

A LONGTIME *(and at one point illegal)* CRUSH



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JANETTE RALLISON

A LONGTIME (AND AT ONE POINT ILLEGAL) CRUSH

SMALL TOWN, BIG SKY ROMANCE

JANETTE RALLISON

A Longtime (And at One Point Illegal) Crush

By Janette Rallison

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Author note and dedication

A warning voice might have come in handy for Elsie Clark, but as she turned her ancient Civic onto Windstream Road, she didn't hear that type of voice. She looked out across the sloping hills that lay in front of the snow-covered mountains, and the voices she heard whispered, "Come back and stay where you belong. This is home."

Nope. Not going to happen. Elsie had been ignoring those voices since she left Lark Springs, Montana, three-and-a-half years ago. She'd moved on, had outgrown the small-town life. If she moved back here, everyone would see her as the same Elsie Clark she'd been in high school: Young, foolish, and impetuous. Or at least Kye McBride would see her that way.

Thinking about Kye wasn't pleasant, but it was hard not to while she drove across his ranch. Whenever she made this drive back—Thanksgiving, Christmas, and now for her brother's wedding—she was afraid Kye would pop up somewhere along the road. It was a stupid worry, really. The Windstream Ranch consisted of twenty-five-thousand acres. It wasn't as if the McBrides would be strolling around the road looking for familiar cars. Still, if there had been another way to get to Lark Springs, Elsie would've taken it.

She drove around a curve that followed the contours of a riverbed and saw the cows. Two of them stood idly in the road, each poking through the snow on the shoulder as though something tasty might be buried underneath.

Elsie slowed down, and when the cows didn't move, she idled and gave her horn a short tap. Neither cow moved. In fact, both turned and looked at

her placidly. She waited a few moments and hit the horn harder. It let out a scolding blare.

One of the cows turned and strolled up to the hood of her car. Its soft brown eyes stared at her while it breathed out frosty puffs. It had moved, but there still wasn't a way to pass the cows without hitting them.

Elsie waited for one of them to saunter off somewhere, to shuffle by her car so she could scoot around them. A minute went by, then two, then three. The cows only stared at her expectantly and mooed.

This was great. With Elsie's luck, if she drove off the road to go around them, she'd either get stuck in the snow or end up puncturing a tire. And that would be just what she needed—to get stuck on Kye's ranch.

Elsie noticed movement in her rearview mirror. She turned around and saw that another cow had wandered onto the road behind her car.

It was then Elsie felt the first inklings of panic. She was boxed in. If she moved her car in either direction, she'd hit a cow. And she knew the price of beef. The only thing that would be worse than getting stuck on Kye's ranch would be having to tell him she'd killed one of his cows. Elsie laid on the horn again, this time long and hard.

Nothing happened. She didn't even get a reaction from the cows—unless you counted the way they were looking at her curiously and sniffing the car's headlights. Off to her right, she spotted three more cows ambling her way, ready to join the others for this impromptu cow party.

What the...? Why had her car suddenly become a cattle magnet?

Elsie put the car in reverse and twisted in her seat. She would find a way around the cow behind her. At this point, she wouldn't mind backing up the entire way to the main road.

Unfortunately, while she'd been honking at the cows in front of her, two more had wandered up behind the car. Now they blocked the road that way too. One ambled up to her window. She stared at them in disbelief. This was beginning to feel like the Alfred Hitchcock movie *The Birds*. She'd wound up in a bovine sequel. Elsie honked the horn in a staccato rhythm and glared at the wet nose now eye level with her window. "Don't you know that people eat you?" she told it. "Where is your fear of predators?"

None of the cows responded to that comment either.

It figured that Kye's cattle would go out of their way to trap her on his property. She might as well turn off the car and wait them out. Only she didn't dare turn off her car for fear it wouldn't restart.

That was the thing about being a college student. She couldn't afford a new car, and lately, her Civic had a temperamental way of pretending its battery had died. It hadn't. Elsie had replaced the battery a month ago when it first started acting up. Now sitting here staring at Kye's cows, she could read her future as well as if a fortune teller were slapping down the cards in front of her. Elsie would turn off her car, the cows would eventually go away, and then her Civic would go on strike and ignore all attempts to coax it into life by fervent key twisting.

When Elsie called home to report the problem, her parents would ring up the McBrides to have them give her a jump. Even if it wasn't Kye who showed up with jumper cables, he would hear about the event. And he would think it was some pathetic attempt on her part to see him again.

He wouldn't believe she'd been waylaid on the road by a small but insistent herd of cattle. He wouldn't believe she'd had a real reason to turn off her car in the middle of his ranch. Elsie could hardly believe it herself, and she was staring at said cattle.

She pulled out her phone but couldn't think of anyone to call for help. Did 911 handle this sort of thing? It didn't matter. Anyone she called in Lark Field would call the McBrides and have them deal with it. Worse still, anyone she called would ask her why she hadn't just called the McBrides in the first place.

Elsie shoved her phone back in her purse. Well, this is what she got for going out of her way to avoid Kye McBride for the last three-and-a-half years. Fate was having a joke at her expense.

Elsie honked the horn again, not expecting it to do any good, but the blare sounded like the car was swearing, so it was appropriate.

Then things got worse. Up until that moment, there had been a chance this cow traffic jam would clear up on its own and Kye would never know she'd been trapped here. If things went the way they were supposed to, Elsie wouldn't have to see him until tomorrow night at the wedding rehearsal where she would be flawlessly dressed up. She had planned to graciously ignore Kye while she was busy being stunning.

Now that scenario was shot. Elsie glanced in her rearview mirror and saw him coming over a rise on his horse. Even in his thick jean coat and cowboy hat, she knew it was Kye and not one of the ranch hands. She recognized his height and shape, tall and lean enough that you didn't notice

how muscular he was at first. Elsie could tell it was him by the way he held himself, self-assured but casual.

Kye had seen her and had undoubtedly recognized her car. It was the same one she'd had in high school. Instead of looking stunning, she wore jeans and a sweatshirt, had done nothing with her hair except run a brush through it several hours ago, and she barely wore any makeup. Now Kye was coming over to see why she was planted in the middle of his ranch surrounded by an entourage of cows.



THE FIRST TIME Elsie saw Kye, she'd been eight and he'd been thirteen. He'd come home from school with her oldest brother, Carson, to do math homework. Before long the guys had ended up outside on the driveway shooting hoops. Back then, Kye had looked years younger than Carson. He'd been short and wiry with arms and legs that seemed too long for his body. Even at that, he'd still been cute. He had thick brown hair and dark blue eyes the same shade as the Montana sky right after sunset.

Later on, when Elsie was old enough to look back on all the times Kye came over to help Carson study, she realized why the two of them had always ended their study sessions playing basketball. Kye was years ahead of her brother when it came to math. Carson must have hated that—being outdone by someone who looked like he was in sixth grade instead of eighth. Carson could only take being tutored for so long before he had to prove he was better than Kye when it came to sports.

But back when Elsie was eight, she'd only seen that her brother was outside playing, and she wanted in on the action. She had two twin brothers between her and Carson, and neither of them ever had much time for her, even though she tried to be one of the guys whenever she could.

Elsie took her basketball outside, the one with her name written in purple marker across it. She made a shot from the edge of the lawn. It didn't even manage to hit the basket.

"Go away," Carson told her in the cuttingly impatient way big brothers had. "You're bugging us."

Elsie hurried after her ball before it rolled into the street. "Three people can play," she said. "Lucas and Jace play with you all the time."

“Yeah,” Carson said, dribbling the ball with such ease it looked like his hands were magnets the ball was drawn to, “but you’re no good. Go play dolls or something.”

Even though Elsie didn’t know who Kye was, she felt the extra sting of being insulted in front of him. She clutched her ball, tears welling in her eyes. Her name, so proudly written on her ball, blurred in her vision until the letters melted together.

“It’s okay.” Kye came toward her. “She can be on my team.” He effortlessly hoisted her up on his shoulders. Ranch work had made him stronger than he looked. “Now we’re taller than Carson,” Kye said, “so it’s almost fair.”

She giggled and beamed and cheerfully missed shot after shot. Kye didn’t seem to mind. He kept saying things like, “Dang—the basket ducked out of the way. That should’ve been a three-pointer.”

He probably had only recruited her on his team so he had a reason to lose. Maybe he didn’t like being reminded of his deficiencies in basketball any more than Carson liked being reminded of his shortcomings in math.

It didn’t matter. After that, Elsie adored Kye, worshipping him with a dedication only an eight-year-old could sustain. Elsie renamed all of her Ken dolls Kye. Her family went to the same church as Kye’s, and while the congregation bowed their heads in prayer, Elsie would peek open her eyes and blow Kye furtive kisses. She looked for him at every one of Carson’s school events and ballgames—Carson played them all: Football, basketball, baseball, and soccer. Kye did eventually get taller and better at not only basketball but football too. She cheered for him louder than she cheered for her brother.

Every time Kye came over during his high school years, she hung around like a stray puppy waiting to be noticed. *I am going to marry you*, she told him silently. She basked in those unsaid words, felt the power of them lifting her.

Kye never did notice her, though. Not really. Not in the way she wanted to be noticed. He was always nice, but it was the sort of niceness granted to everyone. Once when he came over, she was clearing the snow off their walkway, and instead of walking by her, he took the shovel from her and finished the job like it was nothing.

If she could have kept some of the snow as a reminder, she would have.

He grew even taller and more muscular. His glasses disappeared in favor of contacts. His boyish features sharpened into the crisp handsome lines of a young man.

On the night of his senior prom, Carson, Kye, and several of their friends brought their dates to the house. Elsie sat sulking on the stairs while her mother cooed over everyone, snapping pictures and throwing out compliments like they were confetti. Not once did Kye look in Elsie's direction or smile at her. She was thirteen and in braces, completely inadequate in the face of the glittering girls who glided around Kye and the others.

Elsie's mantra of future marriage was drained of its magic that night. The words no longer had the power to lift or warm her. The sentence sat in a mangled heap around her feet, deflated.

That was the last image she had of Kye before he went to college: Him in a tux, achingly handsome, never once turning to glance in her direction.

Now that same man was heading toward her car, and he was close enough she could see the amusement in his eyes—and something else, something she couldn't quite pinpoint. Annoyance maybe? Or worse, pity?

If her last Kye McBride sighting had ended on prom night, things wouldn't have turned out so badly. Elsie eventually stopped acting like she wanted to be one of the guys and embraced all things girly—fashion, shoes, and makeup. She grew out her dark brown hair and had a way of running her fingers through it that made guys stop, pause, and take notice.

The only vestige of her crush on Kye was a permanent placement in advanced math. She had devoted herself to math back in elementary school on the off chance Kye would notice her report cards lying around and consider her brilliant. This never happened, but by the time he'd left for college, she was too well entrenched in the gifted math program to let it all go.

If Kye hadn't come back, Elsie would've remembered him as a childhood obsession that flared into and out of existence along with her crushes on actors and musicians. That's where those crushes belonged—behind the unachievable and anonymous walls Hollywood erected.

On the first day of her senior year, Elsie walked into her honors calc class and saw Kye writing *Mr. McBride* on the whiteboard in the front of the room.

Her arms went slack and her calc book slid from her hands onto the floor.

Kye turned at the sound. Elsie blushed bright red, hurriedly picked up the book, and slipped into a seat at the side of the room. He smiled at her, but it was just a piece of kindness—a sort of welcoming smile that said *I'm not the sort of teacher who eats students*. He showed no recognition, didn't speak to her at all, until after he'd gone over the class rules, the syllabus, and was taking roll.

"Allie Anderson...Madison Basha...Tyson Boggle..." He marked off each student when they answered back.

Kye paused, and Elsie knew he had come to her name and recognized it. He looked around the room, trying to spot her. His gaze passed right over her without stopping. "Elsie Clark?" he asked.

"Here," she called back, already uncomfortable at the tone she'd used. It sounded too nervous, too questioning, as though she wasn't sure herself if she really was here.

Kye's gaze shot to her, and she knew he still didn't recognize her. She'd watched him grow up during his four years of high school, but he had never seen her change from the eight-year-old he'd played basketball with.

She breathed softly, carefully waiting for some sort of pronouncement from him. *Notice me now*, she told him silently. *Really see me. I'm every bit as beautiful as the girl you went to prom with.*

Kye's eyebrows dipped together. "Are you Carson Clark's little sister?"

"Yes." She fought a blush that threatened to creep back into her cheeks.

"Wow," he said.

Wow. She could eat that word. She'd waited long enough for it. Before she could hold the word up and admire his praise, he added, "I suddenly feel old. You were like, what, six when I left for college?"

Then he went on with the rest of the roll.

In so many ways those sentences had put her back on the stairs, an awkward, invisible girl with braces. It wasn't a role she wanted. And it wasn't a role she intended to keep.

Seventeen-year-olds are reckless in so many ways.

That long-ago night at dinner, Elsie told her parents that Kye was her teacher. Her dad nodded as though it was a sad event, one to be mourned over. “He was going to get his electrical engineering degree, but after his father had that knee injury, Kye got his teaching certificate instead. He came home so he could help run the ranch.”

Kye was the youngest of three children. Elsie didn’t know much about his older sister and brother except that they were both married and living in other states. Apparently, neither could come back to help out on the ranch.

Elsie had never thought she could be grateful for someone’s injury before, but she was. Kye was back. He would be teaching at her school for at least a year. Best of all, he was gorgeous and still single.

Elsie’s mother took a bite of her lasagna. “It must be hard on him to be back home when most of his friends are gone.”

Gorgeous, single, and lonely—even better. Well, not really. But sort of. It wasn’t *that* long until she graduated. Only nine months. And then she and Kye could have a romantic whirlwind summer. She could picture them walking hand in hand across the overgrown grass on his ranch, sunshine pouring around them.

“Kye always loved my homemade applesauce,” Elsie’s mother went on. “I’ll send a bottle with you tomorrow to give to him.”

Strictly speaking, her mother’s applesauce was more like pie filling. That’s why everyone loved it.

The next day, Elsie was the first one to reach Kye’s classroom. She’d been looking forward to giving the bottle of applesauce to him all day—had

spent extra time on her hair and makeup in anticipation of this event—but now she just felt nervous. Transparent. It was one thing to be an eight-year-old with a crush on him. Now, well, this was entirely different. He was a teacher and she was a student. This could turn into the most awkward hour of the day if he knew how she felt. She fidgeted with the jar of applesauce hidden behind her books and wished her mother hadn't sent it.

Kye was sitting on the edge of his desk, flipping through the math book. His brown hair was mussed, and his button-down shirt was a little wrinkled. Such a bachelor.

He looked up when she came in, turning his evening-blue eyes on her. He held her gaze, perhaps because she was staring at him and slowly padding over.

"Did you have trouble with the homework?" he asked.

He had told the class yesterday that he offered tutoring in the morning before school. She had considered faking confusion so she could spend extra time with him, but the assignment was just a review of the stuff she'd done last year. And besides, she wanted him to know how smart she was. Kye, she was sure, liked smart girls.

"No," she said. "I brought something for you. An apple for the teacher." She pulled out the bottle and handed it to him.

He smiled in happy surprise. "Your mom's applesauce?"

"Yep. She insisted I bring it to you."

Kye turned the bottle in his hands. "This is the best stuff. Tell her she's completely ruined me for store-bought applesauce."

"Well, there's more where that came from." The Clarks had four apple trees in their yard, which meant there was *a lot* more where that came from. Suddenly Elsie was glad she'd always been drafted into applesauce duty—the way to a man's heart and all of that.

Kye put the bottle on his desk and surveyed Elsie. "I see how it is," he said, teasing. "Your mom thinks she can bribe me into passing you. It might work. She should at least try."

Elsie smiled back at him, more comfortable now. "I won't need bribery to pass calculus. I learned everything I know about math from Carson."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Remind your mom I like the cinnamon kind too."

