandfather’s voice, he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Who let you in?”

“That nice little partner of yours, Annabelle. It’s nice to know one woman still likes me.” Joe walked past him headed toward the kitchen. “I sure as hell hope you have something to eat in this house. I haven’t had a decent meal since Gina left.”

“You flew all the way out here to eat? I know there are great restaurants right in Boise. You even own a few of them.”

“Kate’s on strike. She wouldn’t feed me or do anything except tell me what an ass I am. She had no problem doing that, and I won’t mention what she said about you. She wouldn’t even give me the tree-bark muffins and rabbit food she’s always trying to push on me. I had to come here to get away from her.”

“Lucky me.”

“What do you want me to do? Hell, I’ve been eatin’ beans for a week—they’re the only thing I know how to cook—and let me just say, they ain’t agreein’ with me. It’s gettin’ ugly, boy, and I’m down to my last pair of shorts. I went to Humpin’ Hannah’s yesterday to get a hamburger, and Karma wouldn’t even serve me. It’s just not fittin’.”

Ben went to the bar and fixed himself a drink. “It serves you right. That stunt you pulled wrecked my marriage.”

Joe came out of the kitchen with a box of leftover Chinese food and a fork. “You can’t blame me for that. You wrecked your marriage all by your lonesome. I was just trying to keep you two together and you threw a monkey wrench in my plans. How was I to know you would do something as stupid as accusing your wife of using me? As if she could even if she wanted to, which she didn’t. That little girl doesn’t have a dishonest bone in her body, and if you think she does, you don’t deserve her or the ranch.”

Ben took a swig of his scotch. “Do me a favor, Gramps, just leave me the hell alone. I don’t need you coming down on me too.” He took the bottle and his glass and headed to his room. He hoped his grandfather wouldn’t follow him in.

“You know where the guest room is, Gramps. The washer and dryer is in the hall closet. The directions are on the detergent. Since you’re so smart, you should have no problem figuring out how to use it.”

“Oh, are you gonna lock yourself in your room again and sulk? What you need to do is stop drinking yourself into a stupor and figure out a way to get your wife back.”

Ben lay on the bed staring at the ceiling. “I don’t want a divorce, and I don’t want her struggling either. She needs the money, and the last thing I want is for her to be hurting any more than she already is. I fucked up royally.”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard. It’s over? You’re giving up?”

“I don’t have a choice, Trap. It’s killing me, but it’s what she wants.”

“You need to give Gina what she wants.”

“I just did. All she wants is a divorce and never to see me again.”

“Man, that’s harsh. Okay, drink and wallow for a few days. When you get sick of that and yourself, sober up and give me a call. We’ll put our heads together and see if there’s any way to get you and your wife back together.”

“I wish there was a way, but it’s over. She looked me in the eye and told me. She wasn’t lying about that, Trap. Now all I have to do is figure out how to live without her.”

“You will, eventually. It might take five years, but you will.”
Ben couldn’t help but wonder how Trapper seemed to know so much about surviving a breakup. “Thanks for the pep talk. It’s a good thing you’re a judge and not a psychologist.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. Facts are a whole lot easier to deal with than feelings. Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“You can talk to Kate and see if she’ll get Gramps to go back home.”

“I’ll do anything but that. I’m one of the few men not on Mom’s shit list. I love you like a brother, but when it comes to Mom and Grandpa Joe, you’re on your own.”

“Well, damn, what good are you then?”

“Mom and Karma have been keeping in touch with Gina. If they let anything slip, I’ll give you a heads up, but that’s about the best I can do.”

“I guess that’s something. I have to go. All this talking is keeping me from drinking.”

Ben flipped his phone shut and poured another glass of scotch.
Chapter 17

Gina rolled over in bed and pulled her eye mask up to check the time when Jasmine whimpered at the door. It read 12:20 but for the life of her, she didn’t know if it was day or night. She pressed the button beside her bed to raise the window shades. It was noon. She’d been asleep for a long time. Picking up the phone, she tried to remember what day it was. She hoped it was Monday, Tina’s day off. She used the intercom and buzzed the kitchen. “Tina, are you there?”

“Yeah, are you going to get your ass out of bed today?”

“Could you take Jasmine out for me?”

“No, but you can. Get the hell out of bed. You’ve been in there almost a week. Don’t you need to get back to work?”

“I still have a week’s vacation and no, I don’t want to get out of bed. Just come and take Jasmine out for me and feed her, please?”

“Do it yourself. She’s your dog. I’m your sister, not your maid.”

The intercom beeped off and Gina groaned, pulling herself out of bed. She looked around for something to wear; everything was still in her suitcase. Great. She rummaged through it as Jasmine danced around her feet. She found a pair of jeans, tugged on them to get them out of the bag, and something hard fell on her foot. It was the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* from the cabin—Ben’s mother’s book. She wasn’t sure how it got there. She sure as heck didn’t pack it or steal it.

Jasmine whined again so Gina tossed the book on her bed and got dressed. Unfortunately for both her and Jasmine, the puppy couldn’t hold it any longer and had an accident in front of the door. She cowered there, shaking.

“It’s okay, sweetie. It’s not your fault. I’m just a crappy mom.” Gina retrieved a towel from the bathroom and tossed it on the carpet, stepping on it to sop up some of the mess. “I’ll clean it up later. Come on, Jazzie, let’s go out and then we’ll feed you.”

Gina grabbed her sunglasses and a clean-up bag from the table and headed across the street to the park with Jasmine. It was a gorgeous spring day. The sun shone, the birds chirped, but she couldn’t care less. All she wanted to do was go back to her room, pull the shades, and sleep.

After a very short walk, she and Jasmine returned to the house and went straight to the kitchen where Tina was banging around. The noise did nothing to help the headache Gina had from crying and sleeping and crying some more. She rubbed her forehead. She hadn’t cried that much since Rafael had been taken away. She’d learned her lesson then. She’d cried until her father had told her to stop or he’d give her something to cry about. After one beating with his belt, he left her and Tina alone with their mother in the apartment until he’d spent all the money on drugs and booze. She hadn’t cried again until she’d met Ben.

While Tina ignored her, Gina retrieved the dog food. She was almost out. The thought of going shopping was enough to make her consider calling that expensive grocery store Ben had used, because from the look on Tina’s face, Gina didn’t think her sister would be willing to make a dog food run, and the store delivered. Until now, she would have never considered spending the extra money, but then, she’d never felt this way before either. Maybe she was sick.

Tina slammed a pan on the stove, drawing Gina’s attention away from her own troubles. Tina looked pissed.

“Are you and Sam fighting?”

“No.”

“Then what is your problem? I’d prefer it if you didn’t break the stove. As soon as the divorce is final, I want to be able to sell this place.”

“My problem? If you want to know what my problem is, go look in the mirror.”

Gina stopped and stared. Tina had never spoken to her like that. Ignoring the comment because it would take too much energy to argue, Gina filled Jasmine’s food bowl and set it down beside the water bowl, she thought about giving Jasmine fresh water, but it seemed like an awful lot of trouble.

Tina took two slices out of the breadbox and slathered one with butter before pointing the knife at Gina. “You haven’t gotten out of bed for more than ten minutes in the last week. You’re like a zombie. You come down and eat our leftovers in the middle of the night, you sleep all day, and you’re not taking care of your dog. What is wrong
with you?” She tossed the buttered bread in the frying pan and went to the refrigerator and took out the Swiss cheese, closed the door with her hip, and placed a few slices on the bread.

“I just want to be left alone.”

Tina buttered the other slice. “Well, tough shit. I’ve been biting my tongue all week and I’m done. I’m so angry with you, Gina, I can’t stand it.” She slapped the bread down on top of the sandwich and stared.

Gina leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. “What the heck did I do to you?”

Tina pulled a spatula out of the drawer and slammed it shut before pointing the spatula at her. “You have some nerve asking me that. You’ve kept me in the dark for the last twenty-two years and I’ve spent the last week processing it. You didn’t tell me about Rafael until you were forced to, and if it hadn’t been for Ben and Sam, I still wouldn’t know I have a brother walking this earth. You kept my brother from me.”

Gina stepped toward her sister. “I was trying to—”

Tina held the spatula up, cutting her off and stopping her dead in her tracks. “Protect me. I know, I heard you the first thousand times. You had no right!” She slammed the spatula on the counter.

Gina stepped away, shocked by Tina’s fury.

“Can you imagine how I felt? Oh, no. You’re so busy running everyone’s lives and making yourself out to be a martyr, you never think of anyone else. All this time, Sam and I could have helped look for Rafael. But no, you had to do it yourself. Well, sister, I don’t remember giving you permission to run my life.” She picked up the spatula and flipped the sandwich. “Maybe I let you take care of me too long. I admit to being guilty of that, but it ends now. Things are going to change, and if you don’t get with the program, Sam and I will move out. Maybe that’s what you need to get your head on straight.” She took a plate from the cabinet and slapped it down on the granite countertop.

It was a good thing it was Corelle because if it were the regular china, it would be in a thousand pieces.

Tina didn’t seem to notice. “I have a life. I’m happy. You’re the one who needs someone to take care of you. Look at yourself. You’re alone. Sure, you can date any guy you want, but no matter how great he is, you use him until he gets too close and then kick him to the curb.”

“I do not.”

“Oh yes you do.” Tina flipped the sandwich onto the plate and stabbed it with the spatula, cutting it in half. “You threw Ben out, and you’ve been moping around ever since. You’re in love with him, but you’re too proud or too stupid to do anything about it.”

“What?”

“He made one mistake and you cut him off. He’s a man. If I left Sam over every stupid thing he did or said, we wouldn’t have made it a week. If you’re looking for perfection, Gina, you’re going to spend the rest of your life alone.”

“I’m not looking for perfection.”

“Oh yeah? I have news for you, you aren’t perfect and no one else is either. I think you’re lucky to have someone as kind and caring as Ben willing to put up with your shit because I’m sick to death of it. I’m sick of you and I’m sick of this weeklong pity party. You’re miserable and I’m not going to sit around and watch you ruin your life.”

“I’m not ruining my life. I’m taking a damn vacation.”

“Right. You listen to me, you might be a lot older than me—”

Gina raised her hand. “Hold on, I’m only four years older than you. I’m not ancient.”

“If anyone makes you sound ancient it’s you. What I was going to say before I was rudely interrupted was that you might be older, but I’m the one who has had a successful four-year relationship, almost two of which were spent happily married. You’ve never had a relationship last longer than...” She stopped and tapped her chin with her pointer finger. “How long have you and Ben been married? Two months? Yeah, you’ve never had a relationship last longer than two months. Who do you think knows more about relationships—you or me?”