Elsie had meant it as a compliment to Kye—he'd taught Carson, and Carson had taught her. Although strictly speaking, Carson hadn't helped her

that much with her math, so it was probably a convoluted attempt at a compliment to begin with. "I'll be fine," she said.

Kye held out his hand, palm up. "Let's see your homework."

She pulled it from her notebook and handed it to him, already feeling a glowing sense of pride. He glanced over it, nodded with approval, and set it down on his desk. "You obviously *didn't* learn everything you know about math from Carson. I hate to disillusion you about you your big brother—especially since he's one of my best friends—but Carson frequently couldn't remember which order the numbers went in."

Elsie laughed. "I don't think he was quite *that* bad."

"Seriously," Kye lowered his voice because a couple more people had entered the room. "If you need help later on when things get harder, I want you to come in for tutoring."

"I'll be fine," she said again. "I'm a straight-A student."

"I know. That's why I'd hate to be the one to ruin your GPA."

He knew her GPA? That meant he'd checked up on her after yesterday. The thought made her feel breathless—even if he'd only done it because she was his friend's little sister. "I can tell you're a smart girl," he said. "Sometimes it's hardest for the smart kids to ask for help."

"Okay," she said. "I'll get help. I mean, I'll ask for it. If I need it. From you." She obviously needed help, although not in math. She needed help in knowing how to carry on a conversation with hot older men. She needed help acting like she wasn't an immature teenager. "Um, thanks," she finished and walked over to the nearest desk. One in the front row. It became her desk from then on.

Seeing Kye every day became a sweet sort of misery. Elsie stared at him dreamily, relentlessly. Her eyes traced the lines of his hands as they swept markers against the dry-erase board. His handwriting was a swirl of passion in numbers. Sometimes it was hard to pay attention to the calculus because all the old words about marrying Kye kept stirring themselves up and inserting themselves into the integrals on the board.

$Dx(uv) = u(dv/dx) + v(du/dx)$ = we will have children with brown hair, blue eyes, and your smile that quirks up at the side.

The other girls at school declared math was much more enjoyable with Mr. McBride teaching it, but none of them were as devoted as Elsie. All year long, she excelled in math. She got perfect scores on her homework.

Aced the tests. She lived for the moments when Kye handed her papers back with a smile and a word of praise.

Every Monday she came to class early and brought him a bottle of applesauce. She didn't even complain when her mother made her help in the applesauce canning marathon. Some of these bottles would be for Kye. That made the work delicious.

Sometimes while waiting for class to start, Elsie would talk to Kye about Carson or her family, or anything—books she'd read or things in the news. In those moments, he talked to her like she was a friend. At those times, she was sure he felt an attraction to her too. He always held her gaze a little longer than normal and smiled more easily.

Besides those unspoken moments, he never gave her an indication he saw her as anything else than a student. She knew there were rules about students and teachers. She didn't want him to do anything to risk his job, but she wasn't going to be in high school forever. She could've lived until graduation on a teaspoon of encouragement. And then after graduation, well, she and Kye would have an entire summer before she left for college.

Summer. The warmth of it continually swirled around in her stomach.

Elsie let other boys flirt with her in class and even flirted back with them sometimes. She did this to show Kye that she was someone worthy of attention. If he was jealous, he didn't show it. As he told the guys to settle down and go to their seats, he only seemed annoyed they were wasting class time.

Precious math time.

$D_x(u/v) = (v(du/dx) - u(dv/dx))/v^2 =$ we will laugh about all of this on our tenth wedding anniversary.

Things probably would've gone on that way, and she would've graduated with her dignity intact if it hadn't been for that night at the Mathematics Decathlon.

It was a couple of weeks before graduation. Elsie was on the team and Kye was one of the advisors. They traveled to Montana State University, and it had all gone well enough—or at least as well as anyone expected. The team from Lark Field High didn't win, but they made a decent showing. They had fun and got to joke around with other mathletes.

“Why did the chicken cross the Mobius strip?”

No answer was required. A Mobius strip only has one side.

“Dear Math, Please stop making me find your X. Just get over her.”

On the last night, the students had a dance on campus. Elsie took extra time to make sure she was beautiful, noticeable. Here, away from the usual setting of school, it felt like anything could happen.

Kye was one of the chaperones for the dance. All night he stood in the corner of the room wearing a white, button-down shirt to indicate he was a teacher. That shirt was a *Do Not Cross* sign. His hands were thrust in his pockets, and he looked bored. How could Elsie keep from imagining what those hands would feel like on her shoulders, on her waist, slow dancing with her? Just once, she wanted to stand slow-dance close to him.

She was eighteen. That made her an adult. In other times and places, girls were already married at eighteen. Certainly, it wasn't wrong to just dance with Kye.

After the night was nearly over, Elsie finally got the courage to go talk to him. A fast song played, not a slow one, which made her request downright innocent.

"Hey, Mr. McBride," she said, half-laughing as though the idea had just occurred to her, "let's dance."

He shook his head. "I'm a chaperone."

"So, chaperones aren't allowed to have any fun?"

"Nope. It's one of the chaperone bylaws. I have to be curmudgeonly, insist no one has fun, and I can't dance."

"Come on." She sent him a come-hither smile. "Just this once. I won't report you to the curmudgeon police."

He gestured in the direction of a group of guys. A couple of freshmen stood nearest to the dance floor. "Try one of them. They look like they would say yes to you."

It was a snub and Elsie felt its sting. Still, she smiled, shrugged, and strolled over toward the group he'd pointed at. She passed up the freshmen and walked over to a tall, rebellious-looking guy standing behind them. He had long, shaggy hair, gauges in his earlobes, and a beat-up T-shirt. She not only asked him to dance, she danced in a way to show Kye that math wasn't the only thing she excelled at. Every move, every twist of her hips and flip of her hair was for Kye. *I'm not a little girl anymore*, she thought. *I'm done waiting on the stairs*.

Her dance partner said his name was Bono—like the singer. She didn't know who that was. He made small talk, which she mostly ignored. She was a dancer on a stage and this was a performance. When the song ended,

Bono asked her to dance again. She said yes because it saved her the trouble of having to find a new guy to dance with. A slow song played, and she didn't even mind Bono's hand on her hips because every time she glanced over at Kye, he was watching with an ever-present frown of disapproval.

It made Elsie feel powerful. For so long, she had sat in the crowd watching him. Finally, their positions were reversed.

When the song ended, Bono took a step back from her. His long bangs nearly covered his eyes. "It's hot in here. Do you want to go outside?"

Her gaze cut back over to Kye. He was still watching her, still frowning. Why shouldn't he see her go outside with one of the guys he'd suggested? If it caused him a pang of regret for blowing her off, good. He deserved it. She smiled at Bono. "Sure."

Bono smiled too. She hadn't seen anything sinister in his smile. Not then. He made his way toward the door, and she threaded through the crowd after him, triumphant.

When they walked outside into the darkness of the night, her triumphant feelings drained away. She was no longer making a point to Kye; she was standing outside with a guy she had no interest in. She looked him over again. Now that they were away from the dance crowd, his rebellious-looking hair just seemed pointlessly long. The huge holes in his ears were an obvious cry for attention. His smile was too broad, his gaze too intense.

The cars in the parking lot sat in rows, their darkened headlights making them look like they were all part of the same dull stupor. A lamp in the distance cast off a feeble circle of light.

How long did Elsie have to stay outside before she could politely say she wanted to go back inside? She fiddled with her class ring, twisting it around her finger.

Bono stepped toward her. "Are you thirsty? I know a place we can get some beer." He took hold of her hand and pulled her toward the parking lot.

She dropped his hand and gave him an apologetic shrug. "I'll get in trouble if I go anywhere." She drifted back toward the door they'd come from.

Bono let out a sound that was half grunt and half laugh. "No one saw us come outside. We'll be back before the dance is over."

No one had seen them come outside? She'd thought Kye was watching them. His eyes had been on her throughout the dance, but maybe he'd

stopped looking at her when the song ended. The thought made her feel cross. Had she left with Bono for nothing?

“That’s okay,” Elsie said. “I only came out here because I was hot.”

Bono waggled his eyebrows at her. “You certainly are.”

Lame. It was such an old joke she couldn’t believe he’d said it. If he asked her for her phone number, she wouldn’t give him her real one. Maybe she would give him a list of prime numbers or turn her answer into an equation. If he was smart, he’d figure it out, and if he wasn’t, then he could just figure that she didn’t want him to call her.

Bono took hold of her hand again. “Hey, I want to show you something in my car. It’s right over there.” He pointed to a black car a couple of rows back and began towing her in that direction.

“What is it?” She reluctantly let him lead her across the asphalt. She didn’t care about anything he had in his car. Then again the car was in plain sight. It wasn’t as though he’d suggested they go into a darkened alley.

“So what does L. C. stand for?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“L. C.?” she repeated.

“Your name. What do the L and the C stand for?”

“It’s not L. C.” They were close enough to his car now that she didn’t bother protesting that she didn’t want to go there. It was better to see whatever he wanted to show her and then go back inside. “It’s E-L-S-I-E.”

“Oh,” he said, understanding. “I’ve never heard of that name before. It sorta sounds like a question. L, see?”

This from a guy whose name was Bono? She never should’ve said yes about coming outside in the first place. Making Kye jealous had been a stupid plan to begin with. He was never going to be jealous, and she ought to realize that by now.

They arrived at Bono’s car. He took out his keychain and pushed the unlock button. He opened the door and waited for her to get in.

She didn’t. “What did you want to show me?”

He pulled her closer and lowered his voice in an attempt to sound alluring. “I want to show you how my seats recline.”

Beyond lame. She wasn’t even going to give him a fake phone number. She jerked her hand away from his. “I’m going back inside.”

She turned, but he grabbed her wrist and pulled her back to face him. “We’ll go back inside in a few minutes.”

She laughed even though her stomach clenched in fear. If she treated this like a joke, he would let her go. Nothing bad would happen. She tried to pull her wrist away from him. “I think I’ve already seen enough reclining seats.” It was the wrong thing to say. It made her sound like she’d spent a lot of time making out with guys in their cars.

His grip on her wrist tightened. “What’s one more then?”

She grabbed his fingers, only managing to pry one off her. “Let me go or I’ll scream.”

He laughed and she caught a whiff of alcohol on his breath. “No one will hear you.”

She kicked him in the shin, hard. She’d been aiming for his knee. A kick there could have disabled him. Kicking him in the shin just made him mad. He swore and shoved her hard toward the open car door.

As she fell, her head smacked against the car’s metal edge. She screamed, but he was right. The sound wavered, too weak to carry through the building. Her scream was only a noise of frustration and anger. How had she gotten herself into this situation? How had this guy gone from asking about her name to hurting her? These things only happened in the news, in movies, in warnings given to naive young girls. Not to smart girls like her.

Panic twined through her. She kicked at Bono again, connected with some part of his body, she wasn’t sure what. She was lying half in, half out of the front seat. Instead of screaming again, she turned and pressed the horn. A blare sounded from the car. Maybe someone would hear it. Maybe someone would come out to see what was wrong.

Maybe was such a precarious word.

Still, she clung to the thought and kept fighting.

Elsie kicked at Bono again. This time he expected it. He grabbed hold of her leg, shoved it against the door, and drew his hand back to hit her. She braced herself and lifted one hand to protect her face.

The hit never came. Instead, Bono was yanked backward so fast it looked like he'd been sucked into something. Another figure stood behind him. Kye. Elsie recognized his white shirt. His beautiful, wonderful, chaperone white shirt.

Kye slammed Bono into the side of the car so forcefully that the thud vibrated through the vehicle. Bono swore, swinging wildly at Kye. He must have missed because Kye didn't even flinch. Elsie dragged herself out of the car in time to see Kye swing his fist into Bono's stomach.

Bono crumpled and let out a groan that sounded like a punctured tire.

Rage was etched across Kye's face. He held onto Bono's shirt with one hand, keeping him pinned against the car. His voice was a low, dangerous growl. "What do you think you're doing, punk?"

Bono didn't speak. Didn't move. Didn't fight back as Kye reached into his pocket and pulled out his car keys and wallet. Kye flipped open the wallet, read the name on the license, and dropped it on the ground. He let go of Bono's shirt but held onto the keys. "I'll keep these so you don't drive off before the police get here."

The word police seemed to bring Bono to life. He coughed out, "Sorry, man. I didn't know she had a boyfriend."

"Shut up," Kye said.

Bono shot a last look at Elsie, then darted away from Kye and sprinted through the parking lot.

For a moment Kye looked as though he would go after him, but instead, he surveyed Elsie. Only a little of the anger faded from his expression. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, even though she wasn’t okay at all. She was shaking. Cold. She wrapped her arms around herself. It didn’t help.

“Did he hurt you?” Kye already had his phone out and was calling someone.

She touched the side of her head. A lump had formed there. A patch of moisture told her it was bleeding. “He pushed me, and I hit my head.”

Kye swore and gazed across the parking lot where Bono had run. He was gone, had disappeared into the darkness.

Kye bent down, picked up the wallet, then took hold of Elsie’s arm. Gently, he led her back toward the building. Everything had happened so fast she’d barely had time to think about it, but now the last few moments were repeating in her mind in slow motion. A guy had attacked her. Attacked her. Tried to...what would have happened if Kye hadn’t come? Would she have been able to fight Bono off? Or would he have...right now, she could be back in that car, with Bono hitting her—or worse. Even thinking about it made her stomach turn.

Kye was talking on the phone, relating what had just happened. Elsie didn’t know who he was speaking to. The police? One of the other chaperones? Her parents?

That’s when she started crying—not when she’d been attacked, not when she’d been rescued; she cried at the thought of telling her parents. Elsie wanted her mother, wanted her mother’s comforting arms around her. But how could she tell her the rest? She felt so stupid, so helpless.

Kye slipped his phone into his pocket, took hold of her elbow, and led her to the building. It was all a blur in her mind. The music blaring and bodies moving. Kye guided her past the dance area and found one of the other chaperones—an overweight man with gray hair who looked at Elsie with sympathetic eyes while Kye explained what had happened. “Does she need to go to the hospital?”

Kye brushed away her bangs to look at her injury. “I don’t think it will need stitches. We should put something on it, though.”

Elise hated feeling like a victim. This was not the sort of attention she'd wanted.

The man led them to the nurse's office and got first aid supplies from one of the cupboards. The lights seemed too bright here. Everything looked too colorful and happy.

Kye was still clenching his jaw. He handed Bono's keys and wallet to the other chaperone.

The man looked them over. "I'll go wait for the police to get here. We'll see if they can find the kid at his address." He hesitated, taking note of Kye's stern expression. "Don't worry about getting in trouble for punching the kid. He swung at you first. It was self-defense. Neither the school board nor the police will have anything to say about it."

Kye nodded. "Thanks for your help."

The man left and Elsie sat down on the plastic-coated bed. Kye took out a washcloth and some antiseptic cream. He dampened the washcloth, then dabbed it at the lump on her head, wiping away the blood so he could see the wound beneath.

"It isn't too bad," he said. "It could've been a lot worse."

Yeah. In a lot of ways. She shut her eyes and didn't flinch as he continued cleaning the cut. "Thanks for pulling that guy off of me."

"I was afraid you were going to get in the car with him. I was afraid he would drive away with you, and then who knows what would've happened."

"I wasn't—"

Kye didn't let her finish. "Why did you leave the dance with him? You knew it was against the rules."

She couldn't answer that question. How could she tell Kye she'd gone because she'd wanted to make him jealous? It seemed so foolish now, so petty. The tears she'd cried in the parking lot were back, filling her eyes and brimming over her lashes. Her shoulders shook with the weight of silent sobs.

Kye sighed, sat down next to her, and put his arm around her. His voice grew softer. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you. You've been through a lot." His arm felt warm and strong. She leaned against him without thinking about it.

"I care about you, Elsie. I don't want you to get hurt."

She kept her gaze on his knees, couldn't look into his eyes. She tried to stop crying but made a noise that sounded like a gasp for breath. He pulled her closer. She let her head sink against his chest.

He rubbed her back while she left mascara deposits on the front of his shirt. "It's all right," he told her again and again, each time murmuring the words with more sympathy, more...what else was in those words?

She stopped crying. She didn't move her head, though. It felt so comfortable to lean against Kye this way, to feel the hard muscles of his chest against her cheek. Finally, she asked, "How did you get to me so fast?"

"I went after you as soon as I saw you leave with that idiot."

Kye *had* been watching her. He'd come after her. He cared about her. And now he had his arm around her and they were alone in this room. She felt the steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek. She felt all the years of longing welling up inside of her. Everything was converging in a single point. He was warm and strong and perfect. This was supposed to happen. Why should either of them fight it?

She lifted her head, took a steadying breath, and pressed her lips to his.

For two seconds he kissed her back. His mouth moved against hers, tasting of mint and hope. It was a real kiss and she was blissful. Or at least it had seemed like a real kiss at the time. Later on, as she relived those two seconds and examined them in microscopic detail, she was never sure whether he had truly kissed her back or whether he'd just been so surprised, he hadn't been able to react before then. Maybe his mouth had only been moving in horrified alarm.

Kye dropped his hand from her shoulder and pulled away from her as though she was fire. "What are you doing?" he demanded. He stood up, putting space between them. "Why would you—are you trying to get me fired?"

She blinked at him, her heart pounding painfully against her ribs. "I wouldn't tell anyone about us. You don't have to worry."

He stared at her with wide-eyed disbelief. "There is no *us*, Elsie. This isn't some game. This isn't you blowing kisses to me during the prayers at church—"

"You knew about that?" she interrupted, mortified. "You saw me?"

"No, Carson saw you. He told me about it."

Elsie put her hand over her face. Of course Carson had told Kye about her crush. Kye had always known.

“The point is,” he went on, mercilessly logical. “I’m your teacher and you’re just a kid. So none of this ever happened. I’m going to chalk it up to you being in shock, and nothing like this will ever happen again. Agreed?”

As if he needed to drag that sort of agreement out of her. He’d just cut her heart to ribbons. Did he really think she would try for another kiss after this?

She’d been so mortified that she’d rushed away from him, ran out of the room, and took refuge in the girls’ bathroom. It was safer to cry there. She sat on the cold tile floor, shivering, and realized she had read Kye wrong all along. He’d never been the slightest bit attracted to her. He didn’t see her as any sort of equal, let alone a love interest. She was a kid to him—a foolish, silly girl who didn’t know when to stop blowing him kisses.

A while later, a policewoman came in looking for her. Elsie gave a statement, numbly repeating what had happened. She was glad she had an excuse for her red eyes. Trauma over the attack. That’s all that was causing her to tremble.

Kye—no, *Mr. McBride*—must have given the other students on the team some details about what had happened. They were all so sympathetic and kind to her on the trip home, asking her if she was okay and threatening Bono with all sorts of creative amputations should he ever come near her again.

She wasn’t too worried about that. After Bono was charged with assault, she doubted he’d risk setting foot in Lark Field. She was glad the two other girls from the team kept near her. It saved her from having to talk to the chaperones.

Elsie didn’t come to class early on Monday or give her teacher a bottle of applesauce. Her mother had still given her one—rhubarb applesauce this time. Elsie left it in her locker. She wasn’t going to look at Kye again, let alone talk to him. During his explanation of L’Hopital’s rule, she stared at her calc book, her paper, the whiteboard behind him, anything but his face.

He didn’t speak to her that day, didn’t mention the missing applesauce, and the week plodded by on its slow countdown to graduation. By the weekend, Elsie felt an impatient restlessness to be done with high school, done with the summer too. It was time to start her new life—a new her

where she was officially an adult. People took you seriously when you were an adult.

On Sunday night, Elsie pulled an old tanning lamp out of the garage. Her mother had bought it years ago but hadn't used it for a long time. A healthy glow would make Elsie look better and, therefore, feel better. She took the lamp to her room, twisted her hair in a ponytail, and put on her bikini. She lay on her floor underneath the lamp and pretended she was sunning herself on a yacht. A yacht owned by the hot son of some billionaire tycoon.

After ten minutes, Elsie wondered if the sunlamp was doing anything. Wasn't it supposed to put out some heat? It felt like a normal lamp; the same type she had on her desk.

Then she vaguely remembered that Jace, one of her brothers, had used the sunlamp for a science project once—something to do with how different types of light affected plant growth. For all she knew, the lamp had a regular bulb in it right now.

While she examined it, her mother called from the foot of the stairs. "Elsie, dinner!"

She didn't want dinner. She wanted to spend the remaining days of school with a beautiful glowing tan.

Carson was coming home today from Denver to visit and see her graduate. He'd leveraged his athletic talent and six-foot-five height into a job as a lineman for the Broncos. Hometown boy makes good. Her mother had been making a special dinner for him, so he must have arrived. Well, maybe he could tell her what sort of bulb this was. Elsie tied her bikini straps back up, unplugged the lamp, and went downstairs to talk to him.

She was looking at the lamp, and not at anything else, as she rounded the corner and walked into the kitchen. "I can't get the sunlamp to work," she said, knowing Carson would be somewhere near the food. "Is this the right kind of bulb?"

Elsie's first clue that something horrible was happening was her mother's inward gasp. "Elsie, for heaven's sake! Get some clothes on!"

Elsie's gaze shot up. Kye McBride stood three feet away from her. He stared at her, taking in her bikini and everything it didn't cover. Carson and her father paused in their efforts of putting food on the table to look at her as well.

The lamp slipped from Elsie's hands, which was too bad, as it had provided a partial shield. The cracking sound of glass told her the bulb had broken, perhaps the entire lamp had too. She didn't check. "What are you doing here?" she asked Kye, her voice high-pitched.

She regretted the question as soon as the words left her mouth. Mature women shouldn't get flustered when they walked into their kitchens in swimwear and found their crushes—or ex-crushes—standing around. She should've been able to laugh and brush it off, to come up with some clever retort. Besides it was a stupid question. Kye was obviously visiting her brother, and the way she'd asked the question sounded like an accusation.

Kye didn't answer. Her mother did while making shooing motions with her hand. "He didn't come to check your homework. He's having dinner with us. Go get dressed."

Before her mother was even done speaking, Elsie was out of the room and bounding up the stairs.

Great. Why hadn't her mother mentioned Kye was coming for dinner? Elsie knew the answer, and it was another piece of bitterness to add to her collection. Her mother hadn't told her because Kye was Carson's friend, not hers. Her mother hadn't considered it would matter to Elsie. After all, she was nothing to him...just another replaceable, forgettable student.

Elsie reached her room, slammed her door, and flung open her dresser drawer to find clothes. She was tired of being the youngest and always overlooked and eighteen. She shimmied into her jeans, then flipped through her closet for a shirt. She needed something nice, something that made her feel confident and beautiful. Which was hard to do at this point. Even the best of shirts couldn't work miracles.

Did Kye think she had known he was coming over? Did he think she'd come down wearing a bikini as a way to...to tempt him? The idea made her feel sick. It was what some pitiable starstruck Lolita would do. And Elsie wasn't like that.

She changed into a light blue T-shirt, took her hair out of her ponytail, and checked her makeup. She reapplied powder, but that was mostly because she was stalling, looking for reasons not to go downstairs again.

Finally, she couldn't put it off any longer. She made the slow walk of shame back to the kitchen. The lamp had been cleaned up. No sight of it remained. The family was already seated at the table, eating and talking.

“Did you like the rhubarb applesauce I sent last Monday?” Her mother asked Kye. “Elsie thinks it’s too tart, but I like a little zing.”

The bottle still sat in Elsie’s locker. How was it that the one time she had skipped out on delivering applesauce, her mother asked Kye about it? Could Elsie believably profess forgetfulness?

Kye raised his gaze to hers. For one second something was in that gaze, though she couldn’t tell what. “It was great,” he said. “I like a little zing. I’m surprised Elsie doesn’t.”

Yeah, well, Elsie had been full of surprises lately.

She slumped in her chair, knowing she was blushing.

“So,” Carson said, shoveling some prime rib into his mouth. “I figured out why your lamp doesn’t work. Turns out, it’s in about ten different pieces.”

“That would explain it.” Elsie reached for a roll. It was about all she had an appetite for.

Carson speared a potato chunk on his fork. “Hey, when did Lark Field High implement flash-your-teacher-day? When I went to school, all we got was crazy hair day.”

Kye spread butter on a roll, unfazed by the question. “It’s part of the new math curriculum.”

Carson bit into his potato and shook his head. “See, I knew there was a reason the old math sucked.”

They were trying to tease away her embarrassment, but it didn’t help. She wanted to slide under the table. Could this dinner possibly be more uncomfortable?

As it turned out...yes, it could.

They weren’t even halfway through the meal when Mrs. Clark thanked Kye—again—for protecting Elsie during the Mathematics Decathlon. Carson asked about what happened, which meant Elsie had to sit there at the table and relive the whole thing again: how she’d broken the rules and gone outside with a hoodlum, how Kye had rescued her, how he’d called the police so she could file a report. Kye left out the part about the kiss, but it was there anyway. It was there in the way Elsie’s heart beat faster every time she was forced to look at Kye. It was there in the sympathetic way he kept gazing at her, slightly amused at times, as though he already thought their kiss was something she would look back at and laugh about someday.

Not likely.

Carson gave Elsie another lecture on safety—she never got tired of those after her brush with danger—and threatened to do several illegal things to Bono. Then he turned to Kye. “Thanks for saving my kid sister’s neck.”

“I’m glad I could be there for Elsie...for all of it.” Kye’s lips quirked up into an almost smile as he said the last part. It was so subtle Carson probably didn’t notice, let alone wonder what it meant. But Elsie couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Did he mean he was glad he was there for the kiss even though he’d rebuffed her? No, that wasn’t it. She was still reading things into his actions, although now the book was one penned with rejection. Kye meant he was glad he could set her straight. He’d known about her crush all along but had never had an opportunity to properly deflate it. Now he had.

She was literally going to start a countdown of how many hours were left until she graduated and didn’t have to see him again.

Elsie hadn’t expected to have any time alone with Kye and certainly didn’t want any, but as he was leaving, Mrs. Clark instructed Elsie to get a box of the rhubarb applesauce and give it to him.

“You don’t have to do that,” Kye told Mrs. Clark. “If you keep giving it to me, you won’t have any left for yourself.”

Mrs. Clark waved away his protest. “We still have plenty, and Elsie won’t help me eat the jars with the rhubarb—no appreciation of zing.”

Kye nodded, acquiescing, and Elsie was sent to get applesauce from the basement pantry. While she pulled a box from the shelf, she heard someone coming down the stairs. Kye. Had to be him. Carson wouldn’t have come to help her.

She left the pantry, tramped over to him, and shoved the box into his outstretched arms. “Here’s your zing. I hope you like it.”

“Elsie...”

“By the way, I didn’t know you were coming to dinner tonight.”

He shifted the box so he could hold it with one arm. “Yeah, that was pretty obvious by the way you threw your lamp at me.”

“I didn’t throw it at you. I dropped it in shock.”

Kye held one hand up as though she was being overly touchy—as though he had every right to hang out at her house, and it shouldn’t upset her to run into him when she was barely dressed. “I’m just kidding,” he said. “I didn’t really think you tried to club me with a random appliance.”

She was getting sick of his amused tone. She glanced at the stairs to make sure they were alone, then lowered her voice. “How could you come to dinner at my house?”

“How could I not?” he whispered back. “Your mother kept asking me for a day that worked with my schedule.”

Elsie let out a huff of exasperation. He was right. Her mother had most likely hounded Kye into coming. Applesauce wasn’t enough of a thank you for the man who’d saved Elsie from a hoodlum. Prime rib was required for that task.

Kye leaned closer to Elsie, so close she caught the scent of his aftershave. “Look, when you’re older, we’ll talk about all of this.”

He meant when she was mature enough to realize how stupid she’d been to throw herself at a teacher. It wasn’t a conversation she ever planned on having. “Have a nice night, Mr. McBride.” She walked around him and pounded up the stairs without waiting for a response. All the way to her room it bothered her that she hadn’t been able to come up with a better parting line.

After the graduation ceremony, while Elsie's parents snapped pictures of her holding her diploma, Kye emerged from a group of black-cloaked faculty. He strolled up to her, waited for her parents to finish with their photo shoot, then shook her hand. "Congratulations. I know you'll go far."

"I plan to," she said, meeting his eyes. "I'm going as far away from Lark Field as I can get."

He looked at her questioningly, as though he wasn't sure if she meant it.

She pulled her hand away from his. She meant it. But just so that her parents wouldn't think she was being rude, she smiled the entire time she said it. "Thanks for being my teacher. I learned a lot from you." She'd learned she wasn't pretty enough or charming enough to tempt Kye into kissing her. She'd learned that age mattered much more than personality.

"Did you?" he asked, his expression unchanged. "Good. I hope my lessons stick."

And then he was gone, leaving her with only frustration and a vague underlying humiliation rattling around in her chest.

She didn't really go all that far to college, only across the state to the University of Montana, but that was far enough. During the summers, instead of coming home, she worked in Missoula to save money for college. Her parents didn't question the decision too much. It was a lot easier to find work in Missoula than in Lark Field.

She'd only been back to Lark Field a few times since graduation, summoned home for family events like Thanksgiving and Christmas. She'd

gotten together with her high school friends during those vacations, making sure she never went anywhere Kye McBride might be. If he came over to see Carson, she stayed in her room. She even found reasons to skip out on church. Sudden sickness, mostly. God could do without her when Kye was in the building.

Avoiding Kye had made the return trips to Lark Field bearable, fun even. She should have known she couldn't cheat fate for long. Fate enjoys a good drama.

Elsie had known she would have to face Kye at her brother's wedding. He was going to be Carson's best man. Still, she hadn't planned on him seeing her this way—a bedraggled traveler stuck on his property while his cows held her hostage.

Elsie sat in her car, gripping the steering wheel while Kye rode up on a chestnut horse. He was close enough now that she could see wisps of brown hair sticking out from under his cowboy hat. His features were just as she remembered them: strong jawline, slender face, dark blue eyes that could look into your soul and then come up with a math equation to quantify what he saw.

She immediately felt eighteen again.

He prodded his horse to walk around to the driver's side of the car, only casually glancing at the cows that surrounded her. He motioned for her to roll down the window, then leaned forward over the horn of the saddle. His amusement showed in the tilt of his smile. "Having car problems?"

"Cow problems, actually," she replied lightly. "Do you train them to surround strangers this way? If I hand over my wallet will they go away?"

Kye surveyed the cattle. "You honked your horn at them, didn't you?"

It was a pointless question. He must have heard her from wherever he'd been. Still, the tone of his voice made her feel as though she'd done something stupid, something that needed explanation. "Yes. A couple were standing in the road. I honked to get them to move." She looked over her shoulder at the still-gathering crowd of cows on the road behind her.

"Well," he said, drawing out the word, "that's how we let them know it's time to eat. One of the hands drives out here in the truck, drops off the hay, and honks the horn." He gestured toward the cattle. "They're waiting for you to hand out some dinner."

Oh, so this was the cow version of a feeding frenzy, and she was in the middle of it. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "What happens if I

don't feed them?"

Kye didn't answer. He already had his phone out and was asking someone named Frank to come out and bring hay. Finally, Kye slipped his phone into his pocket. "Might as well turn off your car. It'll take a few minutes."

"Isn't there any other way you can get rid of them? I have, um..." She didn't want to admit she was driving across Montana in a car that had trouble starting. He would think it was a stupid thing to do, and she'd already done enough to convince him of her foolishness.

Kye cocked an eyebrow at her, waiting for her to finish.