“It doesn’t matter. Ben and I don’t have a relationship. We have an agreement. He got what he wanted—”

“Gina, you may have begun this mess with an agreement, but it turned into what looked to me like a real marriage until you went off and wagged it out on him.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh yeah, I’m completely clueless. You slept with him, you went to his ranch for a week and played house, and when he got too close for comfort, you found any excuse you could to terminate it. You’re so afraid of needing and loving someone that you broke your own heart and put the blame on him. If it were just you that you were hurting, I’d say you deserved it. But you hurt Ben too. You used him. How could you do that to him after all he’s given you?”

“I’m going to return every red cent.”

Tina shook her head. “It’s not the money, Gina. Ben gave you his love, and you threw it back in his face. If you can do that to him, you’re not the person I thought you were.” Tina took her sandwich, grabbed a soda from the
refrigerator, and left Gina standing in the kitchen alone. Well, alone except for Jasmine who had curled up next to her food bowl and was fast asleep.

Tina had it all wrong, or did she? Gina didn’t know, and the way she felt, she couldn’t summon the energy to examine it. She removed a bottle of spray cleaner for the carpet from beneath the sink, grabbed a roll of paper towels, and picked Jasmine up off the floor. “Come on, sweetie. Let’s go upstairs where we can be alone, just you and me. We’ll clean up and go back to bed until the next time you have to go out.”

Gina knelt on the carpet as Jasmine helped her clean and wash the spot, chasing the paper towel to and fro. Gina sat and tried to get the towel out of Jasmine’s mouth and remembered she’d forgotten to pack the toy she and Ben had made Jasmine. They’d taken a ball of rubber bands, stuffed it in one of Ben’s old socks, and tied a knot in the end.

She shook her head and caught herself smiling. They’d spent the day picnicking in the meadow, tossing Jasmine’s toy for her to fetch, playing tug-of-war—Jazzie and Gina against Ben; the three of them wrestling on a picnic blanket, and napping after lunch. Jasmine had been so worn out, Ben had carried her the whole way home. Not that he seemed to mind. He never minded anything, even when Gina picked fights, teased him, or when Jasmine cried to go out in the middle of the night. She couldn’t remember one time when Ben hadn’t been smiling. He made everything fun, even doing nothing wasn’t boring if Ben was there. God, she missed him.

Gina just needed to get Ben Walsh out of her head. She took a quick shower and dressed in loose shorts and a T-shirt before crawling into the unmade bed. She picked up the copy of Pride and Prejudice that had somehow ended up in her luggage. It didn’t look as if Joe saved many of her things for Ben. Maybe she’d stick it in the mail because, as far as she was concerned, she never wanted to see Ben again. It would hurt too much. She wondered how anything could hurt more than it did right now.

Opening the book, she saw Ben’s mother’s inscription and was shocked to see Gina Reyez-Walsh written below Elizabeth Walsh’s name. A note fell out and landed on her leg. She unfolded the paper and bit her lip.

Gina~
You’ve made the ranch a home again and filled my life with laughter. I’m so glad the ranch was where we started our family—you, Jasmine, and me.
It’s only right that this is passed down to you, and maybe someday, our daughter.
You have all my love~

Ben

She put the note back in the book, held it close to her chest, and cried into her pillow. How could he know just what to say to inflict the most pain?

***

Ben rolled out of bed when he heard his grandfather stomping around and growling. Damn it. He pulled on a pair of jeans and opened his door. “What’s wrong now?” He’d had just about enough of his grandfather. He thought that after a week, Gramps would be on his way home, but he showed no signs of leaving.

“It’s about time you got up. It’s after noon. You’re as bad as Kate; you won’t cook a damn thing. I would have stayed home if I knew all I’d have to eat were beans.”

“There are thousands of restaurants. Get takeout if you’re not happy with the food.”

“What food? All you have left in your refrigerator is ketchup. When was the last time you went grocery shopping?”

“Before I left for Idaho. Call the market if you want, they deliver. Just leave me alone.”

Gramps turned and walked toward him. Ben took a step back. He hadn’t seen Gramps that mad since he was a kid.

“You have done nothing for the last week. If you’re so broken up about losing your wife, why don’t you get off your ass and do something about it? You’re not going to get her back pacing your room and drinking yourself into oblivion.”

Ben had had enough. “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be in this position.”

“If it weren’t for me, you never would have married Gina in the first place or spent enough time with her to fall in love. You should be thanking me instead of blaming me for your failure. I can’t believe you’re giving up on Gina and your marriage. I thought I raised you to be a better man.”

Ben shook his head. “You don’t understand.”

Gramps looked even madder now. “Boy, I’ve been walking this earth for eighty years. I understand more than you’ll ever know. I understand you’ll get nowhere in this world burying yourself in a bottle. I understand if you love Gina, really love her, you’d never give up on her or your relationship. I understand the only thing that counts in the end is the love you’ve shared through your life. I don’t want to die knowing you and Gina are both alone. I love that
“little lady. You need to go and get your wife. Do whatever it takes to make her see she can’t live without you.”

Ben sat down on his bed. “That’s the thing, Gramps, Gina has no problem living without me.”

Gramps sat beside Ben on his unmade bed. “Right, I’d bet everything I own that Gina is having as hard a time living without you as you are living without her. That girl is in love with you, Ben. You’re just too stupid to see beyond your own nose right now.”

“She looked me in the eye and told me to get the hell out of her life.”

“So? You pissed her off, you hurt her, and you left her. Leaving was your biggest mistake. Gina’s had a hard life. She’s never been able to count on anyone and by you leaving, you showed her she can’t rely on you. You did the one thing Gina will have the hardest time forgiving. Now all you have to do is figure out how to get back into her good graces. It ain’t gonna be easy, but nothing’s as important as true love is.”

Gramps patted his back and stood.

“Get up, take a shower, shave, and go buy us some food. Once we’ve eaten a decent meal, we’ll put our heads together and figure out a way to get your wife back.”

Ben wanted to tell him it was useless. He’d spent the last week thinking about nothing else, and still hadn’t come up with a plan. He always had a plan. But Gramps would never acknowledge defeat. Saying anything would be a waste of breath. “I’ll get up and go for a run. I haven’t done anything all week, so maybe a good run will help. After I get back, I’ll shower, change, and go shopping. Sound fair?”

Gramps nodded. “Sounds like a plan, unfortunately, not a plan that will get me something more than beans for lunch, but that’s fine. I can stand one more meal of beans if you promise me you’ll make something good for dinner.”

“I promise. Think about what you want while I’m gone.” Ben watched his grandfather leave, closing the door behind him. The last thing Ben wanted to do was run, which meant it was probably the best thing he could do to get himself out of this funk. He got dressed, hooked up his heart monitor, and headed out.

Joe watched Ben leave. He’d finally gotten through to the boy. He was too stubborn for his own good. Joe went back to the kitchen and tried to open a can of beans but for some reason, he was having a hard time. It took him three tries with the electric can opener, and the pain in his arm made it difficult to hold the can as he emptied it into the pan. Getting old was a bitch, getting ancient was even worse.

***

Gina’s phone rang and she considered ignoring it but answered it anyway. “Yeah?”

“Gina? It’s Annabelle Larsen, is Ben there?”

“No. Why would he be here?”

“Look, I need to find him. His grandfather is on his way to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. I think he’s had a heart attack.”

Gina almost dropped her phone. “Oh my God.” She jumped out of bed. “Okay, I’m on my way. I don’t know where Ben is. Did you try his cell?” She couldn’t stop shaking.

“Yeah, I heard it ringing in the apartment. He must have forgotten it.”

Gina pulled off her shorts and stepped into a pair of jeans. “Keep trying him. I’ll call the rest of the family, and I’ll be there in a little while. Are you with Joe now?”

“No. I couldn’t leave the gallery. I called Mike, he’s going to meet him in the ER.”

Gina threw a top over her head, stepped into her shoes, grabbed her purse, and ran for the door. “I’m leaving now. Thanks for calling me, Annabelle.”

Gina ran down the stairs as Tina stepped out of the kitchen. “Where are you going?”

“Grandpa Joe is on his way to the hospital. They think it’s a heart attack.”

Tina put her hand on her hip. “And you’re going to the hospital?”

“You of course I am. I didn’t even know Gramps was in town. Ben is out and forgot his phone.”

Tina nodded. “I’ll get Sam up. He can drive you.”

Gina shook her head. “No time, I’ll grab a cab.” She gave Tina a hug. “Just take care of Jasmine for me.”

“Sure, call me.”

Gina ran down the stoop and up the block. When she spotted a cab, she stuck her fingers between her lips, and whistled. Thank God, the cab screeched to a halt. She jumped into the back seat. “Columbia Presbyterian Hospital on the double. I’ll give you an extra hundred if you break the land speed record.”

The cabby took off and Gina was flung against the seat back. “Hey, Gina, what’s the rush?”

She looked up at the cabby. “Oh Carlos, I’m so glad it’s you. My husband’s grandfather had a heart attack. I have to get there quick.”
Carlos slammed on the brakes and turned to look at her. Gina managed to catch the seat in front of her before she slammed into the Plexiglas partition.

“You got married? When the hell was that?”

“You remember the last time I saw you?”

“Yeah, when I asked you out?”

“That was the day. I told you I’d be busy. Now I need to get to the hospital. Just hurry, okay?”

“Sure, hold on.” He looked back at her through the rearview mirror. “Someone from the old neighborhood?”

“No one you know. Now do you want that hundred bucks or not?”

“Sure, sure. I got it. But I gotta say, it don’t look like marriage is agreeing with you.”

“Yeah, tell me something I don’t know.” Gina pulled her phone out of her pocket and called Kate.

“Hello?”

“Kate, it’s Gina. Grandpa Joe had a heart attack. They’re taking him to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. I don’t know where Ben is, he forgot his phone, but I’m on my way there now. Could you text me a list of whatever meds Gramps is on in case he’s not conscious? I’ll need to tell the doctors in the ER.”

There was silence on the phone. “Kate? Are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here.” Kate’s voice shook. “Oh my God. Okay, I’ll text you a list, and get a flight out.”

“Good, send me his meds, his doctor’s numbers, whatever you think I’ll need. I should be there in about twenty minutes. I’ll keep trying Ben.”

Gina heard a sob, and then Kate cleared her throat. “Gina, tell him… tell him I’ll kill him if he goes off and dies on me.”

“He’s not going to die. This is Joe we’re talking about, remember? Just hurry up and send me that information, and get out here so you can threaten him in person. Call me when you land and I’ll send my buddy Carlos over to bring you to the hospital. He’ll take your things back to my house.”

Silence again. “Kate, take a deep breath.”