"My car's battery is temperamental," she said. "I don't want to turn it off."

"Temperamental? By that, do you mean old and nearly dead?"

"No, it's a new battery. It's the connections...or something," she added vaguely. Her knowledge of car parts wasn't extensive. She'd planned on turning the entire thing over to her father and letting him handle it. Her dad loved to tinker with cars.

Kye pulled out his phone again. This time when he spoke into the phone, he said, "Hey, while you're out dropping off feed, can you take a look at Elsie's car? She's having problems with her battery."

Kye paused, listening. Elsie wondered if Frank was questioning why she was driving long distances down lonely roads in an unreliable car.

"Right," Kye said into the phone. A pause. "Thanks." He slid his phone back into his pocket. "Frank will take a look at your car while he's out here."

Elsie tapped her steering wheel. "You really don't need to make him do that..."

Kye tipped his hat in a mock gesture of gallantry. "It's the least I could offer after you've been held up at cowpoint on my property."

"Thanks," she said stiffly. She turned off her car.

She had expected Kye to ride off—preferably into the sunset, but instead, he gestured for her to get out of the car. "It's too cold to wait out here. I'll take you up to the house. You can stay there until your car is ready."

She didn't move, didn't open the door. The last thing she wanted was to prolong this or any conversation with Kye. "That's okay. I don't want to trouble you."

“Hmm,” he said as though giving her words consideration. “I think taking you to the house would be much less trouble than having to explain to your brother why your frozen corpse is on my ranch.”

Elsie sighed. She had no choice. She put on her coat, opened the door, and stepped outside. A cold breeze pushed across her cheeks and fluttered through her hair. A Lark Field winter at its best. She pulled up her coat’s hood and shut the car door. The sound seemed hollow, final.

Kye held his hand down to her and took his foot out of the stirrup so she could get a leg up. “Do you remember how to ride a horse?”

“It’s like a bike, right? You never forget.”

He hauled her up on the horse behind him. “Probably. I imagine there’re a lot of things you never forget, Elsie.”

What was that supposed to mean? She opened her mouth to ask, then decided against it. She was done wasting her time trying to figure out what Kye was thinking.

“Hold onto me,” he told her.

She wrapped her arms loosely around him. It was disconcerting to sit so close to him, to feel the movement of his body along with the horse’s plodding.

She looked at the wide-open spaces around her, the sea of pine trees that spread across the distant hills. The trees were scarcer down here where it was flatter. It looked like a few dozen of them had wandered away from the hills, probably to round up the stray bushes that dotted the landscape. The sky above her spread out vast and open. When she was a little girl, she used to think that if she looked hard enough she could see all the way to heaven.

The hills and trees and sky were all saying, “Come back and stay where you belong.”

Elsie kept gazing at the scenery so she wouldn’t think about Kye sitting so closely to her. He was warm and smelled of leather. The last time they’d been sitting so closely together—nope, there was no point in letting herself think about those two seconds...the feel of his mouth against hers...the taste of mint on his lips. Had he actually kissed her back or had his mouth only moved in horrified alarm?

“So,” Kye said. “I hear you’re majoring in business.”

He’d heard? She hadn’t expected him to know anything about what she’d been doing. She’d hoped he’d forgotten about her as soon as she graduated, although she supposed that had always been a fruitless wish. He

was her brother's friend, and besides, she had given him enough reasons to remember her.

"You heard right," she said.

"I always expected you to pick a major that used a lot of math. You were so good at it."

Yeah, but only because she had wanted to impress him. She shrugged. "I guess I lost my taste for math after high school."

Kye's voice had the same smooth tone he used when teaching and trying to get a point across. "Maybe you should pick it up again and see if tastes better now."

Was he flirting? Teasing? Or just being a math teacher? Well, it didn't matter. She was over him. She didn't care how he...um, how math tasted anymore.

She had gone too long without speaking. He went on, asking her generic sorts of questions about college. Did she like Missoula? How were her classes going? How many credits was she taking?

She answered as succinctly as possible, then asked him questions about the ranch and his family so she could get out of talking about herself. It all felt formal and stiff, like two strangers forced into a conversation. On the bright side, at least their first meeting was out of the way. Pleasantries exchanged. Now they could cordially ignore each other at the wedding and be done with it.

They'd reached the house. It was a sprawling red-brick home with pine trees planted at each corner, framing it in a continual Christmas evergreen sort of way. Elsie dismounted and then waited for Kye. He swung his leg around the horse in one swift, well-practiced motion. His legs were still lean and muscular, perfection in faded blue jeans.

"Go on inside," he told her. "I'll be in as soon as I put my horse in the stables."

"Okay." She headed up the walkway, feeling the awkwardness of every step she took to the door. She had seen Kye's house before. When Carson had been younger, their parents had dropped him off here often enough. Elsie had never been inside, though. Was she supposed to ring the doorbell? Was anybody else home? Probably not. Otherwise, Kye wouldn't have sent her in without any sort of preamble.

She opened the door, said a tentative "hello?" and stepped inside.

No one answered. Elsie relaxed and shut the door behind her.

Kye's house was decorated in shades of testosterone tans and browns. The couch and loveseat in the living room looked comfortable and well worn. A stone fireplace stood against one wall. A large bookcase flanked the other, complete with dog-eared books. Some work boots sat on the tile by the front door. Only the flourish of silk flowers and the gilded family photos placed around the room let Elsie know that Kye's mother had any part in the decorating.

Kye would probably be gone for a while. After all, it took time to unsaddle a horse, brush it down, and do that sort of stuff. He undoubtedly wasn't any more eager than she was to sit around and make small talk. She would most likely be here by herself for half an hour. By that time, Kye would report that Frank was done feeding the cattle, and he would offer to drive her back to her car in his truck.

The worst was over.

Elsie texted her dad to let him know she'd been delayed, then wandered over to the bookcase to look at the titles. Most of them were nonfiction. Books about history. Biographies. Ranching. A few novels were scattered in with the rest. *Lord of the Rings*. Tom Clancy. They might have been Kye's parents' books. It was their house after all, but she knew Kye well enough to know most of the books were his. His parents weren't the type to read biographies about Newton, Tesla, or Einstein. Kye had told the class about those men and used them as examples of the way math changed the world.

She saw the book *Endurance*, the story of Shackleton's expedition to the Antarctic. Without thinking, she ran her fingers along the spine. She had recommended that book to Kye. It surprised her to see it on his shelf. *The Book Thief* sat next to it. She'd told him that the novel was one of her favorites. She dropped her hand away. She shouldn't be surprised, really. Kye had rejected her, not her reading list.

"Good heavens! Who are you?"

Elsie spun around to see Mrs. McBride standing at the edge of the living room, hand pressed against her chest in alarm.

"Oh, sorry," Elsie stuttered. "I didn't know anyone was here. Kye told me to go inside. He's putting his horse in the stable." Her words fell from her mouth in an embarrassed jumble. She gestured toward the stables as though this would help her explanation make more sense.

Mrs. McBride dropped her hand from her chest. She was a middle-aged woman with dark hair like Kye's and a thick waist. "Oh. Sorry to snap at

you like that. You startled me, that's all." She smiled politely at Elsie now. "You're Kye's friend?"

Friend wasn't the word Elsie would've used. Carson was Kye's friend. Elsie was a bad memory. She wondered if Kye had told his parents about what happened between them. He probably had. Mrs. McBride had most likely shaken her head in a sad, understanding way about Elsie's schoolgirl crush. Or worse, Mrs. McBride had become indignant that a trollop of a girl had tried to seduce her son.

Elsie forced a smile. "I'm Elsie Clark." She tried to say her name as though she had nothing to hide. It still came out hesitant and unsure.

"You've come for the wedding?" Mrs. McBride said pleasantly. No flicker of pity or indignation went through her eyes. Maybe Kye hadn't told his parents after all.

"Yes," Elsie said, "I'm just here for a fast trip."

The sound of a walker clunking into the room announced Mr. McBride's arrival. "Who's come for the wedding?" He was a big man with bright blue eyes that peered from a sun-worn face. His hands, gripping the walker, were scarred from years of ranch work.

"This is Elsie," Mrs. McBride said. "She's Kye's friend."

The word *friend* hit Elsie's ears with the same tinny discordance it had the first time. Still, there was nothing to do but smile politely at Mr. McBride.

"Well," he said, "you're a good deal prettier than most of Kye's friends. His taste must be improving." He laughed at his joke, and it was a booming, friendly sound. His gaze swept around the room. "Where is Kye?"

"Out in the stables," Elsie said. "He'll be here soon." She didn't want to say why she was here and wondered how much explanation was required. *You see, your cattle trapped me in a standing stampede...*

"So what do you do?" Mrs. McBride asked, still smiling politely at Elsie.

"I'm a senior at UM. I'm studying business." For the first time, Elsie wondered if Kye's parents recognized her. Certainly, they knew who she was. She'd told them her name. They'd sat in the same church every Sunday for years. They'd dropped Kye off at her house and Carson had been over to theirs countless times. They were asking about her schooling to be gracious.

Mrs. McBride nodded at Elsie. "Are you staying for dinner? It's nothing fancy. Just some soup, potato salad, and ham sandwiches."

Elsie shook her head. "No, I don't want to put you to any trouble."

Elsie hadn't realized Kye had come inside until she heard his voice behind her. "It's no trouble. We eat dinner every night."

Elsie turned to him, her mouth opened to protest.

"I insist," he added in the tone he used to tell the class to settle down and get to work.

What else could she do? Sit there and watch them eat? Stay in the living room and pretend they were all strangers? So she smiled, waited for Kye to put his coat in the closet, and went with him into the kitchen.

Well, this was ironic, Elsie thought as Mrs. McBride put a sandwich on her plate and poured her a bowl of tomato soup. When Elsie had been growing up, she'd glanced at the McBrides sitting in their pew and imagined this moment a dozen times: being invited over to dinner, Kye's parents chatting happily to her as though she mattered. It was proof prayers were answered. Unfortunately, they weren't answered promptly. Elsie had taken this dinner off her wish list years ago.

After a few minutes of conversation, Mrs. McBride glanced between Kye and Elsie. "Tell me again—where did the two of you meet?"

Elsie stiffened, mid bite. So it was every bit as bad as she'd feared. Kye's parents didn't recognize her. They thought she was dating Kye, that she was his equal, and now Elsie would be forced to listen while he set the record straight.

Kye stared blankly at his mother, then seemed to understand her confusion. "This is Elsie Clark. I've known her all my life." He turned to Elsie. "Didn't you tell them who you were?"

"Yes, of course I did." The words came out more defensively than she'd intended. She didn't want Kye to think she'd pretended there was something between them.

Mrs. McBride stared at Elsie in amazement. "Clark? I thought you said Parker. Good heavens." The wrinkles at her eyes deepened as she laughed at her own mistake. "You're little Eloise Clark? It can't be." She shook her head. "When I saw you there in the living room, I assumed you were Kye's date for the wedding."

"An easy mistake," Kye said evenly, "except I told you my date's name was Lisa, and she doesn't get to Lark Field until tomorrow night."

Mrs. McBride ignored her son. “Look at you,” she went on cooing at Elsie. “You’ve grown up into such a pretty young woman.”

“She’s always been pretty,” Kye said, stirring his soup in a matter-of-fact way. “You just never noticed before.”

Well, that made it a family trait they shared, since Kye had never looked twice at her either. Elsie wondered what Lisa looked like and how serious they were.

Elsie stirred her own soup, and her gaze locked on Kye’s for the first time since she’d sat down at the table. “You don’t remember how we met, do you?” She asked the question to prove what she already knew—that despite Kye’s polite attention now, things weren’t any different between the two of them.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Well, since we’ve both lived in Lark Field all our lives, I assume we met when you were a baby and I was five years old. My mother probably stopped yours in the hallway at church to congratulate her on your arrival.”

“That sort of meeting doesn’t count,” Elsie said.

“Then no, I don’t remember.”

Proof positive, and a reminder to Elsie that her crush had always been one-sided. She certainly didn’t need to rekindle it now.

“Well,” Kye prodded her. “How did we meet?”

Elsie took a sip of her soup. It was thick and spicy, warm with cheese and comfort—which were sometimes indistinguishable from one another. “As long as you don’t remember, I can say anything, can’t I? I saved you from a burning building, and it’s quite ungrateful of you to forget about it.”

Kye’s lips quirked in a familiar way. “No, I’m sure I would remember that.”

“Think harder...the smoke, the heat, the flames licking around you.”

He took a casual sip of his water. “I believe what you’re actually describing is Hell. I’ve been there several times but don’t recall ever seeing you there.”

“Oh, I’ve been there many times,” Elsie said. “It’s always a lovely reprieve from the Montana winters.”

Both of Kye’s parents laughed at that. “True enough,” Mr. McBride said.

Kye’s gaze was steady on Elsie. “So where did we actually meet?”

She had to tell him, even though she didn't want to. "When I was eight you came over to tutor Carson. After a while, you went to play basketball, and I wanted to play too. Carson told me to go away, but you said I could be on your team. You put me on your shoulders."

Mrs. McBride let out an appreciative sigh. "That's so sweet." She patted Kye's arm. "It's nice to know you were kind to someone's sister since you were rarely kind to your own."

"I was frequently kind to Celeste," Kye said.

Mrs. McBride kept patting his arm. "Oh, I'm just teasing." She turned to Elsie confidently. "He was *usually* kind to his sister. I always told my boys you could tell how a man would treat his wife by the way he treated his sister."

"Poor Olivia," Elsie said, referring to Carson's fiancé. "Maybe I should warn her about that deer head Carson kept hiding in my bedroom." One Christmas, Elsie's parents had been given a mounted deer head from some relatives. Elsie had thought the thing was horrible and said they shouldn't keep it, which had been an invitation for her brothers to hide it in places she would find it—her bed, her shower, her closet, and the back of their car.

Kye raised a finger of recognition. "I do remember the deer head. I probably should confess that it was my idea to put it in your fridge. Took Carson and me a good half an hour to clear out the space for it."

"Really?" Elsie asked with a smile of her own. "Well, I absolve you for it. My mother was the one who found it that time. I think that's what finally convinced her to get rid of it."

Mrs. McBride shook her head at her son. "A deer head in the fridge? Someone should be warning Lisa about you."

Kye went back to his dinner. "Totally unnecessary. Besides, I don't think you can *really* judge a man by how he treats his sisters."

Mrs. McBride finished off a bite of her sandwich. "Then how should you judge him?"

"By the way he treats his students," Elsie supplied. She shouldn't have said it. It was too close to admitting that the memory of Kye rejecting her still stung.

"In that case," Kye said, "I have nothing to worry about. I've always treated my students well."

Is that the way he saw it? Granted, maybe by law, he'd had to reject her, but he hadn't needed to do it so heartlessly—accusing her of trying to get

him fired and emphasizing it had always been one-sided between them. Hadn't he ever heard of the phrase "I'm flattered, but I just want to be friends"?

Mrs. McBride spooned a second helping of potato salad on her plate. "I'd say you've treated some of your students a fair sight better than they've treated you." She offered the bowl to Elsie. "The shenanigans those kids come up with."

Elsie felt her cheeks warm. Shenanigans like throwing yourself at your teacher? Was Mrs. McBride about to make the connection? Well, it served Elsie right. She should've kept her mouth shut. She should've said nothing during the meal except, "My, this food is good. Thank you."

Mrs. McBride offered Elsie seconds of the potato salad, but Elsie declined. She wasn't hungry, and the sooner dinner ended, the better.

"Skipping school," Mrs. McBride went on, "cheating, trying to forge parent's notes—it's amazing the school can get anybody to teach these days."

Mr. McBride leaned forward to take the potato salad from his wife. "Kye won't have to put up with it much longer. Every year I get more useless. Soon Kye will have to run the entire ranch." He put a couple of dollops of the salad on his plate. "I suppose dealing with all those kids is good practice for herding ornery cattle."