“Okay, I’m fine. Gina, you take care of my boys until I get there.”

Gina brushed the tears from her eyes. “I will. I promise. Just get me a list of Gramps’ drugs and I’ll see you later.”

Gina hung up and ran for the ER. “I’m Gina Walsh. My grandfather, Joe Walsh, was just brought in.”

The woman behind the desk gave her a clipboard with a stack of forms. “You’ll have to fill these out.”

“Sure, right after I see my grandfather.”

“Miss, you’ll see him just as soon as you fill out the paperwork.”

Gina picked up the clipboard and slammed it back on the counter. “I don’t think so. I need to see my grandfather now.”

Mike Flynn stepped through the ER doors and Gina ran for him. “Where’s Grandpa Joe? Is he okay? This woman won’t let me see him.”

Mike put his arm around her. “He’s holding his own. I’ll bring you back to see him. He’s been asking for you.”

Mike turned and smiled at the nurse. “It’s okay, Becky, Gina can come on back. I’ll make sure the paperwork gets filled out.” He picked up the clipboard and walked Gina into the emergency room.

She held up her phone. “Kate sent me a text of all his meds and doctor’s numbers. Here.” She handed it to Mike and ran to Joe’s side as soon as she saw him. Lying there in the hospital bed, he looked so much smaller, not to mention older. He had an IV in his arm, oxygen tubes in his nose, and wires connecting his chest to monitors. “Oh my God, Joe.”

Joe waved his bony hand at her. “Calm down, girly. I’m fine.”

Gina brushed away her tears. “You call this fine?” She tried not to hurt him when she gave him a hug. “Gramps, you scared the life out of me. Annabelle called, Ben is somewhere but he forgot his phone, she’s still trying to find him.”
“He better be grocery shoppin’ because I’ve been eatin’ beans for a week.” Gramps looked past her to Mike. “Look at what I had to do to get my granddaughter to visit me.”

Gina laughed through her tears. “You could have just called. You didn’t have to have a heart attack.”

Mike sat on the orange pleather chair and copied the information from her cell phone onto the hospital paperwork. “Gina, Joe came in with chest pain. They’re doing tests to see what it is. As far as we know right now, it’s acute angina. I’m here as a family friend, not a doctor, but the ER docs are first-rate. Joe is being well taken care of.”

She held Joe’s hand and turned to Mike. “Is he going to be okay?”

“I called Dr. Glass in for a consult. He’s the best cardiologist around.”

Joe raised his free hand. “I don’t need any tests.”

Gina shushed him. “You’re going to be good and listen to everything the doctors say, do you hear me? Kate is on her way and I’m sure Ben will be here soon.”

“You called Kate? What are you trying to do, kill me? The last thing I need is that woman hanging over my bedside telling me what I should and shouldn’t do.”

Mike came around to her side. “Gina, you need to finish filling out this paperwork before the nurses stage a revolt. Joe’s wallet is in the bag with his clothes beneath the bed. I’m sure all his insurance information is in there. Let’s take it out to the waiting room. I’ll tell them to keep us informed. Right now, Joe just needs to lie back and rest.”

“I don’t want to leave him.”

“You need to let the doctors and nurses do their job. He’ll be fine.”

She looked up at Mike who looked way more calm than she felt. “Okay.” She took a deep breath and tried to stop shaking. “I’ll go then. They’ll let me know if anything changes, right?”

Gramps tried to sit up. “Stop talking about me as if I’m not here.”

Gina pushed him back down. “Don’t give me any trouble, Gramps. I’ll be right outside. I’ll come back in just as soon as they let me. Okay?”

“Do I have any choice?”

Gina smiled. “No. Now be good and I’ll see you in a little while.” She kissed his cheek. “I love you, Gramps. Just concentrate on getting better, okay?”

Joe patted her back and Gina realized she meant it. She loved the old fart. Gramps put his free hand around her shoulders and held her close for a moment. “I love you too.”

She pretended not to notice that he teared up. “I’ll be right outside.” She turned her back to him and brushed the tears off her face with her shaking hands before she gathered the paperwork, her phone, and Gramps’ wallet. She shot Gramps a quick smile and returned to the waiting room with Mike.

He led her to a chair. “I’ll get you a cup of coffee while you finish up the paperwork. How do you take it?”

“Strong and black.”

Gina drank coffee and filled in what she could of the paperwork. If she thought about Gramps in that bed, she’d lose it, and she couldn’t afford to lose it now.

Ten minutes later, Gina sensed something and looked up to find Ben coming toward her.
Ben stared at her. It took Gina a moment to realize he was out of breath, sweating, and wearing running shorts and a T-shirt. He looked lost. She wasn’t sure what to do. She didn’t know if she was experiencing an “oh shit” moment or a “thank God he’s here” moment. She grabbed the clipboard and stood, holding it like a shield. “Where were you?”

“I went for a run. I got here as soon as I could. How is he?”

“You went for a run and then ran all the way here?”

“Yeah, Annabelle told me as soon as I got back to the gallery. I didn’t want to waste time going upstairs, and I didn’t have my wallet so I couldn’t get a cab.”

Gina didn’t bother telling him he’d have gotten there a lot faster if he’d just grabbed his wallet and taken a cab. Ben probably figured that out halfway to the hospital. She shifted from foot to foot. “Gramps is in the ER. They’re running tests. I did my best to fill out these forms. I did all I could. Why don’t you fill in the blanks?” She held the clipboard out to him but he didn’t reach for it.

“Can I see him?”

“I don’t know.” Gina turned and looked toward Mike.

When Ben noticed Mike, he took a step back. “Oh, Mike. I didn’t see you.”

Mike came up beside her. “Nice of you to make it, Ben.”

Okay, maybe Mike being here wasn’t such a good thing. She thought the hard feelings Mike had toward Ben over Annabelle would be history since Mike and Annabelle got married. It looked like she was wrong again.

Ben wiped his sweaty forehead on the sleeve of his T-shirt. “Thanks for being here. I didn’t know pulmonologists handled this sort of thing.”

If it was possible, Mike stiffened even more. “Don’t worry, I’m not his doctor. I’m just here because Annabelle asked me to come by as a friend of the family.”

“I appreciate it. How is he? Can we see him?”

Mike nodded. “Sure, Gina can take you back, she knows the way. Just keep him quiet.”

Gina handed Ben the clipboard and looked up to Mike. She didn’t want to be alone with Ben if she could help it.

“You’re not going to leave, are you?”

Mike shook his head. “No, I’m happy to wait.”

She smiled. “Good.”

Ben put his arm around her, which was the last thing she wanted. Okay, maybe not the last thing. The last thing she wanted was to be in the hospital at all, but it was a close second. “He’s through here. Come on.” When she got to Joe’s cubicle, she stopped, took a deep breath, pasted on a smile, and pushed aside the closed curtain. “Look who I found.”

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Ben definitely hadn’t been prepared for what he saw. He left Gramps a couple of hours ago and though he hadn’t looked all that good, he certainly hadn’t looked like he belonged in a hospital. He sure did now.

Gramps opened his eyes and smiled. “It took you long enough to get here. I wondered if you had decided to run all the way back to Idaho.”

Ben grabbed the rail at the foot of the bed to steady himself. He’d never seen Gramps look so frail. “Hey, Gramps, I got here as soon as I heard.” His voice sounded weird to his own ears—what little he heard of it over the sound of blood rushing through his head. He cleared his throat and tried again. “How are you feeling?”

“I’d be better if they’d let me get the hell out of here. You know I hate hospitals.”

All Ben could do was nod and stare.

Gina tugged on his arm, dragging his attention back to her. “Ben, why don’t you sit down, you don’t look so good.”

“Yeah, okay.” He made it to the chair beside the bed and sat down hard.

Gina leaned on the arm of his chair facing Gramps and held the old guy’s hand as Ben’s vision grayed and cleared.
again. He blinked and swallowed, his mouth was dry, and his heart was going double-time. Thank God Gina was better at this hospital stuff than he was. He put his arm around her waist, needing to touch her.

She shot him a sideways glance and raised her eyebrows before turning her attention back to Gramps. “Mike says you’re doing just fine. He’s called the best cardiologist to check you out so you might as well give up on getting out of here any time soon and enjoy the company. Kate checked in with me on her way to the airport. Fisher’s already been in touch with Dr. Mike, and last I heard, Karma, Trapper, and Hunter were meeting Kate at the plane. They’re on their way.”

“They are?” Ben and his grandfather spoke in unison.

Gina smiled at Gramps; she hadn’t smiled at Ben once since he got there. She avoided even looking at him, much less talking to him. “Well, you didn’t think they’d wait in Idaho while you’re in the hospital, did you? Fisher’s on call, but he’s trying to get someone to cover for him for a few days.” She looked from Gramps back to him. “I’ve arranged for a friend to pick them up from the airport and bring them back here. He’ll take their things back to my place, and Tina and Sam will make sure the guest rooms are ready.”

Ben was amazed. “You did all that?”

“Why? Shouldn’t I have?”

Ben held her tighter and she stiffened under his arm. “No, I mean, thanks. I hadn’t even thought to call home. Kate would have killed me.”

“Yeah, well, you would have thought of it eventually.”

Ben wasn’t so sure. He’d never thought he was the type to panic but that’s exactly what he did when Annabelle told him what had happened. The whole way to the hospital, all he could think of were the fights he and his grandfather had over the last week. Gramps could have died. Ben always thought the old man would outlive him. He never thought there was anything strong enough to take the old goat down, until now.

Mike came into the cubicle. “Okay you two, time for you to leave. They’re going to take Joe up to ICU. It’s going to take a while, so why don’t you get something to eat, and then you can wait in the ICU waiting room. It’s in the Milstein Building on the fifth floor.”

Ben stood. “You’re taking him to ICU?”

“Lucky for us a bed just opened up. That’s the best place for him. Dr. Glass will meet him there, examine him, and look at the test results. Right now it looks to me like myocardial ischemia as opposed to an infarction.”

“What?” Ben wrapped his arm around Gina and held on. “In English, please?”

Mike ran his hand through his hair and looked as if he were holding his temper while talking to an annoying child. “There is evidence of injury to the heart muscle, probably due to a coronary blockage. Further tests are needed.”

He stopped talking and Ben couldn’t help but feel as if he were the one being examined.

Mike crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels. “Ben, you’re not looking good. When was the last time you ate?”

“I’m fine.”

“I didn’t ask if you were okay, I asked when you ate last.”

Ben shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“If you want my professional opinion, I think you should go and eat dinner. I’ll call you if anything happens, but I don’t think it will. Dr. Glass will meet with you later to discuss your options.”