"Not all the kids are bad," Kye said, probably for her benefit. "Some are great. And some..." his gaze was back on her, "some stay with you."

Why did he say things like that? Was he teasing her? Pitying her? Or was she reading things into his words that weren't there? Maybe he was talking about all of the students who hadn't kissed him.

The conversation moved on. Eventually, Kye's phone rang, and he told Elsie that Frank had cleaned the corrosion off the posts and her battery should work fine now.

After they finished eating, Elsie thanked the McBrides for dinner and followed Kye to the garage. Kye led her to a new dark-blue pickup truck, not the old white Ford he'd driven to school his first year as a teacher. He opened the door for her and helped her step up into the cab.

Well, that was another moment to cross off her prayer list—three years too late.

She sat down, pulled on her seatbelt, and couldn't think of anything to say. She wanted to ask who Lisa was and if he remembered how *they'd* met,

but asking either question would make her sound like she hadn't moved beyond him. And she had. Or at least she was going to. So Elsie sat in the cab, her arms wrapped around her middle to keep warm.

Kye drove out of the garage and the two silently made their way toward Windstream Road. She'd forgotten how bright the stars were out here away from the city lights. They hung in the sky above, sparkling like frozen chips of ice.

Kye asked a few questions to fill the silence, mostly things about the wedding. "It's funny that Carson is marrying a girl from Lark Field," Kye shot her a glance. "I guess not everyone wants to get as far away from here as possible."

That, she supposed, was a reference to what she'd said to him at graduation. "People change," she said.

"Yes, thankfully they do." Another glance. "You've grown up quite a bit."

What did he mean by that? Did he see her as a peer now since they were both in their twenties or did he just think she was more mature because she was no longer throwing herself at him? Elsie inwardly groaned. This was the problem with being around Kye. She would forever analyze everything he said. He probably meant the statement in the same way his parents had meant it when they'd said nearly the same thing. Kye hadn't seen her in three years. She looked older, that was all.

Time to say something else so there wasn't an awkward, long pause. "I was surprised Carson and Olivia hit it off," Elsie said. Carson and Olivia had gone to school together but had been closer to enemies than friends. He'd been a jock, she'd been the bookish type, and there'd been some bad blood between.

"Well, like you said, people change." Another glance.

She wished Kye would stop doing that, looking at her like that. It was hard not to overanalyze what he said when he kept giving her that blue-eyed gaze.

How did Kye see her now? She asked another question so she wouldn't have to think about it. "You must have wanted to leave Lark Field at one time. Weren't you going to become an electrical engineer? Not many jobs for those in Lark Field."

He shrugged as though it wasn't a big deal. "I've always been good at math, so it seemed like I should take a job that used it. But I wouldn't have

lasted long in a cubicle, and I would've hated living in some crowded city. I like space too much." He took his gaze off the road for long enough to send her a questioning look. "Don't you miss Lark Field at all?"

"Sometimes."

"Really? If you missed it at all, I'd imagine you would've come back more."

"School has kept me busy." She didn't have to say more because they'd reached her car.

He put his truck into park. "I'll wait around to make sure your car starts."

"I'm sure it will. Tell Frank thanks for me." She opened the door and slid outside. She probably should've said more, thanked him again for dinner, something. Instead, she hurried to her car.

It started right up. Good. Apparently, Fate was done making her suffer. Elsie gave Kye a wave to let him know everything was fine and drove down the road toward home.

Tomorrow Kye would be with Lisa—whoever she was. Elsie wouldn't have to worry about being thrown together with him again. And that was for the best.

The next day was a blur of wedding activities. Olivia's family had never been wealthy. Her mother worked as a receptionist for a dentist and her father had never been around much. Carson said Mr. Travers worked construction in Bozeman when he worked at all. No one was sure whether he would come to the wedding or if he'd be sober.

Since Olivia's parents didn't have much, Carson was paying for the bulk of the wedding. After playing for the NFL for years, he could afford it. Mrs. Clark hadn't relented all of the decorating tasks to the professionals, though, and found things for the family to do.

Still, Elsie found time before the rehearsal dinner to drive to town and get her hair trimmed and highlighted. It was more than she usually paid for her hair, but she wanted to look good for the wedding photos. The new red sweater she wore—the one that clung to her just right—had been on sale, and she'd never been one to pass up a bargain. Ditto for the jeans, which were the perfect combination of soft and formfitting. Her boots were a sophisticated touch that also worked well in cold weather.

When Elsie's parents called to her that it was time to leave for the rehearsal, she cast a satisfied glance at herself in the mirror. Last night when Kye had plucked Elsie off the road, she may have looked like a bedraggled college student. Tonight, though...tonight she looked like a confident, beautiful woman.

When they got to the church, most of the wedding party was already there. The pastor was in the chapel talking to Olivia's mother. Olivia stood beside them, her long dark hair pulled back in an I've-been-running-around-

all-day ponytail. Still, she had a glow of excitement about her. Elsie walked over and gave her a hug. “Nervous?”

“I’m too busy to be nervous,” Olivia said.

“I guess that’s the point. Keep the bride and groom so busy that they don’t have second thoughts and bolt.”

Olivia let out a laugh. “If that’s the point, then you’d better keep Carson extra busy. If he bolts now, I’ll kill him.”

“And I would help you. After all, we have enough food for the funeral.” Elsie looked around the chapel at the rows of empty pews. “Speaking of which, where is my brother?”

“He and Kye are picking up the tuxes.” Olivia glanced at her watch. “He should be here by now.”

The church had a large meeting room behind the chapel, which would be used for refreshments and dancing tomorrow after the wedding. People had been at work decorating it all day with silk trees, a trellis, candles, twinkle lights, and yards of chiffon. The flowers were coming later.

The pastor, a balding man with glasses that rested low on his nose, turned to Olivia. “Are we ready to start? Where is the groom?”

“I’m here,” Carson called from the back of the chapel.

Elsie turned at the sound of his voice. Kye was striding up the aisle next to him: tall and tan and looking better in a pair of Levis than a man ought to. His eyes met Elsie’s, and his gaze ran over her, from the heels of her sophisticated boots to the tips of her newly highlighted hair.

She felt transparent, as though he could tell she’d dressed up for him. She turned away with an inward sigh. She couldn’t win. Yesterday she’d felt dowdy and pathetic. Now she felt dressed up and pathetic.

The pastor went over the instructions, letting them all know their part in the ceremony. The best man and maid of honor would walk in first. In this case, Kye and Elsie. She shouldn’t have been the maid of honor, really. She’d only been given the position because Olivia didn’t have any sisters and didn’t want to choose one of her friends above the others.

After Kye and Elsie walked down the aisle, the rest of the wedding party would follow. Last of all, the father of the bride was supposed to walk his daughter down the aisle. The pastor paused and turned to Olivia. “Will your father be giving you away?”

Olivia glanced at the door as though still waiting for his appearance. “I don’t think so. I think my uncle will do it.” Her face fell a little as she

spoke, as though she didn't like admitting this. Her mother reached over and squeezed her hand.

"Your uncle then," the pastor said and went on describing the rest of the ceremony.

When he was done, everyone lined up behind the chapel doors to do the run-through.

The organ started up, and Kye held out his arm to Elsie. "Shall we?"

Without comment, she took his arm, looked straight ahead, and stepped down the aisle to the slow rhythm of the music. She supposed this meant she could mark off another thing on her prayer list—walking down the aisle with Kye. So close and yet so far away.

Concentrate, she told herself. *Don't think about how near he is. Don't notice how strong his arm is or how good he smells.* He did smell good. Sort of woodsy and spicy, like worn leather. Like something you could run your fingers through.

She really was pathetic. He'd already made it perfectly clear he wasn't interested in her. "There is no us," he'd said. She needed to repeat it like a mantra so she'd remember it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kye glance at her. She was not going to smile at him or do anything he could interpret as flirting.

Carson, standing at the front of the chapel, shook his head. "Stop looking so stern, Els. You're walking to the altar, not being sacrificed on it."

She sent her brother a forced, glaring smile. He wasn't making this any easier.

Carson rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that will look great on the wedding video. Hey Kye, your assignment is to make sure Elsie loosens up by tomorrow. Use some of your cowboy charm on her."

Did her brother really just say that? Did he tell the guy he knew she'd had a childhood crush on to use his charm and loosen her up?

She felt Kye stiffen, felt his arm muscles shift underneath her fingertips. A glance at his face let her know he wasn't amused by the suggestion. Again, she wondered how much Carson knew about the night at the Mathematics Decathlon. Who had Kye told about her kiss?

She and Kye reached the altar and parted to walk to their separate sides of the room.

She watched the others come in. Everyone else was smiling and happy. Her brother Jace waltzed the entire way with his bridesmaid. Lucas put on a

pair of sunglasses and acted like a celebrity on the red carpet. “No pictures,” he called out. “The paparazzi aren’t allowed inside.”

When you came right down to it, brothers were overrated. Elsie decided right then not to invite hers to her wedding. Especially not Carson.

After the rehearsal ended, Elsie’s parents announced that everyone was invited to a restaurant in town for dinner, their treat. Everyone accepted except for Kye. He said he had some things he needed to do. Right. He was probably worried Elsie was going to corner him and demand to see some cowboy charm.

Or maybe he was going to meet Lisa. That was probably it. His absence most likely had nothing to do with Carson’s instructions. The thought should’ve made Elsie feel better but didn’t. Elsie couldn’t help wondering what Lisa had that she didn’t. What did a girl have to do to attract Kye McBride?



ELSIE HAD MEANT to get a good night’s sleep. In theory, everything was supposed to be ready, so the only thing the family had to do the day of the wedding was pick up the food from the caterer and make sure the florist was setting up.

But Elsie’s mother thought that the centerpieces the decorator had provided—simple candle arrangements among flowers—needed sprucing up, and so after the rehearsal dinner, Elsie volunteered to do the sprucing. This involved a stop at the craft shop for glow lights, silver star ornaments, garlands, and baby’s breath flowers.

Pinterest made the whole thing look easy, but Elsie didn’t finish with them until midnight. Staying up so late shouldn’t have been a problem. Her brothers and father were going over to the church early to bring over the new centerpieces and make sure everything else was set up, but they didn’t need her for that. In fact, her father had specifically told Elsie she could sleep in if she took on the all-important centerpiece project.

So when her mother began calling her name from downstairs at seven-thirty in the morning, Elsie pulled herself out of bed with irritation. Had her brothers run into some problem with the setup and they’d come back for her? Elsie glanced out her window. Carson’s truck was gone, as was the

family's van. Some other problem then. Perhaps a chocolate fountain emergency. She tromped downstairs to see what her mother wanted.

Elsie had forgotten to pack her pajamas for her trip home so she wore one of Carson's oversized Bronco's T-shirts. She should've known she was tempting fate by not changing into something else first, but her mother sounded insistent and no one else was home but the two of them.

Or at least no one else should've been in the house. When she rounded the corner into the kitchen, Kye was standing there talking to her mother.

Elsie gasped and had flashbacks of the bikini day.

Her mother's mouth dropped open. "Elsie!" She made swooshing motions with her hands. "Put some clothes on!"

Elsie had already retreated into the hallway, but not before catching sight of Kye's amused expression. Why had her mother done this to her—again?

"Why didn't you tell me Kye was here?" Elsie demanded.

"I did," her mother said.

Great. Wonderful. Elsie must have still been asleep for that part and now Kye would think...well, she wasn't sure what he'd think, but from now on she was going to wear sweats and a parka at all times while in her house. She didn't reply because she was taking the steps two at a time to go back to her room.

Once there, she dressed in jeans and a sweater. She also brushed her teeth, combed her hair, and wiped off traces of yesterday's mascara that ringed her eyes, making her look like she had emo-girl tendencies. And she might have put on some new mascara and lip gloss. Damage control, and all of that.

When she entered the kitchen for the second time, she looked presentable. And she tried not to be flustered. The t-shirt, after all, still covered more than her bikini had, and she wore that to the pool. She shouldn't have been flustered about any of it.

"What's the problem?" she asked her mother calmly.

"Kye needs you to go to Bozeman with him," her mother said.

"To pick up Olivia's father," he added.

Perhaps her mind was still muddled from lack of sleep. "Her father needs a ride?" Bozeman was two hours away.

"He needs some persuasion," Kye said dryly. "I don't really plan on giving him a choice."

So Mr. Travers wasn't planning on coming to the wedding. Elsie rubbed her forehead. "How am I supposed to persuade him?" She'd never talked to Mr. Travers before, only heard hushed disapproving stories about him. "*Isn't it so sad*" sort of things.

"I called him last night," Kye said, "and offered to pick him up. He refused. If I show up on my own, the guy will still refuse. If one of Olivia's friends shows up to ask him to come, he's more likely to listen." Kye shrugged. "And if he doesn't listen, well, you can still act as a distraction while I grab him and throw him into the truck."

Elsie's mother bustled around the kitchen, putting food into a paper bag on the counter. "I packed some things for your trip since you didn't have time to eat breakfast."

It was already decided. They weren't giving her a choice. "Why doesn't Mr. Travers want to come?" He might have a legitimate excuse, after all, like a hospital stay.

A scowl flickered across Kye's lips. "He said he didn't have a suit coat and nobody really wanted him there anyway. He was drunk when he said it though, so he wouldn't listen to reason."

Elsie's mother handed her the bag, all cheerful determination. "Olivia will love the two of you for this. But you need to go now so you're back in plenty of time to get ready for the wedding." The ceremony started at four o'clock. They could be to Bozeman and back by twelve if Mr. Travers agreed to come with them without a lot of deliberation.

Still, Elsie hesitated. She hadn't emotionally prepared for this. "Does Olivia know we're getting her father?"

Kye shook his head. "I didn't tell her in case he still refuses to come. But she wants him to come. I've talked to her about that."

Olivia wanted him to come and it was her wedding day. That outweighed the hours Elsie would be forced to spend with Kye. "Okay." She grabbed her phone, purse, and coat, then the two of them went outside and climbed into Kye's truck.

They drove away from her house silently, remnants of street ice crunching under Kye's tires. Elsie peeked into the bag of food her mother had packed. Two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, two apples, two bags of crackers, and two water bottles. Clearly, Elsie was supposed to share this with Kye, although she imagined he'd already had breakfast. He was

showered and shaved. He was also smiling. That same amused smile she'd seen in the kitchen.

He glanced at her and laughed.

"What?" she asked.

"You have an interesting wardrobe. I should drop by your house unexpectedly more often."

She refused to blush. "You've done that enough already."

"It wouldn't have been unexpected this time if you'd answered your phone."

"I was sleeping," she said.

"Last night at nine?"

She pulled out her phone to check for missed calls. "You didn't call me at nine."

"That's when I texted you. I called at nine-thirty."

Her screen showed nothing. Not even a missed call. "You must have the wrong number."

"It's the one Carson gave me." He repeated the number. It was hers. She was about to comment on the oddity of his call and text not going through—and then she remembered. She'd blocked his number the summer after she graduated. She'd spent the first month hoping he would contact her, and when he hadn't, she'd blocked him so she wouldn't think about it anymore. And she hadn't until now.

"Is it the right number?" he asked.

"Yeah. Oh, um..." She cleared her throat. "I see the missed call now..." She surreptitiously went to her settings to unblock his number. "I was busy last night weaving glow lights around garlands and wasn't near my phone."

He shot her a look as though he knew she was lying. "Well, you're here now. That's the important thing."

She watched the road go by for a few moments. She was keenly aware of Kye sitting next to her. He and his blue eyes and stupidly attractive jawline. They'd have almost two hours to Bozeman. Two long hours to do nothing but talk. She wanted to ask what Lisa thought of the two of them going off on this excursion together, but on second thought, Elsie didn't want to talk about Lisa. Elsie didn't want to hear about how wonderful his girlfriend was or how long they'd been together.

"Why didn't you get one of Olivia's friends to come with you? Her father knows them better than me." Elsie hoped, ridiculously, that he would

say he wanted to spend time with her. Foolish, really. Was she still looking for validation from him?

“Olivia’s friends are helping her with wedding things. If any of them came with me, she’d notice their absence and ask where they were going. I’m hoping to be able to give her a happy surprise at the ceremony.”

“Oh.” He’d chosen her because she was more invisible. Funny how things never changed.

“Besides,” he said, “it’s been a long time since you’ve given me any book recommendations. You were always the one to tell me what I should read next. You must have a long list after three years.”

Books. A safe topic. She’d read so many that if she included reasons why she’d liked each, she could possibly stretch the topic out all the way to the Bozeman city limits. She told him about the latest ones she’d read and also some nonfiction books she knew he’d like. Ones about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and the Wright brothers. When she’d read those books, she’d thought of Kye and felt a twinge of sadness that she’d never be able to talk to him about them. And now she was.

He’d already read the one about the Wright brothers—proof that she’d been right about him liking it and also proof that they had the same tastes in books; in a lot of things, really. They spent half an hour alone just talking about the trials the Wright Brothers had to overcome. At Kitty Hawk, the brothers were faced with swarms of mosquitos so thick, they nearly blocked out the sun.

That alone would’ve probably put an end to Elsie’s attempts to fly.

But maybe that had been one of her problems, not expecting things to be hard. A lot of goals were filled with sun-blocking mosquito swarms.

Kye talked about books he’d read and told her whether she would like them or not. Which meant he thought he knew her well enough to know which ones she’d like. She wasn’t sure whether that was touching or presumptuous. But it was probably accurate.

When they reached Bozeman, they were discussing fiction. “You’d like the Erasing Time series,” he said. “It’s got action, but not a lot of bloodshed or swearing. And it’s got romance. You were always a big fan of that.”

Did that sentence have more than one meaning? That was the problem with talking to Kye. Everything seemed like it could be hinting at something else. “I’m more realistic about my views on romance now,” she said.

“Good. Then a guy doesn’t have to be a billionaire, demi-god, or a mafia don to catch your interest?”

“That depends. Are we talking about in books or in real life?”

He laughed and shook his head. “College must have changed. There were very few demi-gods when I went.”

“Well, as you’ve pointed out in the past, you’re a lot older than me. Ancient, in fact.”

“I did point that out,” he said, unrepentant.

And there it was. The subject that was never far from the surface when they were together. And she’d been the one to bring it up this time. Well, maybe that was for the best. There was something she wanted to know. She turned to better see him. “Who did you tell about the... about what happened in the nurse’s office at the Mathematics Decathlon?” It was best to know whom to be mortified around.

“No one,” he said.

“No one?”

He raised his eyebrows. “You thought I would tell anyone that I kissed a student?”

“You didn’t kiss me. I kissed you, and you were horrified and scandalized and pushed me away.”

He let out a breath. “Okay. If that’s how you remember it. Sure. That’s what happened.”

“That *is* what happened.”

“Right.” His grip shifted on the wheel. “And that’s exactly how the school board would’ve seen it. They would’ve, of course, believed it was all one-sided, and I never encouraged you.” He shook his head. “That was my first year of teaching. I doubt they would’ve renewed my contract if I’d told anyone what happened.”

Guilt pinged through her. She’d been an idiot back then on so many levels to kiss him. Of course, he hadn’t told anyone—and thank goodness for that. She looked out the window at the homes they were passing. They were small, rundown things, with peeling paint behind chain-link fences. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to get you into trouble.”

“I know. And I learned an important lesson from it. After that, I made sure to keep more distance both emotionally and physically from my students.”

So basically he'd become a less friendly teacher because of her. Well, that was one more thing to feel guilty about.

He went on, "I guess I'd never done that with you because you were my friend's little sister. We already had a preexisting relationship."

Why had she ever brought up this subject? For that matter, why had she agreed to come on this trip? She didn't want to hear this. Everything about the memory made her feel horrible and now she was trapped in the car with Kye.

"Does Mr. Travers live in this neighborhood?" she asked to change the subject. The homes had become shabbier as they drove, and now the ones they passed seemed to be squatting in listless despair.

Kye nodded toward a faded blue trailer home down the street. "If my GPS is right, it's that one."

Good. They were almost there. A beat-up truck stood in the driveway, so he was probably at home. "What exactly am I supposed to say to him to convince him to come to the wedding?"

"That he needs to be there for Olivia's sake, and your family doesn't hate him."

This was news. She was not only a stranger to Mr. Travers, she was part of the family who hated him. Someone might have mentioned that to her before she agreed to come. "Why does he think my family hates him?"

"Carson said some things to him."

Oh. She should've guessed as much. Carson wasn't known for his tact. "What did he say?"

"When he and Olivia got engaged, Mr. Travers basically said that since they were going to become a family, Carson should pay some of his debts."

Elsie winced. "Yeah, I bet that didn't go over well." Carson was generous enough. He'd helped all of his siblings pay off their student loans, but he was a firm believer in only helping the deserving.

"In Mr. Travers' defense, he probably knew that Carson had already paid off Olivia's mother's house, and was hoping for equal treatment. Instead, Carson told him that since he'd never taken care of his family, he could at the very least take care of himself."

Ouch. Yep. That was her brother.

"Let's just say that the conversation devolved from there."

As it would. Elsie only hoped Olivia hadn't been there, in the middle of the argument, trying to reign Carson in. Her brother was made mostly of

testosterone and opinions.

Kye pulled up to the house and turned off his truck. The lawn was a narrow patch of land with dead grass and an offering of discarded beer cans on the front steps. Elsie and Kye climbed out of his truck and ambled up the steps to the door.

Kye knocked. No sound of movement came from behind the door, no tread of footsteps. He knocked again, this time louder.

Elsie glanced at Mr. Travers' dented and rusted truck. He might have two vehicles and was out somewhere. "What if he's not home?"

"Then we'll go look for him." Kye took out his phone and brought up the maps of the area. "Let's see what sort of places are around here..."

Elsie glanced at the beer bottles on the doorstep. They stared up at her in a disorderly heap. "He might just be hung over. You said he was drunk last night when you talked to him."

She knocked, giving the door three insistent raps. Still no answer. If Mr. Travers didn't agree to come with them, she'd be stuck alone with Kye for the two-hour drive back home. She'd already run out of small talk. This called for desperate measures.

She tried the doorknob. It was unlocked.

Kye put his hand on her arm to stop her. "It's illegal to walk into a stranger's house."

She pushed the door open a crack. "We've already established that I'm a rule breaker."

He didn't let go of her arm. "Yeah, that's why I'm not letting you walk into his house. He could think it's a burglary and shoot you."

Only if he was sober enough to shoot straight. "You were literally threatening to kidnap him earlier."

"And I'll make sure he's unarmed when I do that."

Kye had a point, but she nudged the door open more with her foot. A messy front room greeted them. Beyond that, she could see a dirty kitchen. Dishes looked as if they were colonizing the countertops. No sign of life down the hallway. She pointed to the coffee table where a set of keys and a wallet lay next to cigarette boxes. "He's either a sound sleeper or he went out for a walk. He wouldn't have left his keys and wallet here otherwise."

"We can wait for a few minutes and see if he shows up." Kye shut the door. "We shouldn't be peering into his home in the meantime." He scrolled through his maps. "Not a lot around here he would walk to..."

Elsie stared down the street at the row of silent homes and the barren trees, pitchforked into the sky. "We should get our strategy straight. If Mr. Travers doesn't agree to come with us after ten minutes, we'll do the good cop-bad cop routine. I'll be the bad cop."

Kye took his attention from his phone long enough to give her an incredulous look. "You think you can intimidate him?"

“I’ll be demanding and hysterical. Men hate that. You’ll be the voice of reason.” She waved her hand at him. “It’s believable because you’re a math teacher.”

He tilted his chin down. “Am I supposed to open with that? ‘Hi, I’m a math teacher friend of your future son-in-law.’”

“You won’t have to tell him. He’ll know your profession from that pen you have tucked into your plaid shirt.”

Kye looked down at his shirt. “Lots of people wear plaid shirts—ranchers, for example. And what’s wrong with carrying a pen? They come in handy.”

“You have to be the good cop because you’re the law-abiding one. I’m the one that does this sort of thing.” She opened the front door again, took a step inside, and called, “Mr. Travers? Are you home? We’ve come all the way from Lark Field to talk to you.”

Kye pulled her back onto the steps “You can’t do that.”

“Said like a true good cop.”

A sound came from the back of the house. A thump like someone falling out of bed. Trudging footsteps followed. A bleary-eyed, unshaven Mr. Travers peeked out of the hallway at them. “Who are you?” he demanded, not at all happy to see visitors.

Elsie smiled at him brightly, like this was all a normal social call. “Hi, I’m Elsie Clark, one of Olivia’s friends. We’re here to take you to the wedding.”

Mr. Travers slouched into the hallway, rubbing his face. He wore a sweatshirt and a pair of flannel pajama bottoms. “I already told them I couldn’t go.”

“I’ve got a suit you can borrow,” Kye said.

Mr. Travers squinted at Kye, taking in his height. “I’d look like a kid playing dress-up in your clothes.”

“We can find something for you. I know a few guys who are close to your size.”

Mr. Travers smacked his lips like he had a bad taste in his mouth. He probably did, after all the drinking last night. “That’s nice of you to offer, but I don’t go where I’m not wanted.”

“You’re wanted,” Elsie said. “Olivia wants you there. You should be there for your daughter’s wedding.”

Mr. Travers wandered into the kitchen, shaking his head. “It’ll just cause problems if I show up. There’ll be a whole chapel full of people judging me, all thinking that I didn’t do enough for my family.”

Okay, granted, maybe, but he’d picked a fine time to start caring what people thought of him.

Mr. Travers pulled open the fridge door and took out a beer.

Despite Kye’s instructions to Elsie about not going into the house uninvited, he strode inside, made a bee-line to Mr. Travers, and plucked the beer can away from him before he could drink more than a sip. “You need some food in your system. Why don’t we go to a drive-through, and I’ll buy you some breakfast?”

Mr. Travers looked like he wanted to yank the beer can back, but after another assessment of Kye’s height, he slumped down at the kitchen table instead. He rubbed his forehead. “I was just going to drink a little to take the edge off of this hangover.”

The last thing they needed was for him to start drinking again. Elsie came into the kitchen and sat across from Mr. Travers, giving him her most understanding smile. “I know Carson said some regrettable things to you. I’m his sister, and believe me, he’s said plenty of regrettable things to me. He’s also said regrettable things to my other brothers. And my parents. Some pushy fans from other teams. A few unhelpful customer service agents. That one reporter...”

Kye folded his arms. “I’m not sure this is helping.”

Elsie ignored him. “Sometimes Carson speaks without thinking first. But he’s really a good guy at heart, and he loves Olivia. They want you at the wedding.” Elsie went on for several more minutes, reciting how much Olivia loved her father and how sad she’d be if he didn’t come.

Mr. Travers rubbed his eyes. “They don’t really want me there. Look, I know I haven’t always been there for my girl, but I meant to be. I always thought I’d be able to put it right someday.” He gestured to a used lotto ticket mingling with the trash on the kitchen table. “I’ve bought one of those every week since I was eighteen. I used to dream about buying me a Lamborghini, but after I had my kids, it was always about them. I dreamed about what I could give them. Never paid out, though. Story of my life.”

Lottery tickets? That’s how he hoped to help his kids? Well, this just went to show why the world needed math teachers—to explain the minuscule probability of winning a jackpot.

“You can still give Olivia something,” Elsie said, “Be a part of her wedding. That’s what she wants now.”

“The past is in the past,” Kye agreed, “and you can’t do anything to change it. Trust me, I’ve tried.” His gaze shot to Elsie.

She gulped despite herself. He wanted to change the past? What part of it?

Kye returned his attention to Mr. Travers. “All you can do is decide what sort of future you want. For example, right now you need to decide whether you’ll willingly come with us like a sensible person, or whether I have to hog-tie you and throw you into the back of my truck.” He smiled stiffly. “Don’t let this plaid shirt and pen in my pocket fool you. I’m a rancher. I know how to do it.”

Elsie coughed in surprise at the threat. Mr. Travers, on the other hand, laughed and shook his head. “You two aren’t gonna take no for an answer?”

“Nope,” Kye said.

“Well, I guess I’d better get showered and dressed then.” He stood up and shuffled down the hallway, “Don’t want to be hog-tied in my pajamas.”

When he’d disappeared into a room, Elsie turned to Kye. “You clearly don’t understand the part of good cop. Also, he’s probably going to escape out the bathroom window, and we’ll never see him again.”

Kye pointed to the coffee table. “If he does, he won’t get far without his car keys.”

Maybe. But that still didn’t mean they’d be able to find him. Elsie stepped outside the house just in case. She planted herself not far from the bathroom window and wrapped her arms around her for warmth. There were a lot of ways she’d imagined spending this morning. None of them had involved throwing herself on the fleeing father-of-the-bride.

Olivia had better appreciate this.

Mr. Travers didn’t go out the bathroom window, and when Elsie heard the shower stop, she tramped back inside. Several minutes later, he presented himself, clean, shaved, and wearing some khaki pants and a polo shirt. “This is as fancy as I’ve got,” he said.

He looked nice, like a normal person. Like the person he should’ve been all along.

Kye led the way to the door. “I’m sure we can rustle up a suit coat that will fit.”

The three went outside, climbed into Kye's truck, and began the trip back to Lark Field. Elsie expected Mr. Travers to be sullen about being forced to go with them, but just the opposite happened. He seemed to have decided that Kye was a kindred spirit—which made one wonder how often Mr. Travers had threatened to hog-tie someone—and happily shot the breeze with him the entire ride. That was probably for the best. Elsie didn't need more one-on-one time with Kye.

She was relieved when they finally pulled up to her house. She hadn't expected Kye to see her to the door, but he told Mr. Travers he'd be a minute and got out with her.

"Thanks for your help," he said as they walked. "The next time I need someone to be the bad cop, you'll be first on my list."

"Thanks—if that was a compliment and not an insult."

He gave her one of his wide grins. "Of course it was a compliment. I would only ever compliment you."

Mmm hmm. That's exactly how she felt.

"Don't tell Olivia about her dad yet," Kye said. "There's still time for him to bolt. In fact, don't tell Carson either. Because if Mr. Travers does bolt, and Carson knows about it, he might hurt him. That's not how we want their wedding day to go." Kye cast a glance back at his truck. "I'll find a suit coat for Mr. Travers, then drop him off with Olivia's aunt and uncle. Once he's with the other guests and sees that they're glad he's come, I'm sure he'll be fine."

Olivia would be so happy to see him. "Thanks for doing this. It will mean a lot to her."

He nodded, and for a moment looked like he wanted to say something more to her.

She waited for those words, wishing for...she wasn't sure what.

"I'll see you later," he said and headed back to his truck.

Nope. Those weren't the words she'd wished for.

She watched him for a few moments, letting her eyes linger on his confident stride. He really was nice. Her eighteen-year-old self had been stupidly foolish, but she'd had good taste in men.

Best not to think of those things. As soon as Kye was done finding a suit coat, he would be spending time with Lisa. The last thing Elsie needed was to start having ideas about Kye again. A woman should only have to endure so much rejection from a man, and she'd already reached that limit.

Elsie went to the church to help with last-minute setup, then got dressed in a long, green taffeta dress, which vaguely reminded her of something a Barbie doll would wear. Pretty, but too poufy to be practical.

She took extra time doing her hair and makeup, but that was only because of the wedding photos, not because she was hoping she looked better than Kye's date. When she finished, her hair gleamed in gentle brown waves around her shoulders and her eyes looked large and luminous.