Gina smiled at Mike. It irked Ben that she was spending a lot of time smiling at Mike and not even looking at him. She must have seen him scowl since she shot him a warning look, and turned to Gramps. “I have your wallet. Do you want me to take anything else? Your watch, your ring?”

Gramps nodded. “Yeah, that would be good. Just don’t go on a shopping spree without me while I’m stuck in here.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “Darn. Now I’m going to have to cancel the appointment with my personal shopper.”

“Don’t worry. Once I get out of here, I’ll buy you whatever you want.”

Gina reached over the side rail of the bed and brushed what little hair Gramps had away from his forehead. “All I want is for you to get better, so you listen to the doctors, and don’t give them a hard time. Ben and I will be waiting for you on the fifth floor. We’ll see you later.” She squeezed his hand.

Gramps held her hand, not letting her go. “You take care of Ben for me, huh. Mike wasn’t kidding when he said Ben’s not lookin’ too good.”

“I will. Don’t worry. He’ll be fine.”

Two orderlies walked into the small space and released the brake on the bed.

Ben moved when Gina shoved him toward the hall. He took a last look at his grandfather. “I’ll see you later, Gramps.”

He and Gina stood aside as they wheeled the bed out and turned to follow.
Mike stopped him. “Ben, listen to me, man. You look as if you’re about to drop. Go and eat. Gina doesn’t need to worry about you too. I’ll call if you’re needed. I know you left your wallet at your place. Here—” He reached for his wallet and Gina waved him off.

“I have money. I’ll take care of Ben. Just call if there’s any change.”

Mike nodded. “Will do.”

***

Gina took one look at Ben and wondered if she should get him some juice before they went hunting for the cafeteria. “I think I saw a soda machine in the waiting room. You need something to drink right now. Sit here and I’ll get you a Gatorade or something.” It would also give her a moment of much needed space. She hadn’t been prepared to see Ben, and she certainly hadn’t expected him to look so lost. He was more of a mess than she was, and that was saying something. She’d dealt with an awful lot in her life, but she’d never seen someone she loved in the hospital. If it was this hard on her, she couldn’t imagine how hard it must be for Ben. Gramps was all he had. Well, except for Kate, Karma, and the boys.

After digging through her purse for change, she took a few deep breaths and snuck a glance at him. The look on his face broke her heart. All she wanted to do was run up to him and hold on for dear life.

She had the urge to bang her head against the soda machine. Madre de Dios, Tina had been right all along. She’d gone and fallen in love with Ben. Now what the hell was she supposed to do? The orange Gatorade fell into the slot and she bent over to get it. When she rose, she found herself cornered between the machine, the wall, and Ben.

“Here. Drink this.” She shoved the Gatorade at him.

“Thanks.” He took the drink. He didn’t step back, he didn’t open it, he just stared at her.

“You’re supposed to drink it.”

Ben shook his head. “I don’t need it. Gina, all I need is you.”

God, what was she supposed to do now? She put her arms around him and hugged him. She would have done the same for anyone who was upset. Of course, she probably wouldn’t have breathed in the scent of anyone else. Even though he was sweaty, he smelled like heaven—no, he smelled like Ben and he felt as good as she remembered every night when she’d close her eyes.

They held each other for a moment until Ben took a deep breath and kissed her head. “I’m so glad you’re here. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

She looked away and slid to the side—anything to get some much needed distance. “You would have been fine without me.” Okay, she lied. He really did seem to need her.

Ben shook his head. “No, I haven’t been fine since you left. I’ve been a mess.”

God, she couldn’t handle this right now. “Come on. Drink up and let’s get you something to eat. We’ll deal with one disaster at a time.”

Ben nodded and took her hand. “As long as we can talk about us later.”

She was afraid to look at him, and fought the urge to run. She didn’t know which was worse, being away from him or being with him and waiting for the next shoe to drop. “Okay. We’ll talk after we know Gramps is out of the woods.”

“Thanks.” Ben bent his knees so he was eye to eye with her. “I just need one more thing.”

Gina opened her mouth to ask what when he swooped in and kissed her, pulling her hard against him. She dropped her purse and pressed her hand against his chest, not that it made much of a difference. His beard brushed her chin as he nibbled her lips. The feel of his lips against hers, his arms holding her, and his heart racing beneath her hand had every nerve-ending standing at attention along with few other things. She stilled, trying not to melt against him, and failing miserably. Kissing him had become second nature. She drowned in him, took comfort, and lost herself for a moment. Now what? She’d just set herself up for another heartbreak.

When reality intervened, she ended the kiss and Ben stepped back. “God, Gina, I’ve missed you every second of every day we’ve been apart.”

Gina closed her eyes; she didn’t want to hear this. She wanted to stick her fingers in her ears and sing to herself like she used to when she was a kid to drown out something or someone. When she opened her eyes, Ben was staring at her. “Let’s go get something to eat.”

“I’ll be fine with this.” He held up the Gatorade.

“Oh no, you heard Mike. Besides, I don’t want to answer to Kate if you pass out and end up needing your own hospital bed. You really do look like you could use a meal. It’s going to be a long night.”

He took her hand in his and plied their fingers. “I’ll eat if you eat.”

Gina shook her head. “That’s blackmail.”
Ben tugged her away from the wall and up against him. “Yeah, I know. I’m a desperate man.”
Ben wasn’t stupid. He wasn’t about to say that she didn’t look very good either. She was hiding it well, but she was as upset about Gramps as he was, she just handled the hospital thing better.
While they waited for the elevator, he drank the bottle of Gatorade.
Gina watched him with a smirk on her face. “ Feeling better?”
He tossed the bottle in the trashcan between the elevator doors. “What are you talking about? I’m fine.”
“You looked as if you were about to pass out next to Grandpa Joe’s bed.”
“What did you expect? I’d just run ten miles on an empty stomach. It wasn’t my brightest move.”
“No argument here.” The elevator dinged.
He put his arm around her and stepped through the open doors. “I’ve done a lot of stupid things lately.”
He cursed under his breath when Gina’s phone rang giving her the perfect excuse to ignore him. “Hello?” she nodded. “As far as I know it wasn’t a heart attack. They took him to ICU for more tests.” She looked at Ben. “Yeah, he got here about a half hour ago. We’re just heading to the cafeteria to get a bite to eat.”
The elevator stopped at their floor and they stepped out.
“Do you want to talk to him?” Ben stepped closer to take the phone and she shook her head. “Okay, I’ll tell him.”
She looked away. “Good, what time will you be landing? Ah huh. You’re flying into Kennedy? Okay, I’ll have Carlos pick you up. You can just leave your things in the cab and he’ll take them back to my place.” She shook her head. “Don’t be silly, I have plenty of room for everyone. I’ll see you in a few hours. Yeah, I’ll tell him.” Gina disconnected the call.
“Kate didn’t want to talk to me?”
“She said she loves you and she’ll be here soon.”
“She couldn’t tell me that herself?”
“I guess not.”
“There’s a lot of that going around.”
“What?”
“Women not willing to tell me they love me even when they do.”
Gina swallowed hard, stuffed her hands into her jean pockets, and looked at the floor. “Kate sounds as if she’s having a difficult time keeping it together. It’s hard when you’re so far away and someone you love is hurting.”
Ben put his arm around her and kissed her temple. “Tell me about it.” They walked into the near empty cafeteria and looked around. Ben checked the clock. “I guess 4:30 at the cafeteria isn’t a busy time.”
“Yeah, I hope it’s not just because the food is bad.”
They each grabbed a tray. Ben took the first sandwich he saw and groaned when Gina put a salad on his plate too.
“I’m not hungry.”
“Tough. You look as if you haven’t eaten in a week.”
She was right. He couldn’t remember the last time he had really eaten anything of substance. “Fine. Is that enough?”
She shrugged and picked up a yogurt with granola and a salad. Ben didn’t say anything about the way she looked. As long as she was eating, he wasn’t going to complain.
When they got to the cash register, he reached for his wallet only to remember he was still wearing his running shorts.
Gina opened her purse. “I’ve got it.”
Ben didn’t have much choice so he stood back and let her pay. He took their trays to a table by the window while she got them coffee.
Ben watched her walk back to the table and held her chair. She rolled her eyes. “Would you just eat?”
He sat and pulled the wrapper off the sandwich. It didn’t look appetizing—nothing did but Gina. He wanted to talk to her, but he wasn’t sure what he could say that wasn’t off-limits. “How’s Jasmine?”
“She’s good. She’s getting bigger every day, and she’s doing well with potty training.” Gina stirred her yogurt and added granola.
Ben picked at his salad. “Good, she’s a smart puppy.”
Gina nodded and licked her spoon. Ben tore his eyes away from her mouth and looked back at the salad.
“When did Joe come out?”
He was tempted to say the same day she’d thrown him out of his own house, but thought better of it. “He was waiting for me when I got home from your place last week.”
She nodded. “This is really awkward. Maybe it would be better if we just didn’t talk.”
Ben reached across the table and placed his hand on hers. “Or we could stop avoiding the big white elephant in the room and talk about us.”
Gina’s phone vibrated on the table and she ripped her hand from under his to reach for it. “Dr. Glass is ready to talk to us. Grab your food and let’s go.”
Ben stood. “Okay, but this conversation is not over.”

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Several hours later, Gina flipped through a three-month-old People Magazine trying hard to ignore Ben sitting beside her. His big body practically took up the entire couch. Whenever she moved away, he moved closer until she was jammed against the arm. A lot of good trying to ignore him did. She noticed his every move. She checked her watch for the thousandth time knowing Kate and the family would be there any minute, and thanked God because she didn’t know how much more of this togetherness she could stand.

Ben threw his arm around her shoulder and slid even closer. Soon he’d be on her lap. “People have angiograms every day. Gramps is strong, you heard Dr. Glass. Maybe they can do that balloon thing.”

She looked up from the magazine she hadn’t been reading. “Did you even look at Dr. Glass?”

Ben turned to face her. “Yeah, sure. Why?”

The man was clueless. “Dr. Glass and Mike both think Joe needs bypass surgery. It was written all over their faces.”

“It was?”

Gina blew her bangs from her eyes, tossed the magazine on the next chair, and got up to pace. “Yes. They have to do an angiogram, and maybe they’ll be pleasantly surprised and find an angioplasty will do the trick, but I wouldn’t bet the ranch on it.” As soon as she said the words, she winced. Damn it. When she turned to make another pass, Ben stood in her way.

“I know how strong Gramps is. Either way, he’ll bitch and complain, but he’ll come out of it fine. Maybe now Kate will get him to follow his diet.”

She gave Ben a long look. “You sure look a lot more confident since you ate.”

Ben shrugged. “You were right, it was low blood sugar.”

“I’m right about a lot of things.”

Gina turned to continue pacing and stopped when Annabelle floated into the waiting room. Any woman who could seemingly float while carrying a baby seat complete with baby, baby bag, and a duffel bag had to be a freak of nature—and Gina meant that with the utmost love and respect.

Gina liked Annabelle, but if Annabelle wasn’t so nice, Gina would really have to hate her. Annabelle was everything Gina was not—tall, long-legged, and social. But even in Gina’s unhappy state, she had to admit that Annabelle deserved all the happiness she and Mike had found. It hadn’t come easy.

Mike returned to the waiting room carrying more coffee and shook his head at his wife. “What are you doing here?”

Annabelle gave Mike a kiss before setting the baby carrier on a chair. “I brought Ben his wallet, phone, and a change of clothes.”

Ben gave Annabelle a brotherly hug. “Thanks, Belle. Is Becca at the gallery?”

“Of course.” She twitched her nose and shoved a duffle bag at him. “You need to take a shower and change. Mike, why don’t you show Ben where he can take a shower?”

Mike didn’t look pleased to know Annabelle had been elbow deep in Ben’s underwear drawer. It was obvious he still hadn’t forgiven Ben for proposing to Annabelle. It didn’t seem to matter that Annabelle had never said yes, or that Ben and Annabelle were nothing more than friends.

Oblivious to or possibly ignoring the tension, Annabelle unstrapped three-month-old Maria. God, she was cute with her Kewpie doll stand-up mahogany hair the same color as her mama’s with the most amazing blue eyes, and dimples everywhere—on her cheeks, her knees, elbows, and chubby hands.

Gina tickled Maria’s tummy. She wore a onesie that said, “If It’s Drama You Want, Here I Am” with an embroidered jean skirt and little pink socks that matched her top. “Look at how pretty you are.”

Annabelle plucked Maria out of her car seat. “Here. You don’t mind holding Maria for a minute, do you, Gina?” She threw a burp rag over Gina’s shoulder and handed her the squirming infant.

“I, um…” Maria was thrust into Gina’s arms. She had no choice but to cradle the baby against her chest. Maria’s chubby little hands grabbed the edge of Gina’s blousy top giving the world a show. Gina rubbed her chin against Maria’s stand-up baby-fine hair while disengaging her hand. She tried to pull her blouse down while balancing the baby between her arm and shoulder.

Annabelle smiled. “Maria, meet your Auntie Gina.”

It had been forever since Gina held an infant, probably since Rafael, but it was like riding a bike, or so she
assumed, since she’d never actually learned to ride a bike.

Maria grabbed Gina’s nose, so she took her pudgy little hand and kissed it. When she looked up, she caught Ben staring at her with a faraway look in his eyes. She didn’t want Ben to get any ideas, but she wasn’t interested in handing Maria off either. Holding her was nice—she had that wonderful baby powder smell and everything about her was soft and cuddly. She was comfortable, and the way Gina felt right now, comfort was appreciated.

She turned her back on the three adults and concentrated on Maria who looked as if she was used to being the center of attention. It must be nice to have parents who so obviously loved you and know there were people everywhere willing to give you whatever you needed. “You are one lucky little girl.”

“Oh yeah, and she knows it.”

Gina turned to find Annabelle standing right behind her. “I just came over to relay a message. Ben said he’d be right back. He ran down to grab a shower. How is Joe doing?”

Gina waited for Annabelle to take Maria back and was relieved when she sat in a nearby chair. Gina rocked the baby, not quite ready to give her up yet and shrugged. “It wasn’t a heart attack per se. They’re going to do an angiogram in the morning. From there they’ll see if they need to do an angioplasty or bypass surgery.”

Annabelle nodded. “Joe is strong as a bull. Either way, I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. The rest of the family should be here any minute.”

“Family? What family? Ben’s an only child and his parents are dead.”

“Yeah, but he has Kate and his cousins.”

Annabelle raised her eyebrows. “So, you got close to Ben’s family while you were on your pseudo-honeymoon, huh? And from the looks of things, you got even closer to him.”

Gina shrugged and moved Maria to her other arm. “His family is great.”

Annabelle touched Gina’s hand and gave her that no-nonsense look Rosalie had down pat. It must run in the family. “Ben and I have been close friends for a few years now and I’ve seen a myriad of women come and go.”

“Annabelle—”

“Don’t interrupt me. This is something you need to hear so just listen and nod until I’m finished.”

If Gina wasn’t holding Maria, she really would have stuck her fingers in her ears and started with the “la la las” because this was one conversation she most definitely did not want to have.

When Annabelle was sure she had her full attention, she put her hands on her skinny little hips. “You broke Ben’s heart. I’ve never seen him like this before. He spent the last week stomping around the loft like some kind of weird zombie. He wouldn’t eat, he wouldn’t talk except when Joe yelled at him, and he’s been drinking heavily. He never does that.”

“Yeah, well, it hasn’t been all fun and games for me either.”

“Then you need to do something about it.”

“What?”

“Fix whatever it is that’s broken, and move on.”

“Annabelle, I really appreciate what you’re trying to do here, but I can’t fix it.”

“Why?”

She jiggled Maria who had started to fuss. “Because I’m what’s broke. I don’t do relationships. I’m not good at them. It would be better for both of us if we just ended it.”

“Oh really? Then why are you here?”

“Because—”

Annabelle held up her hand. “That was a rhetorical question. You’re not supposed to answer, you’re just supposed to nod and listen, remember?”

“How much longer are you going to lecture me?” Maria rested her head on Gina’s shoulder, found her own thumb, and sucked.

“As long as it takes. Now stop interrupting and listen.” Annabelle’s hands went into motion. “I’m gonna tell you why you’re here. You’re here because you’re just as in love with Ben as he is with you. And you’re not broken, you’re just a little battered and bruised. The only thing you need is to get your head out of your ass long enough to see the writing on the wall, Gina. You’re miserable without Ben, and Ben’s miserable without you. You’d both be a lot less miserable together. You’re already married, so just suck it up, and solve your problems instead of avoiding them.”

“Is that what you did?” Gina cradled Maria in her arms.

“Yes, and look how well it turned out.”

She lowered her voice when she saw Maria was having a difficult time keeping her little eyes open. “Mike didn’t leave you.”

“You’re wrong there. He did leave. But Gina, the thing is, he came back. If you had stuck around long enough,
Ben would have too. When you left Idaho, he sat in the park for a week waiting for you. That has to count for something. If he didn’t love you, he never would have worked so hard to get you back.”

“He didn’t. When I told him I wanted a divorce, he said he’d give it to me.”

“No, he told me you wanted him to live up to the stupid deal the two of you made. That’s different. It’s a guy thing. Good men never go against their word. He may give you a divorce, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to stop trying to get you back.”

“It doesn’t?”

Gina set the sleeping baby back in her car seat and kept an eye on the hallway waiting for Kate and the others to arrive to save her from Annabelle.

“What are you looking for?”

Gina turned to face her. “Ben’s family. They’re supposed to be here any minute, Kate, Trapper, Hunter, Fisher, and Karma. Though I’m not sure if Fisher can make it.”

Annabelle’s eyes went wide. “You’re kidding me, right? Karma, Trapper, Hunter, and Fisher? Who would pick out names like those?”

“I did.”
Chapter 19

Gina heard Kate’s voice and smiled at Annabelle before turning. “Kate! I’m so glad you’re here.” She hugged her and held on tight. Once she let go, she turned and got hugs from Trapper, Hunter, and Karma too. “Annabelle Flynn, this is Kate, Trapper, Hunter, and Karma Kincaid. Everyone, this is Ben’s partner and good friend, Annabelle Ronaldi-Flynn, and her darling little girl, Maria.”

Karma smiled and moved toward Annabelle. “So, you’re the one Ben proposed to right before you married that doctor.”

Annabelle’s eyebrows rose. “Yes, that would be me.”

Gina never noticed it before, but Karma looked like a blonde version of Annabelle. It might explain why Annabelle and Ben were never anything but friends.

Trapper brushed his cowboy hat against his thigh. “So, how’s Grandpa Joe?”

Gina shrugged. “The same, he’s resting. We talked to the doctor and they’re going to do an angiogram in the morning. From there they’ll decide whether to do an angioplasty or a bypass.”

Kate rubbed Gina’s back. “Where’s Ben?”

“Oh, he’s showering. He should be back any minute. He came here right after his run. Annabelle was nice enough to bring him a change of clothes.”

Ben and Mike returned and all the Kincaids but Trapper went to greet him. Trapper sat down and patted the chair next to him so Gina took a seat. He twirled his hat around on his finger. “So, have you two worked things out?”

She shook her head. “No.”

He gave his hat another twirl. “Yet here you are.”

Gina moved closer to whisper. “What was I supposed to do, Trapper? Just let Gramps languish in the hospital all by himself? No one was able to reach Ben, and we are still legally married.”

Trapper shrugged. “Ben’s been here how long?”

Gina turned toward him. “Gee, Trapper, I never thought you’d be the type to beat around the bush. Why don’t you get it over with and say whatever it is you need to say?”

“No.”

Gina moved closer to whisper. “Yet here you are.”

Trapper nodded. “That’s the first honest thing I’ve heard you say. Well, that and you care for Joe. You can’t fool me, Gina. I’m a judge, remember? I’m trained to recognize the truth.”

“Because I don’t know if you know it. Sweetheart, if you’re really out to divorce Ben, then you should leave and we should get hotel rooms. Dragging this out won’t be any good for you, Ben, and especially not Joe.”

“Want me to leave?”

“No, I want you to take Ben back. He loves you and for some unknown reason, you seem to love him.”

“Trap, stay the hell out of my marriage.” Ben had come out of nowhere… Okay, it wasn’t nowhere, just across the room, but Gina for once hadn’t been aware of his every move. She shivered when she saw the look on Ben’s face. He sported the same one right before he left her. It was enough to make all the hair on her arms stand straight up.

A slow smiled crossed Trapper’s face. He rose and stood nose to nose with Ben. “I was just keeping your lovely wife company, Ben, hardly a punishable offense.”

“Leave it alone.”

“Done. But it doesn’t look to me as if you’re having any luck.” He turned and walked toward the rest of the family who were taking turns going in to see Joe.