Kye had been noticeably absent during the setup. Mr. Travers and Olivia's aunt and uncle didn't come either. Elsie hadn't told the rest of her family about her trip to Bozeman. Only her parents knew, and they agreed with Kye that it was best not to say anything until Mr. Travers was actually in the building.

The guests began to arrive, including Olivia's aunt and uncle. Mr. Travers didn't come with them. Elsie had to stop herself from gritting her teeth. Where had the man gone off to? Was he out drinking somewhere? How many days of Olivia's life did he need to mess up? Unkind thoughts, she knew, but they perched in her mind, refusing to leave.

Kye hadn't come yet either. She called him. No answer.

Twenty minutes before the wedding, Kye still hadn't shown and Carson was cursing as he tried to get a hold of him.

Her brother Lucas, who at this point in the preparations was wearing his tuxedo's bow tie in his hair, said, "Maybe Kye got cold feet."

“As the best man?” Carson shoved his phone back in his pocket. “I don’t think so.”

Lucas slipped his tie around his neck and tightened it. “Some dudes just aren’t into commitment.”

“He’s got the ring,” Carson said.

It wasn’t like Kye to be late for his friend’s wedding. It wasn’t like Kye to be late for anything, actually. What if something bad had happened to him? What if he’d been in a car accident? Or what if he’d had to take care of something on his ranch and been trampled by a bull? The place was so huge—anything could’ve happened, and it would take weeks of searching to find him.

Carson’s phone beeped. He pulled it out of his pocket and read the text out loud. “Sorry, I’m running late. Don’t worry. I’m five minutes away from the church.”

Lucas shook his head and laughed. “He’s cutting it close. Lisa must be really hot.”

Elsie stopped listening after that. She went to the bride’s changing room to see if Olivia needed anything. Elsie found Olivia’s mother there, happily fussing over her daughter. Olivia looked porcelain-doll pretty, standing in a dress of satin, lace, and ruffles cascading over the skirt. Her hair was pinned up in ringlets; her face excited and expectant. “Is everyone ready?” she asked Elsie.

“Just about.” No need to worry her about the missing ring, best man, and father.

Olivia’s mother kept spritzing her daughter with hairspray. “You’re so beautiful,” she murmured. “I can’t believe you’re getting married.”

“Do you need anything?” Elsie asked Olivia.

“A time machine so I can go back and get more comfortable high heels.”

“Can’t help you there,” Elsie said.

“If Carson wasn’t so tall, I wouldn’t have to wear these stilts.” Olivia moved her skirt to show Elsie her heels. “But he’s eight inches taller, and I worried I’d look like a munchkin standing next to him. Now I’m just worried I’m going to fall on my face going down the aisle.”

Her mother was still wielding the hairspray can like a graffiti artist surveying their work. “You’ll be fine.”

Elsie nodded. "And if you're not, I'm sure the wedding video can be edited."

A knock sounded on the door, then the pastor's voice said, "The last member of the wedding party is here."

Meaning Kye or Mr. Travers?

"Good," Olivia's mother called. "We're about ready to go."

"He wants to speak to you," the pastor said.

Almost immediately Mr. Travers' voice came from the other side of the door. "Can I come in?"

Olivia blinked in surprise and moved toward the door, completely missing a cloud of hairspray sent in her direction. She flung open the door and gasped. Mr. Travers stood there, smiling sheepishly in a crisp black suit coat and matching pants. Olivia threw her arms around him. "You made it!"

"Wouldn't miss it." He hugged his daughter, then stood back and looked her over in wonder. "Can't believe my baby's getting married."

The pastor peered around the group. "If you're ready, we'll have everyone line up now."

Olivia and her father headed out, her mother close behind, still adjusting and primping over ribbons on Olivia's dress. Elsie followed in the wake of lace and ruffles and made her way to the chapel doors.

Kye was there already, looking heart-stoppingly handsome in a black tuxedo and emerald green cummerbund. He was clean-shaven and his normally mussed hair was sleek and perfectly in place. Tall, self-assured, and cologne-ad smooth.

Really, the man should've been in advertising. Whatever he was selling, women would happily buy it.

There is no us, Elsie reminded herself. He had a girlfriend.

Elsie took a breath, smiled calmly, and glided over to Kye. His gaze ran over her approvingly and he held out his arm to her. "I believe I was supposed to use some charm on you to loosen you up. Was it my cowboy charm or my math teacher charm? I can't remember which."

"Cowboy charm. Math teachers don't actually have any charm." She had meant in general. After all, very few romance novels sported pictures of math teachers on their covers.

Kye raised his eyebrow at her in disbelief. His look seemed to say, *Oh really? You found me charming enough to kiss.*

She looked away from him, concentrating on the door and waiting for their cue. It came a moment later: the sound of the organ playing. An usher swept open the chapel doors, and Kye and Elsie moved forward, taking slow, measured steps toward the altar. It was easy to smile at Carson today. He looked so proud, so nervous, so unlike himself dressed in a tuxedo and standing at the front of the church.

Elsie survived being in Kye's charm-zone during their walk together, and she made her way to the bridesmaid side of the chapel. The hard part was over. Now Kye didn't have a reason to talk to her and the two of them could go back to ignoring each other.

There hadn't been a point to having a bride's side and a groom's side of the chapel. Not in a town where everyone knew everyone else. Elsie only saw a few clumps of people she didn't recognize—friends and family of Olivia's, mostly. Several young, beautiful women were sprinkled through the crowd. One of them was Lisa. Elsie couldn't help trying to pick out Kye's girlfriend.

Lisa couldn't be the woman with florescent pink stripes in her hair that matched her fingernail polish and lipstick. Too flashy. Too look-at-me for Kye. Lisa also wasn't the bleached blonde wearing too much makeup and a low-cut maroon dress. That wasn't Kye's type either. He would pick someone intelligent; someone who was pretty, but confident enough about her looks that she didn't overdo her hair and outfit. Someone more practical than the brunette who'd worn four-inch stilettos and a miniskirt to a winter wedding.

Elsie narrowed it down to an elegant-looking redhead and a woman with shiny black hair who exuded a high IQ. Really, Elsie should've had the forethought to hire some male model to pretend to be her date. Or at least begged one of her guy friends from Missoula to come. The truth was, she had never dated anyone seriously at college. There were a few guys she hung out with occasionally, but school kept her busy, and she never seemed to have the time for more than that. And besides, most of the guys in her classes seemed so...uninteresting.

Three of Olivia's friends joined Elsie on the bridesmaids' line and the groomsmen took their place alongside Kye. Then Olivia and her father walked down the aisle. The most noticeable thing about the bride wasn't the yards of satin and ruffles or the ringlets in her hair. It was a smile that

radiated her joy. That's what love felt like when it was reciprocated—it lifted you and made you glow.

Elsie was happy for Olivia and Carson, happy in a way that made her feel sentimental and weepy. It brought the ache inside her to sharp focus. Would she ever glow with joy like that?

The pastor read the vows and Olivia and Carson gave their breathless “I do’s”. With a two-second kiss, her brother and sister-in-law started their new life together—blissfully holding hands.

When the wedding ceremony ended, everyone moved to the reception room for food, toasts, and finally dancing. There was a live band, crooning songs for the younger couples to dance to while the older couples sat around talking and sipping raspberry sherbet punch.

At first, Elsie kept busy helping with the refreshments—putting out more food, gathering up empty cups, and throwing them away. She didn't give the dance floor much consideration except in passing when she checked to see who Kye was dancing with.

She wanted to see if she was right about her girlfriend prediction. Every time she spotted him, though, he was dancing with a different woman. Lisa must not mind sharing him with all the bride's friends.

Kye was a good dancer. His steps were smooth and fluid, his rhythm flawless. Maybe that should've surprised Elsie, but it didn't. Somehow she'd always known her math teacher knew how to move.

Eventually, there wasn't anything left to do, then Elsie stared out across the room at the ribbons and flowers and the soft glow of the twinkle lights—at all of the dancing couples. She was standing here alone. It had definitely been a mistake not to hire a male model.

Would anyone miss her if she slipped away and read an ebook for a while? Probably not. Carson and Olivia were happily oblivious to most of what was going on around them.

“Do you want to dance?”

Elsie didn't have to turn around to know Kye was the one who stood behind her. She tensed and tried to think of a plausible excuse not to dance with him. He didn't give her the chance. Before she could speak, he took hold of her elbow and towed her out onto the dance floor. Apparently, it had never occurred to him that she would turn him down.

Well, fine. She would get through one dance and then leave. She was only a few verses and choruses away from freedom. A slow song was

playing. Kye stopped, took hold of her left hand, and put his other hand on her hip. She felt the heat in his fingers, the possibilities. He had large hands, calloused by ranch work. That had never bothered her. It had seemed like a badge of honor. The hands of a strong man.

She ignored the feel of them against her body, blinked away the possibilities. Wanting to dance with him was what had started the whole horrible chain of events at the Mathematics Decathlon. She looked everywhere but at him.

When they'd danced for a couple of minutes, he said, "We spent all morning together, even kidnapped a hapless man and dragged him here. I thought after that, things would go back to normal between us, but apparently, they're still not." He tilted his chin down. "So how long are you planning on avoiding me?"

She coughed and feigned surprise. "What makes you think I'm avoiding you?"

"You've never come home from college in the summertime—"

"It's easier to find work in Missoula," she said.

"Every time I went to your house to see Carson during Christmas breaks, you never set foot out of your room."

She hadn't thought he would notice or remember this fact. "I was busy reading. Sorry, you can't compete with Rochester or Mr. Darcy."

"You never went anywhere you would see me, including church..."

She shrugged it off like it was a joke. "I became a vampire at college. I'm not supposed to step foot on hallowed ground."

"Which would explain why you've hardly stayed in one spot since the wedding."

"I've been helping."

"Carson hired people to do that. And you've reverted back to refusing to look me in the eye."

She met his gaze to prove she could. He was staring at her. His blue eyes were intense, penetrating in a way that made it clear he wasn't thinking about math. The heat from Kye's hands seemed to increase, seemed to tingle from her hip up her back. She looked away.

He let out a disapproving grunt. "See," he said as though she'd proved his point. "You can't even look me in the eyes."

Well, what did he expect when he looked at her like that?

He pulled her closer so he could speak into her ear. "Elsie, you've got to stop this. Your parents live here. Your brother wants me to be his children's godfather. Once he retires from football, he's considering buying half my ranch, moving out here, and helping me run cattle. Are you going to avoid your family just so you can keep avoiding me?"

"No," she said with forced lightness, "I'm pretty sure I can see them and avoid you at the same time."

He made another grunting sound. "I can't believe you're still acting this way. You know, I don't think my cows surrounded your car on accident. I think they staged an intervention."

He smelled so good. He wore the same aftershave he'd used when she'd been in high school. It made her feel like she was walking back through time. All the old familiar feelings of longing were stirring around inside her, promises of a summer that never happened. It was dangerous dancing with him this way. She gazed around the room to clear her mind. "Shouldn't you be dancing with Lisa? Where is your girlfriend anyway?"

"Lisa is just a friend, and she ended up not coming."

"Then where were you this afternoon?"

"After we found a suit that fit Mr. Travers, I was at the family science teacher's house paying her to hem some of my pants so they fit him. I figured I ought to stay with him to make sure he didn't take any detours to a bar."

"Oh." Elsie not only met his eyes, she held his gaze. He was so thoughtful. It made the ache inside her all that much worse. Kye was wonderful, and he had never been and never would be interested in her.

Kye's hand tightened on her hip possessively. "You would've seen me come in with Olivia's dad if you hadn't been hiding in the bride's room."

"I wasn't hiding." Okay, she sort of was, but she wasn't about to admit it. "I was seeing if Olivia needed anything."

Kye pulled Elsie closer to avoid another couple. "Which brings us back to the topic at hand. We were talking about your inability to let go of the past."

"No, we weren't." She looked over his shoulder at Carson and Olivia dancing, at all the couples clinging to each other. "You were lecturing me, and I was ignoring you. I'm not your student anymore. I don't have to listen to you."

Kye sighed and stopped dancing. She had no idea what he meant by this action, or what she was supposed to do now. He wasn't watching her anymore, though. He was gazing at the door that led to the hallway. Still holding Elsie's hand, he led her across the dance floor. They weaved around other people, threading their way to the door.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"We're going to fix this once and for all."

She could have pulled her hand away. Part of her wanted to. It was arrogant of him to assume she would just walk out of the room with him. But another part of her was curious. How exactly did he think he could fix this?

Kye took her down the hallway that led to the pastor's office. It was dark there, but Kye didn't flip on a light switch. He didn't stop until they'd nearly reached the pastor's door, until the two of them were swallowed up in the shadows. People coming and going from the reception wouldn't be able to see them down here. Elsie's heart beat faster, although what she expected to happen, she couldn't say.

Kye still kept hold of her hand. In fact, he took hold of her other hand too. His eyes looked darker here in the shadows, coal-black almost. "Back when you were eighteen," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, "you were feeling overly emotional about me rescuing you, and you did something you regretted. You kissed me."

Elsie shifted away from him. "Yeah, I remember. I was there."

"Don't interrupt. Apparently, you've been so embarrassed by my reaction to that kiss, you haven't been able to be around me for the last three years."

"Maybe I just stopped liking you," she said.

He took a step toward her, closing the gap between them. A hint of a smile played on his lips. "You're interrupting again."

"Sorry."

"So, I have no choice but to remedy the situation, to equalize our positions." He leaned over and his lips came down on hers.

For a moment she stood there so shocked, she was incapable of reacting. He let go of her hands and put one of his hands on her back and the other on her neck. The feel of his fingers against her nape sent a shiver tingling down her spine.

Nearly as quickly as he'd kissed her, he let her go. "Now we're even." He stepped away from her. "You kissed me. I kissed you. So you don't have to feel awkward about it anymore."

She stared at him, stunned and sputtering. "What do you...? Why would you...?" He had given her a pity kiss, and in his mind that made things even? Her indignation grew, snapping her restraint like a dry twig. "Do you think this is some sort of math equation and if you add the same variable to both sides, the answer is kept in cosmic balance?"

He sighed, and when he spoke his voice was soft, a whisper almost. "No, you're definitely more complicated than a math problem, or I would've figured out how to make things right between us a long time ago."

The hurt of the past years welled up inside of her. It was as though she was back in the nurse's office at the Mathematics Decathlon, back feeling the blazing pain of rejection again. "This doesn't make us even. I idolized you for ten years, and you rebuffed me like my attentions were an insult, like I wasn't worthy of your time. You acted like I was some sort of teenage skank trying to get you fired. One conciliatory kiss on your part doesn't equalize things."

"Okay then," he said, "I'm willing to do more."

She should've expected what happened next, should've moved away. She didn't, though. She thought he'd give her a longer apology. Instead, he stepped forward and kissed her again. This time his momentum ended up backing her into the wall. It wasn't a quick kiss like the last time. It turned from gentle to insistent in seconds. He wanted this, she realized, wanted to hold her and press his lips to hers. This wasn't just about evening the score so she could get over the bad ending to their first kiss.

It didn't matter what he wanted anymore, though. It wasn't his choice now. She wasn't a groupie he could kiss whenever the mood struck him.

Elsie put her hands on his chest to push him away, but then somehow ended up grabbing his shirt front and holding onto him instead. Kye had not only awakened the rejection she'd felt years ago, he'd awakened the desire too. That part of her seemed to have a mind of its own. It wanted this too. She let his mouth move against hers, answered his kiss, and melted into his arms.

He ran his hand down her back and pulled her closer. He was apparently more than willing to try to give her a kiss equal to ten years of longing, and

he was doing a good job of it. Everything else seemed to melt away: the hallway, the music filtering out of the reception, the chill in the air. There was only the warmth of Kye's arms around her, his lips caressing hers, teasing a response from her. Or maybe just making a point about his power over her.

Finally, she pushed him away. By that point, her heart was knocking against her chest in a frantic rhythm. This was absolute madness. She'd gone from the girl who'd had a foolish crush on Kye to the woman who was willing to make out with him outside the pastor's office—which had to be some sort of sin in and of itself.