Ben sat beside her, ran his hands through his still-wet hair, and leaned over, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’m sorry.”
Gina rubbed his back. “It’s fine. I can handle Trapper. How did the reunion go?”
Ben shrugged. “Well, it looks as if everyone is talking to me again.”
“I never told them to stop.”
Ben sat back and put his arm around the back of her chair, his fingers brushed back and forth against her upper arm. “I didn’t think you did. They took it upon themselves to punish me. It’s their version of tough love. As if losing you wasn’t torture enough.”
“I’m sorry.”
Ben’s every emotion showed in those big blue eyes of his. The man was scared, heartsick, and even though he was now surrounded by his family, he looked like a lost little boy.
Gina stood when she saw the last group return. “Come on, everyone. There’s nothing we can do here. Let’s go home and get you settled in. We need to be back early.”
Ben stood and watched as everyone gathered their things. “I guess I’ll go back to my place.”
Gina couldn’t let him do that. “Oh, no. You’re not getting off that easy. I won’t let you leave me all alone with your whole family. You’re coming with us.”
Ben shook his head. “You don’t need to do this.”
“Ben, stop telling me what to do and just come home.”
“If you’re sure.”
“The only thing I’m sure of is I don’t want you to be alone right now.” Gina didn’t know if he felt it was a pity invite, but at this point, she didn’t have the energy to even think about it.

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The two cabs carrying Ben, Gina and the entire Idaho contingent pulled up to the house. Everyone piled out and stared at the massive brownstone.
Ben opened the front door and was surprised to find Jasmine sitting on Fisher’s lap in the living room while he talked with Tina and Sam.
“When did you get in?” Jasmine jumped off Fisher, stumbled over her own feet, and ran to Ben. He bent down to pick her up.
Fisher gave Ben a guy-hug around the puppy. “Just about a half hour ago. I didn’t think I’d get in to see Grandpa Joe tonight, so I just came here. How is he?”
The whole family gathered while Gina introduced Sam, Tina, and Jasmine to the brood. She stood so close to Ben that she kept brushing up against him. Every time she did, it felt as though an electric current ran through him. For the first time since he was thirteen, he was at a loss of what to do with his hands. Part of him wanted to put his arm around her and pull her to his side, but he wasn’t ready for the rebuff, especially in front of his entire family. He stuffed his hands firmly in his pockets to keep from doing something stupid.
After a quick head count, Ben realized if everyone got a room, they’d be short one. His mind raced. He supposed he could take the couch since he didn’t think he was capable of sharing a bed with Gina and not losing what little was left of his mind.
Tina and Gina brought out snacks and drinks while the group caught up on the news of Gramps’ condition. Before he knew it, Sam and Tina were showing everyone to their assigned rooms. Ben hung back, saying good night to everyone until he and Gina were the only ones left on the first floor. “Where’s Jasmine’s leash? I’ll take her out for a walk.” He definitely needed to clear his head and figure out what to do next.
Gina went to the hall table and held the leash. “I’ll go with you.”
Ben raised an eyebrow wondering if now was when Gina would give him the brush-off. Jasmine pranced around waiting to go out and Gina chose this time to show him how well Jasmine had learned to sit. It took a few tries but she finally sat before Gina clipped the leash to her collar and smothered her with praise. She handed Ben the leash, grabbed a bag, and pulled her keys out of her purse. “I’m ready.”
He was glad someone was, because Ben wasn’t ready for anything else to happen today, unless it was good. He’d had about all the bad news he could handle. He held the door open for the girls and followed them out. He might have held the leash, but Jasmine walked with Gina. When Gina noticed he was hanging back, she stopped and slipped her arm through his. Okay, things were looking up and not just in his pants. “Cold?”
Gina looked up to him and smiled. “A little. Not as cold as I was at the ranch, though.”
He slipped his arm around her and let Jasmine lead them around the park.
“Are you worried?”
Was he supposed to play the big strong man part, or tell the truth? He chose the truth since Gina was not one to stand for even white lies. “Yeah, I’m scared to death. You?”
“Uh-huh. I don’t think my heart has slowed down since Annabelle called me this afternoon.”
“Thanks for rushing to the hospital. I wouldn’t have blamed you if you hadn’t.”
“Really?” She looked surprised.
“Really. I’ve spent the last week thinking about what I’ve done, how I’ve handled things.”
“We’ve both made mistakes. Believe me, I’ve had a few people point them out to me today. I hate it when they’re right.”
“Yeah, there’s no shortage of that going around. Before I left Gramps this afternoon, he read me the riot act. To give the old man credit, he didn’t say anything I hadn’t already said to myself a thousand times.”
“So you took a long run to think or to get away?”
“To think.”
“What?”
“What I could do to get back to where we were before we left the ranch.”
“I don’t think that’s possible. We can’t take back what happened. We just have to decide where to go from here.”
Ben spent the rest of the walk in a daze. Before he knew it, they were back at the front door. He walked the girls in and waited for Gina to tell him to leave. After all, she’d just said they couldn’t go back. He’d been trying to re-learn the art of breathing ever since.
Gina took the leash off Jasmine and put her keys back in her pocketbook. She shuffled from foot to foot, clearly uncomfortable. He stood between her and the door waiting for the ax to drop. She bit her lip and looked up at him, her big eyes shining in the light of the chandelier. “Are you coming to bed?”
Ben’s stomach took a dip. “I guess that’s up to you. If you want to toss out a pillow, I can take the couch.”
“Is that what you want?”
He closed his eyes and prayed that he wouldn’t say the wrong thing. He opened them to find her standing so close that if he took a deep breath, they’d touch. He placed his hands on her shoulders and ran them down her arms to hold her hands. Sliding them behind her back, he pulled her close. The feel of her against him had him stifling a groan.
“I’ve made it abundantly clear I want to be wherever you are. But when it comes down to it, it’s your call, Gina. I’ve given up trying to steer this relationship. Whenever I’ve tried, I’ve hit the skids, so to speak.”
Gina bit her lower lip and he held back the urge to soothe the redness she’d created.
“Just because we can’t go back to the way we were at the ranch doesn’t mean we can’t go forward. Come to bed.”
Ben let out a breath and picked her up. Jasmine barked and jumped around his feet.
“What is it with you mountain men always feeling the need to carry me around?”
Ben decided not to press his luck and say he was the only man allowed to carry her anywhere, especially to bed. He took the steps two at a time, careful not to tread on Jasmine. When he made it to their bedroom, he let her slide down the length of his body. Jasmine jumped on a doggie bed in the corner and turned a few circles before lying down with her paws crossed in front of her.
“She’s not sleeping with us?”
Gina shrugged. “Only if she has doggie nightmares, or if one of us feels the need to cuddle.”
“If I’m going to be cuddling with someone, it’s not going to be Jasmine.”

***

Ben’s words sent a shiver through Gina that was impossible to disguise. The way he watched her was unnerving. She took a deep breath and opened the top button of his shirt. Her hands shook and no matter how many times she told herself she’d already seen him naked, this time felt like the first.
Gina tackled the second button as he pulled her blouse from her waistband. His thumbs caressed her stomach as his hands held her hips. She fumbled her way down the button band and pulled his shirt from his pants. She’d like to think she’d forgotten how wonderful he looked, but she hadn’t. She’d seen him every night in her dreams, kissed him, made love to him, only to awaken alone and needy. It was almost a relief to know that tomorrow morning she wouldn’t wake reaching for him only to find a cold empty bed, or worse, Jasmine.
Ben unbuttoned her jeans; blood rushing through her ears muffled the sound of the slide of the zipper. She reached for his belt buckle and his hands stayed hers. “Wait.”
She raised her eyes to his; Ben’s look of uncertainty stopped her. “What’s wrong?”
Ben took a deep breath and blew it out. He shook his head as if to clear his mind. “Gina, I can’t do this. If you are looking for comfort or a roll in the hay, I’ll grab a pillow and sleep on the couch. If you want me, I’m yours for the taking, but I want this to be a fresh start. I want this to last forever.”
For whatever reason, Ben was always the one in the relationship to know exactly what he wanted to do, and he always seemed to have no problem steering her in the direction he wanted to go. Now, she was the one leading—
which on one hand was nice since she always resented the fact that he’d spent most of their relationship ten paces ahead of her on so many levels. But along with the leadership position came the pressure to make the right decision, and live with the consequences. It was not as easy as it looked. She’d never been the one to step into a relationship and if she removed his belt buckle, that’s exactly what she’d be doing. She’d always been the one to run away, and that’s what she’d done with Ben. The feelings she had for him scared her down to her toes, but after she’d left him, those same feelings followed her no matter how far she ran, even across the country. There was no peace to be had, no escape; running hadn’t worked for either of them.

Gina pushed away Ben’s hands and slid the leather strap through the buckle, gave it a tug, and pulled it free right before she went up on her tiptoes and kissed him hard, letting go of the anger and fear she’d carried with her all her life. Ben wrapped his arms around her and for the first time since she left him, she felt at home.

The rest of their clothes and any uncertainty they held were shed before they made it to their bed. For a moment, she looked into his eyes and found everything she’d lost, and everything she’d longed for over the last weeks. His hands slid over her body, dragging her close, caressing, exciting, tantalizing. It was familiar and new at the same time.

Gina ran her hands over Ben’s chest and down toward his stomach as he rose above her. Her legs wrapped around his waist urging him on. He entered her in one long, slow thrust. A feeling of completeness washed over her. They stilled, their eyes met, and she found everything she never knew she’d searched for. “I love you.”

He looked as surprised as she was. She hadn’t planned to say it, especially while they were making love. She’d never said those words to any other man. Okay, she’d told Joe she loved him, but that was a totally different kind of love, so it didn’t really count.

A slow grin spread across Ben’s face. “I know.”
“Yeah? I tell you I love you and that’s all you have to say?”

He slid out of her and then reaching beneath her, held her hips and slid back deeper. “Sweetheart, if you didn’t love me, I wouldn’t be making love to you now.” And he did, he loved her slow and gentle. Teasing her, caressing her inside and out, driving her to the brink of sanity and letting her hang there, still wanting more. He drove her up and then higher. His slow and steady pace keeping her from reaching her climax. Gina raked her nails across his shoulders and bucked beneath him, arching her back, urging him on. When she kissed him and sucked his tongue into her mouth, he lost all control thrusting deep and hard, sending her over before finally groaning her name, stiffening in her arms, and coming. He thrust within her twice more before collapsing on top of her.

Still inside her, he kissed her softly, and then rolled onto his back. She rested her head on the pillow of his shoulder and listened to the beat of his heart slow to a normal pace.

“Do you think Joe’s going to be okay?”
He trailed his hand down her side. “Yeah, he’s too stubborn to die.”
“That’s good. I hope you’re right.”
“Gina?”
She raised her head so she could look him in the eye. “Yeah?”
“I love you.”
She kissed him and settled her head back on his shoulder. “I know.”

***

The knock on the door woke them. “It’s getting late, guys. Are you ready to go to the hospital?”

Ben rolled, pulling Gina along with him. “What time is it?”

Gina pulled her sleeping mask off and looked at the clock. “8:30?”

“Shit.” He rolled off the bed. “We gotta go.”

They quickly showered, dressed, and ran downstairs. Trapper looked up from the paper he was reading. “Sleep well? Or maybe I should rephrase that, sleep at all?”

Hunter spit out his coffee, and Fisher looked over at Karma. “You owe me twenty.”

Kate walked out of the kitchen and smacked all four of her kids in one fell swoop. “Hush. You leave Ben and Gina alone.” She turned to Ben. “It’s about time you two got up. There’s coffee in the kitchen and then we have to leave.”

There was a knock on the front door and Gina went to answer it. “Can I help you?”

“Gina Reyez?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

The man handed her a manila envelope. “You’ve been served.”

“What?”
Ben swore under his breath. “Gina, don’t.”
He moved as if in slow motion as she opened the envelope and pulled the papers up. Her eyes widened, she nodded, and shoved them back in the envelope.
Karma went over to her. “What’s that?”
Gina shook her head and stuffed the envelope into her bag. “Divorce papers.”
Kate turned. “What?”
Everyone in the room turned on Ben, but at that point, he couldn’t care less what they thought. He cleared his throat and addressed his family. “Why don’t you go over to the hospital? Gina and I will be along in a few minutes.”
Everyone gave him nasty looks as they hugged Gina on their way out. The door closed behind them, and the silence was enough to choke him. “I’m sorry.”
“You’re sorry?”
“Gina, I was afraid you were going to move out if I didn’t file for divorce right away. I wanted to make sure you kept the house and the money. I just wanted you to be okay.”
“And you thought I’d be okay without you?”
Sam, who’d been silent the whole time, stepped forward. “Gina, it’s not like you gave the man much of a choice.”
She turned on him. “Sam Corrigan, stay out of this. It’s between me and Ben.”
Tina moved in front of Sam and put her hands on her hips. “Like hell it is. We’ve been here from the beginning. We’re your family. Believe me, dealing with you for the last week hasn’t been any fun. You gave the man no alternative, so you have no right to hold it against him now that you’ve changed your mind.”
Sam looked out the front window. “Ben, your family is still outside. Why don’t you go to the hospital and let Gina calm down a bit. I’ll make sure she doesn’t pull another disappearing act. You need to be with your grandfather now.”
Ben was torn. He couldn’t believe his luck—all bad. Gina still hadn’t looked at him. He turned to Sam, “Okay, I’ll go, but if she isn’t at the hospital in an hour, I’m coming after her.”
He took one last look at his wife and left.

***

Gina walked to the window and watched Ben leave. She took a deep breath and thought about all her options. When she turned around, Sam and Tina were staring at her. She smiled knowing exactly what she was going to do.
Tina’s eyes went wide. “Oh my God. I know that look.” She shook her head. “That look is trouble. That’s the look of determination.” Tina turned and pointed. “Sam, lock the door.”
Sam stood in front of the door. “What are you going to do, Gina?”
Gina looked over her shoulder and cocked her head as she headed upstairs. “I’m going to put on my best suit. I have an appointment to make with my lawyer. After all, a deal’s a deal.”
Chapter 20

Ben paced the halls doing his best to avoid all the nasty looks from his family. He checked his watch. Gina should have been back hours ago. As soon as Gramps got out of recovery, Ben was going back to Brooklyn to try to find her. Just when they’d gotten things worked out, fate stepped in again and blindsided him. He turned to pace back, and found Trapper leaning against the wall twirling his hat on his finger.

“You really did it this time, Benji. How the hell are you going to get out of this one?”

“Damned if I know. She’s the one who insisted on the divorce. I only put the wheels in motion to make sure she stayed in the house and kept the money.”

“You should know it takes more than a week for the average woman to calm down. And Lord knows, Gina is anything but average. I think it would take a lot longer for a hot-blooded Latin woman like her to get over it.”

Ben stood in front of him and tossed his keys up in the air, catching them. “As if you would know.” Ben gave his keys another toss. “You’ve never spent any more than seventy-two hours with any woman, and I’d bet that most of that time was spent in bed not talking.”

Trapper nodded and twirled his hat. “You’d be right. I’ve never done anything as dumb as marrying one of them with a prenup big enough to choke a horse, and then gone and fallen in love.”

“Why do you look like you’re enjoying yourself?”

Trapper smiled. “Maybe because I am. I told you it was a bad idea.”

“That’s really helpful, Trap, thanks.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Maybe you could help me get out of the mess I’m in.”

Ben tossed his keys, only to have Trapper catch and pocket them. “You’re going to have to do a whole lot more than grovel.”

Fisher nodded. “Oh yeah, you don’t file for divorce and say ‘Oops, sorry, my mistake.’”

Hunter snorted. “I’ll say. I don’t know what you’re going to do to make it up to her. You already bought her the biggest house in Brooklyn, and even that didn’t impress her.” He rolled the brim of his baseball cap. “I got this on the street corner for ten bucks. It’s nice, huh?”


Gina strutted toward them wearing a black power suit. Her skirt was so short, Ben wondered if the red garters he knew she wore beneath it would show if she quickened her pace. Her red five-inch heels clicked over the linoleum floor. Her low-cut silk blouse showed an abundance of cleavage, and the look on her face was one of pure victory. Ben’s heart sank. He was completely fucked.

“Hi, boys. How’s Gramps doing?”

Trapper turned and smiled. “Not as good as you, but he came through the double bypass like a trouper. He’s in recovery now. It’ll be a while. Where have you been?”

“I had a meeting with my lawyer.” She turned to Ben. “It’s all taken care of. Our divorce should be final in about sixty days.”

Ben felt as if he’d been sucker punched. Gina walked up to him and slid off her suit jacket, handing it to Trapper to hold. When she turned, he saw that her blouse was completely backless.

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Gina crossed her arms and shook her head. Ben wished she’d put her jacket back on.
She tapped her finger against her lips. “I like dark-haired men who look as good in a baseball cap as they do in a Stetson.”
Hunter rolled the brim of his new hat. “I got that one covered.”
Fisher ran his hand through his blond hair. “I left my hats at home, but take my word for it, I look good wearing just about anything… or nothing.”
Gina winked. “Good to know.”
Kate and Karma came into the hallway. Kate’s eyebrow winged its way up trying to assess the situation. Ben wished her luck. All he could think of was that his marriage was over. Every breath he managed to take hurt.
Kate hugged Gina. “You’ve been gone for hours. What are you up to?”
Gina returned Kate’s hug. “I’m happy to hear Gramps is on the mend. I met with my attorney and since the divorce is imminent, I’m planning my future. I’m considering acquisitions.”
Karma made a face. “What are you looking to acquire?”
“A husband. Trapper offered seventy-two hours, which, although tempting, isn’t what I’m looking for. If I wanted something temporary, I could have just stayed married to Ben.”
Ben couldn’t take any more of this. She was killing him. He felt sick and needed to sit down at the very least. He shook his head and turned back toward the waiting room.
He heard Kate talking about finding the cafeteria as the waiting room doors closed behind him. He sat down hard on the couch he and Gina shared the night before and held his head in his hands. If she was out to kill him, talking about her future without him was a great way to get the job done—slowly and painfully. Her red shoes appeared in his line of vision. He waited for the deathblow.
She laid her jacket on the chair beside the couch, pulled her BlackBerry out of her purse, and set her bag down. “I was looking at my schedule. The divorce should be final by mid-August. What are your plans for the autumn?”
“Plans?” He couldn’t believe her. First she told him in front of his entire family that she was going through with the divorce, then she talked about shopping for a new husband, and now she wanted to know his plans? Was she insane or just sadistic?
“Yes, well you see, I just happen to own this ranch in Three Whores Bend, Idaho, and I swear, it’s the most beautiful place on earth. I thought that would be the perfect place.”
Ben stood and looked her up and down. “The perfect place for what? The new season of The Bachelorette?”
She snapped her fingers in his face. “I know it’s difficult, but try to keep up with me here, Ben.”
“Gina, I’m trying to do a number of things, the least of which is keeping up with you. It’s not as easy as you think when I’m still trying to process the fact that you went ahead with our divorce, even after last night, and then you were kind enough to start interviewing for my replacement right in front of me, with members of my family no less.”
Her eyes went wide, maybe because he was speaking loudly, so loudly one of the nurses poked her head in and gave him a look followed by a “Keep it down, will ya?”
Gina took a deep breath and looked up at him with guileless eyes. “Ben, we got married for all the wrong reasons. This time I want a real wedding—not one where one of my exes is the best man. I want all the bells and whistles and this time I want to get married for all the right reasons. I’m thinking about the first Saturday in September, September 4th. Grandpa Joe will be better by then. Will that work for you?”
“Huh?”
“I’m asking you to marry me. At the ranch. On September 4th.”
He didn’t know if he wanted to strangle her or kiss her. At this point both, but probably in the reverse order. “You want to get married? To me?”
She rolled her eyes. “Duh, what the hell did you think I was doing out there? Checking out your competition?”
Ben rolled back on his heels and shrugged. “Yeah, pretty much.”
She stood so close, her feet went in between his and she wrapped her hands around his neck, pulling his face down to hers. She grinned like a cat that had just eaten a canary. “I had you goin’ there for a while, didn’t I?”
“You certainly did.”
“It’s not like you didn’t deserve it. You didn’t waste any time trying to get rid of me. Besides, it serves you right. You were always about ten steps ahead of me, but not anymore.”
“No? What’s changed?”
“Me. I think all along I never believed I deserved you. I wasn’t good enough for you—”
“What?”
Gina put her fingers over his lips to quiet him. He was tempted to kiss them and then work his way over her palm, up her arm…
“Calm down, I got over it. It just took a while.”
Ben blinked twice, bringing himself back from the path one part of his mind was going down.
When he just stared, she continued. “Ben, look at your family and look at mine. My mother was a whore; my father sold his own child for drug money. What could I bring to the table?”
Ben wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her flush against him. “You. I love you. I need you. I don’t care who your family is. I love you.”
Gina smiled, but her eyes were glassy. “Yeah, I figured that out.”
“Gina, I only gave you divorce papers because—”
She cut him off with a kiss and for the first time since she opened that envelope that morning, Ben was able to take a deep breath. He straightened and pulled her along with him. Kissing her like his life depended on it. He was pretty sure that it did.
Gina tapped his arm to get his attention and pulled her mouth from his. “Well?”
“Well what?”
“Are you going to marry me the right way? No prenups, no exes as the best man, just you and me, and our whole family, getting married for all the right reasons at the ranch?”
“Sweetheart, I’m yours for the taking.” He kissed her wishing they weren’t standing in the waiting room of a hospital. “I’ll marry you as often as you want. I love you.”
“You’d better love me, because if you haven’t noticed, I’m not the easiest woman to deal with and I don’t take crap from any man, not even the one I marry. Comprendé?”
“Comprendé.”

***

Ben wondered how long the reception had to last before he could carry Gina back to the house and have his wicked way with her. They’d been married for three hours, they’d done the whole picture thing, had a big dinner, and even cut the cake, some of which he could still feel in his ear. He wanted to pick up his wife, carry her back to the house, and lock the family out. Hell, they could always use the outhouse if need be.

He watched Kate, who had caught the bouquet, dance cheek to cheek with Buck who had scared everyone sufficiently to be the only man vying for the garter. Gina danced with Grandpa Joe who must have said something about children because she turned bright red. Ben decided it was a good idea to separate his wife and his grandfather. Lord only knew what the old guy would come up with next. Maybe now he and Gina were married, Gramps would finally turn his attention to one of the cousins.

As much as Ben loved his family, he’d heard all the wedding night advice he could handle. Trapper handed him a beer and Ben took a long pull. “I’ll give you a thousand bucks to get rid of everyone so I can take my wife home.”

Trapper laughed. “I’ll cover you if you two want to sneak out in the next half hour. We have a pool going on how long you’d last. I said between 3 and 3½ hours. I gotta tell you though, adding a grand to it would certainly sweeten the pot.”

Ben was about to say something when he saw Gina and Gramps heading his way. Thank God. He couldn’t wait to get her alone. He’d hardly slept the night before because for some stupid reason, Gina insisted on sleeping apart so he wouldn’t see her on their wedding day. It was the most insane tradition he could imagine, but she insisted, and the last thing he wanted to do was spoil it for her. He figured it was just one night, but he’d gotten so used to sleeping with her curled up next to him, he spent the night reaching for her. It didn’t help that he woke hungover from the bachelor party Delbert and the guys threw him while he was kicked out of the cabin. And it wasn’t as if there was any other place to go. The family had taken over the bed and breakfast in Atlanta, as well as a few of the other part-time residents’ cabins, leaving him and the boys to bunk with Delbert.

When Gramps handed Gina back to him, Ben could tell by the look on her face she was done. Gramps smiled at the two of them. “So, when are you two gonna start working on making me some great-grandbabies?”

“Right now.” Ben bent down and picked up his wife. “Come on, sweetheart, we’re going home.”

Gina felt herself being lifted, which was really no surprise. Ben had a habit of carrying her around and, although she’d never admit it, she was beginning to like it. Usually when carrying was involved, making love came soon after, so who was she to complain?

As soon as he lifted her off the ground, she was pummeled by birdseed. That was one tradition she could have definitely done without. She swore someone shot a handful right down the front of her dress. She held on for dear life until Ben shouldered his way through the door and locked it before setting her down.

“Damn.” She brushed off her hair and shook her dress, dislodging birdseed from a number of interesting places.
“What’s the matter?” Was she the only one who got hit by birdseed? Wasn’t that just typical? He looked all
chivalrous when really, he was just using her as a shield—not that she’d mention that to him… yet. Gina looked around because she felt as if she were missing her purse, when she realized what it was. “We locked Jasmine out.”

Ben stuck his head out the door and whistled for Jasmine. She ran in and went straight to her bed. “She has the right idea.”

Every time Gina moved, she felt birdseed falling deeper within her dress and under things. She shimmied around.

“What is it?”

“I have birdseed down the front of my dress.”

Ben smiled that smile of his that never failed to make her catch her breath. “I can help you with that. Here, turn around.”

“You want to do this right here?”

Ben shrugged. “Well, yeah. I’ll sweep it up later. It will be easier here than in the bedroom.”

“Fine, but our whole family is going to be walking by the cabin on their way down. The least you could do is close the blinds.”

“Right.” Ben made quick work of closing every blind, shade, and curtain on the first floor of the cabin. When he ran back, he had taken off the jacket of his tuxedo, the first two snaps of his shirt were undone, and his bow tie hung from his collar. He was so gorgeous she still took her breath away. Earlier, when she saw him waiting for her in the meadow, looking nervous, she felt as if she should pinch herself. She wasn’t sure how she’d gotten so lucky. Then she remembered when she was a kid, the one thing that got her through every disaster was the knowledge that once she finally grew up and was able to lead her own life, she’d be happy. She’d lived through hell and got through all the bad stuff early. The rest of her life would be wonderful. Thank God she’d been right about that.

Ben tipped her face up as if he were reading her mind. “I’ve seen that look before. That’s the same look you had the first time I told you I loved you, and you ran off crying. You’re not going to cry again, are you?”

She took a deep breath and wrapped her arms around his waist, blinking away the tears. “I hope not. It’s embarrassing.”

“What’s wrong?”

Gina shook her head and felt the first teardrop fall. Crap. “Nothing. I’m just happy and I love you. Maybe it’s an overflow of emotion.”

“I wish I had known that the first time.”

Gina had to laugh. “Yeah, you and me both.” More birdseed slipped down through her dress, making her wiggle around. It was really annoying.

“Turn around and I’ll help you with the dress.”

She did and Ben began to unbutton the long row of pearls running down her back, and kissed the skin he bared with each button that popped. “Ben, how long is this going to take?”

“It could be a while—they’re really small buttons. Are you in a rush?”

She shivered beneath his lips. “Well, I was just thinking.”

One more button popped through the little loop. “What?”

“It’s not like I’m ever going to need a wedding dress again. I’ve gotten married twice now, I think that’s enough.”

Another button popped open and he licked the skin he uncovered. “I sure hope so.”

She reached back, yanked, and pearl buttons went flying, bouncing as they hit the floor. The dress fell to her feet. She stepped out of it, and turned around. Ben looked as if he just swallowed his tongue. “What?” She looked down at the ice blue bra, panties, and garters she wore. “What do you think? It’s my something blue.” The way he looked at her gave her goose bumps.

“God, you’re beautiful.”

She blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Thanks, but I think I have birdseed in my bra.”

Ben unhooked her bra. Sure enough, birdseed fell out and bounced on the floor. He ran his hands over her whole body, unhooking her garters and rolling down her stockings. His mouth followed his hands as he slid her panties down, tantalizing her, intent on dislodging all the birdseed. She had to hand it to him. He certainly was thorough.

When he’d exhausted her patience and his, he lifted her off her feet. “Let’s go to bed and I’ll make sure you have nothing on you but me until 3:00 tomorrow afternoon.”

Gina wrapped her arms around his neck and was about to ask why 3:00? He stole her thoughts when he kissed her. Before she knew it, he’d carried her to the bedroom and was driving her insane with his mouth and hands, while she did her best to get him out of the rest of his clothes.

They fell into bed together and she slid on top of him, looking down on the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. She’d never felt so loved and complete as she did the moment she slid over him, taking him inside her. He groaned and squeezed his eyes shut, holding her still. She slid her hands up his stomach, his muscles contracted as he blew out a breath and speared her with a look so intense, she felt her orgasm building. When she moved, he
went wild, filling her, driving her, and shattering her control. He rolled them both over and did it again until he finally lost the battle and groaned out her name, collapsing on top of her. Ben rolled them both over so she was lying on top of him. She listened to his breathing level out and his heartbeat slow.

She kissed him and smiled when she felt his erection jump within her. “What’s happening at 3:00 tomorrow?”

Ben ran his hands down her back to her butt and pulled her legs forward, sinking deeper inside her. “We need to leave for Boise. We have a family meeting at 9:00 Monday morning, before everyone disperses.”

Gina kissed him, taking her time exploring his mouth, as she teased his sides with her fingers. When he groaned she ended the kiss. “What about?”

“Finding Rafael.”

“They know?” Her face heated with the intense shame that followed her all her life. She tried to push herself off him, but he held her firm.

“Sweetheart, when you married me, you didn’t think you were just marrying me, did you?” Ben drew her close against him. “Oh no. You got the whole family along with me. Once they got wind of Rafael, they did what they always do. They interfered. I’m sorry. I couldn’t keep them out of it.”

“They knew about Rafael before the wedding? And they didn’t try to stop it?”

“Why would they?” He looked as if he didn’t understand why she asked. She searched his face for any signs of deceit or contempt, but she didn’t see any. He really didn’t care about her past, and for the billionth time since she’d met him, she thanked God she’d taken Ben up on his offer.

“Sam and Trapper have been talking, and Gramps got involved. Dick Sommers is flying in tomorrow and he’s going to update us on what he’s found. Now that you’ve got all of us on your team, we should be able to find Rafael in no time.”

Gina swallowed hard and blinked away tears.

Ben furrowed his brows. “Shit. Sweetheart, I couldn’t keep them out of it, they love you almost as much as I do. And hell, they’ve adopted Sam and Tina too.” He wiped the tear running across her cheek. “Are these happy or sad tears?”

“Happy. Definitely happy. I love you and our whole family.” She did her best to stop crying. She knew she’d look like a raccoon if she didn’t. “I was thinking that we should get busy making our niece or nephew a few cousins. I want our kids to grow up with a big family.”

A slow grin spread across Ben’s face. In the blink of an eye, he tossed Gina on her back. “Then we better get started.”

The End
Acknowledgments

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**About the Author**

Robin Kaye was born in Brooklyn, New York, and grew up in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge next door to her Sicilian grandparents. Living with an extended family that’s a cross between *Gilligan’s Island* and *The Sopranos*, minus the desert isle and illegal activities, explains both her comedic timing and the cast of quirky characters in her books.

She’s lived in half a dozen states, from Idaho to Florida, but the romance of Brooklyn has never left her heart. She currently resides in Maryland with her husband, three children, two dogs, and a three-legged cat with attitude.

Robin would love to hear from you. Visit her website at www.robinkayewrites.com or email her at robin@robinkayewrites.com.
He might be too good to be true...

Ben Walsh shouldn’t be single. Handsome and wealthy, Ben is equally at home in Idaho where he grew up and in Manhattan where he’s now an art dealer. Suave and successful with impossible taste, he normally has women beating down his door. But the one woman he wants can’t be convinced that he’s for real...

She isn’t sure if she has time for fairy tales...

Gina Reyes has fought for every bit of her success, and it’s about time for things to start going her way. So when Ben makes a proposal that will allow her to take care of her family the way she wants to, she agrees. Besides, a guy this perfect would never be interested in her...right?

By the time Gina figures out that she’s read Ben all wrong, the arrangements are made, the papers are signed...but what exactly are they getting themselves into?

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