"This is your way of fixing things between us?" She took a deep breath and smoothed down her hair in the places where Kye had been running his fingers through it. "Now I'm not supposed to feel embarrassed when we run into each other?"

"You never needed to feel embarrassed." He was near enough to her that he didn't have to step closer to put his hands on her shoulders. She hadn't realized how tense her muscles were until he gently massaged them. "You were eighteen and vulnerable. I knew that. It would've been wrong for me to respond to you, even if I wasn't your teacher. The fact that I was your teacher made the idea unthinkable." He kept massaging her shoulders, kneading away the tension there.

She supposed she should've always known that Kye wouldn't respond to that first kiss. But still, it had hurt to be unloved, unwanted by the guy she'd loved so desperately. Now with his hands making ripples of pleasure across her shoulders, with the taste of his lips still on hers—raspberry sherbet punch—all her anger at the event drained away. Instead, she knew she had to be honest. "I didn't kiss you just because you saved me. You sent me away at the dance, so I went with that Bono guy to make you jealous."

Kye's fingers froze on her shoulders. "You...you what?" His voice rose, incredulous. "That was a stupid thing to do."

"I know. I realized that pretty quickly."

Kye went back to massaging her shoulders. "You didn't need to do it. I was jealous before you ever left with him."

Elsie cocked her head, checked his eyes to see if he was teasing her. The amusement that played at the corners of his mouth so often was absent now. He meant it.

Kye pressed his fingers into the tight muscles along the bottom of her neck. "You were smart, beautiful, and could discuss any subject and make it seem interesting." His hands moved up her neck, caressing the skin there. "And every day you sat in my class and stared up at me adoringly. You'll never know how hard it was for me to push you away when you kissed me. It made me feel like some sort of predator. I had to make frequent calls to Carson to remind myself that he would tear out my entrails if I so much as touched you."

Elsie felt her heart lift, saw the memories of that time in a new light. He hadn't thought she was a pathetic groupie. And judging by the way his hands were massaging her neck, he didn't want to let her go.

"Why didn't you say anything to me after I graduated?"

"You were still so young." One hand left her neck and went to her face. His thumb traced the curve of her jaw. "I figured you would go to college, grow up some, and realize you could do better than me."

That had never happened. She had met plenty of guys who would make more money than Kye, but she'd never met one that made her forget him.

She slid her arms around Kye's waist, liking the fact that she could take that liberty. Instead of pulling away from her, he leaned into her, nuzzling the hair at her temple. "I kept tabs on you through Carson. I've always cared about how you were and what you were doing."

"Oh." She felt a shivering sort of happiness at his words. "When did you realize I still had feelings for you?"

"When you kissed me back just now."

"Only just now?" She had been sure it had been there on her face every time she looked at him today. It was the reason she hadn't wanted to meet his eyes.

"Yes, although I realized I still had feelings for you as soon as I saw you sitting in your car trapped by my cattle." He smiled lazily. "You make an appealing damsel in distress. I had to call Lisa and tell her not to come."

Elsie might have made a comment about that, and not one that showed much sympathy toward Lisa, but Kye kissed her again. This one was soft, gentle. One that said they had time.

"So," Elsie said when he finally lifted his head, "I guess you've stopped worrying about Carson ripping out your entrails?"

"You're several years older, and I know for a fact that Carson is busy right now."

Kye took her hand, and they walked slowly back down the hallway. “We’ve got some more dancing to do, things to discuss—like when you’re coming back to Lark Springs again.”

“I really should start coming home more,” she said. “Maybe every weekend.”

“And I’m pretty sure I’ll need to go to Missoula on business trips a couple of times a month.”

“I might be able to find a job here after I graduate.”

He ran his thumb over the back of her hand. “If you can’t, I’ll hire you myself.”

“As a ranch hand?”

“Don’t knock it. The job comes with perks. You’ll be able to wrap your boss around your finger.”

“Sounds tempting.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it softly. “Good. I plan to tempt you a lot.”

“A job on your ranch...” she said, mulling over the idea.

“Come back,” he said. “Stay where you belong.”

It was a familiar request. This time she was going to listen to it.



WANT to read the first chapter of Olivia’s and Carson’s romance?

Keep scrolling ([or click here](#)) for that and the Author’s note and dedication. (In which I valiantly try to defend myself for writing a story where a student kisses her teacher. No, I don’t think this is a good idea, and every time I read a news story about a teacher and a student’s inappropriate relationship, I too, am creeped out. But read on for my reason.)

Or go to the book’s Amazon page here [A Longtime \(and now NFL player\) Nemesis](#)

OR CHECK out these other novels by Janette Rallison (sometimes CJ Hill, when she’s fighting dragons...)

Also, I would really love you—even more than I already love you—if you’d leave me a review. Doesn’t have to be long, but people do pay

attention to those shiny little stars.

You can follow your Ereader's instructions or go to the book's product page, [here](#), scroll past all of the stuff Amazon wants you to see, a look on the left for the review button.

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CHAPTER 1 OF A LONGTIME (AND NOW NFL PLAYER) NEMESIS

Chapter 1 of A Longtime (and now NFL player) Nemesis

Back when Olivia Travers was eighteen and so newly graduated from high school that her dreams were still intact, she'd uttered the words, "I'm glad I'll never have to see Carson Clark's smug face again."

Turns out, she'd spoken way too soon.

Because now, her younger brother, Matt, was asking her to do just that. He'd texted her several times during the afternoon asking her to call. Sometimes he forgot that teachers, even art teachers, couldn't just drop everything to make phone calls. High school students didn't do well without supervision, and if she so much as turned her back on a few of them, they'd be flicking paint at each other. The little darlings. Bless their overly hormonal hearts.

She planned to call Matt on her way home. He texted her ten minutes before school ended. *I need to talk to you. It's an emergency.*

Granted, sometimes Matt's emergencies were less urgent than others. This one could be anything from *I need you to stop by the store on your way home to buy Doritos for my poker game* to *Mom was in a car crash*.

Olivia told her students to put their paintings on the drying rack and clean up their areas. Then she retreated to her desk to call her brother.

He picked up after the first ring. "Hey, Olivia." He sounded like he was driving somewhere.

"What's the emergency?" she asked.

"I need you to do a big favor for me."

So, this was the Doritos variety of emergency. “You know I’m still at work, right? School doesn’t end until three.”

“Sorry. It’s important. I’m heading to Idaho for a while.”

That made no sense. “Why are you going to Idaho?” Except for the year Matt had spent at Montana State University doing more partying than studying, her brother had lived in Lark Springs his whole life.

“I have a friend who can get me work there, and I gotta get out of town so Carson Clark doesn’t kill me. That’s the favor—I need you to talk to him for me.”

“What?” Olivia dropped her voice. “Why would Carson kill you?” Matt had been working as a project manager for Carson for the last month and a half, renovating a house an hour out of town. As far as she knew, Matt’s only complaint about his boss was that he expected him to get up at the crack of dawn to start work.

“I’m going to pay him back. Tell him that.”

Olivia rubbed her temples. “Why do you owe him money?” Her brother had never been responsible with money, but he’d never owed anyone so much that he skipped town.

There was a long pause on the phone.

Only half of her class was actually cleaning up their tables. The other kids were sitting around talking. With little more than a week of school left, students thought the rules stopped applying. “How much do you owe?” And why hadn’t he asked her to lend it to him before skipping town? He’d hit her up for money plenty of times before.

“Twenty-one thousand.”

She gasped under the weight of that number. “How could you possibly owe him that much?” She only had five thousand in her bank account. Not near enough to cover the amount.

Another pause. “I made a bad decision. I realize that. Carson gave me sixty thousand to pay for the flooring, but I only had to pay half down, and I thought I could invest the rest and make a little before the bill came due.”

Olivia’s stomach sank. Her brother had done some stupid things in his life, but they’d mostly been harmless. Even that time he’d got drunk and showed up at his ex-girlfriend’s wedding reception had only ended up costing him the price of an ice sculpture and a restraining order. “What sort of investment?” Maybe there was some way to salvage the money.

“One of the drywall guys retired because he’d given money to this buddy who was a day trader. He told me he had a sure thing that could earn ten thousand.”

“And instead lost twenty-one?”

“Yeah. I’m so mad at him. The dude actually charged me a fee to lose most of my money.”

Not Matt’s money. Carson’s. The noise of students talking was getting so loud that it was hard for her to hear. She held the phone away from her mouth to address the class. “Hey guys, settle down and clean your areas!”

The kids mostly ignored her about cleaning but the volume in the room decreased.

Matt was speaking again, “I left nine thousand in cash in an envelope in your old bedroom. Take it to Carson. Tell him I’m sorry, and I’ll pay him the rest as soon as I earn it.”

“Matt, you’ve got to come back and work out some sort of arrangement with him. Tell him you’ll work for free until you’ve paid off the debt. Otherwise, he could charge you with embezzlement.”

“I know. That’s why I want you to be the one to talk to him. If I tell him what I did, he’ll drag me down the police station himself. You can convince him not to press charges.”

She coughed in disbelief. Her brother had clearly forgotten her high school history with Carson. “How am I supposed to convince him of that?”

“You’re a beautiful woman. Do what beautiful women do.”

“What beautiful women do?” she repeated. “You mean like offer to model for any advertisements he may need?”

Matt sighed like she was the one who was being unreasonable. “You don’t want me to go to jail, do you? Think what that would do to Mom.” This was usually her brother’s trump card when he wanted Olivia’s help. The two had had an unspoken agreement since childhood that they wouldn’t add any more worries to their mom’s already stressful life. Even before their parents’ divorce, their mother had been functioning as a single parent, sometimes working two jobs to make ends meet.

But this request wasn’t on par with writing essays for Matt so he didn’t flunk out of school or making a few of his truck payments because their mother had been foolish enough to cosign, and creditors were about to start calling her.

Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose and shut her eyes. “No. Absolutely not. I’m not pimping myself out to your boss. Sorry to disappoint you, but I don’t have the kind of moves needed to bring in twenty-one thousand dollars.”

It was then that she noticed the class had fallen silent. She opened her eyes and saw that Mrs. Newman, the assistant principal, was standing in the classroom doorway. The woman’s mouth hung slightly ajar, and her eyebrows were lifted in what was probably horror. The students all returned to their desks, their gazes bouncing back and forth between Mrs. Newman and Olivia.

Lovely.

“I’ll call you back,” Olivia told Matt and slid her phone into her pocket. Her face was flaming red, she knew that, but she forced a smile at Mrs. Newman that hopefully looked professional. “Yes?”

Mrs. Newman took a step into the room. Her gaze kept going over Olivia in that same disapproving way. “I’m taking members of our student body presidency around to deliver thank-you gifts to our teachers.” She glanced back and seemed to notice that no one was with her. She stepped into the hallway and motioned to someone.

A few moments later, Ezra Daniels, the school newspaper’s photographer, walked in with Wren Cohen, the student body secretary. She was a thin blond girl who’d won her position by being so bookish and competent that she was made for the job. She strode up to Olivia carrying a gift basket wrapped in red and yellow cellophane, the school’s colors. Ezra trailed her, camera raised.

Mrs. Newman sent Olivia a we-will-discuss-this-later look and left to take some other members of the student body around to different classrooms.

Wren smiled brightly at Olivia, posing for the photo op. “The students would like to thank you for being one of our teachers. We know that sometimes when you work, you have to deal with some hard things.”

A few boys in the back of the class sniggered.

Yep, that’s what Olivia got for making prostitution references on the phone during class. She wanted to send the guys warning glares, but Ezra hadn’t taken the photo yet, and she didn’t want everyone who saw the newspaper’s end-of-year edition to wonder why the art teacher looked so murderous while receiving her thank-you gift.

Olivia reached for the basket, but Wren wasn't through talking. "We know you don't get paid enough for what you do."

More laughing from the back section. One of the guys—she couldn't tell who—muttered, "At least not twenty-one thousand a day."

Wren sent the guys a confused look and continued, "We're glad you're here instead of working somewhere else."

Even though it was more of a stretch to infer innuendo from that sentence, the boys in the back laughed like Wren had just said something hilarious. Teenage boys could do a lot of stretching.

Wren ignored them. "We hope you'll have a great summer, full of touching moments—"

"Thank you!" Olivia grabbed the gift basket before Wren could say more. Then she glared at the guys in the back, trying to set them on fire with her eyes.

That's when Ezra took the picture.

Well, that would look great in tomorrow's edition. The school year really couldn't end fast enough. And now, to top off everything else, Olivia was going to have to talk to Carson Clark.

To read more, [order the book on Amazon or read for free in Kindle Unlimited by clicking here!](#)

The blurb for *A Longtime (and now NFL player) Nemesis*

"You'll basically be my prisoner," Carson said with one of his smooth smiles. "Sort of like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, but without the singing dishes or the library."

Olivia fiddled nervously with her purse strap. "The lack of a library is a drawback in a prison."

When Olivia's brother embezzles money from his boss, she's left to plead his case to his boss and beg for leniency.

The only problem? Her brother's boss is Olivia's old high school nemesis, Carson Clark. And he's not known for leniency. He's tall, handsome, and grouchy to be back in his hometown while he recovers from an NFL football injury.

Olivia offers to take her brother's place and help Carson renovate a secluded, luxury cabin in the mountains. How hard can Carson be on her?

Turns out, pretty hard. She's tired, sore, and deeply in need of a back massage.

And she's with Carson 24/7 until the project is finished.

With both of them still holding grudges, perhaps that paint fight was bound to happen. But the kissing that comes after it is a surprise she's not sure how to handle.

If you like your romcoms with swoon, swagger, and happily ever after, snatch this novel up today! It's the first book in the Small Town, Big Sky romance series.

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CHAPTER 2 OF A LONGTIME (AND NOW NFL PLAYER) NEMESIS

After school ended, Olivia called her brother back. He didn't pick up. Coward. He knew she would lay into him about gambling with someone else's money.

There was nothing else to do but drive to her mom's house. Matt used to live there too, bouncing between construction work and cattle work at one of the ranches in the area. Perhaps Olivia should've lived at home as well. She would have saved more money for that ever-elusive house down payment that was her goal, but she was twenty-five and wanted her independence, so she lived in an apartment in town with two roommates.

She pulled up to the small one-story white home in the rundown area of Lark Springs. Weeds were making their presence known around the lawn, and the house's paint was worn and flaking in places. Olivia had told her mother she'd help her repaint the house in August, and her mother was saving up to pay someone to do landscaping. Now, any extra money their mother had would likely go to paying off Carson in an attempt to keep Matt out of prison.

In fact, when her mother found out what Matt had done, she might go back to working some night shifts at the grocery store like she'd done after her divorce.

Olivia gritted her teeth. It wasn't fair for Matt to do this.

She went inside and trudged to her old bedroom. The walls were still the same peach color they'd been when she was in elementary school. When she'd gotten older, she'd wanted to paint her room a peaceful sage green with silver accents. She'd made a Pinterest board which included a wall-to-wall bookshelf and white canopy bed where she could retreat to read or sketch.

The only thing from that inspiration board she ended up having were the books—not the bookshelf. She'd picked up dozens from the town's thrift store. Even though Olivia had moved out of the house, she couldn't bring herself to get rid of them.

A thick envelope sat on top of her dresser. She opened it and counted the bills. Nine thousand in a stack of twenties, fifties, and hundred-dollar bills. Matt had scrawled a note on the envelope with Carson's address. The

place was a luxury cabin with a guest house and pool. If she left now, she wouldn't be there until at least four-thirty.

She tapped the envelope against the palm of her hand and debated not going. She shouldn't have to deal with this. Normal families didn't have these sorts of problems. For a moment, she let herself wish, once again, that her family was like her friends'. Responsible parents with steady jobs who splurged on their kids and gave them unwanted career advice. Siblings who posed for the camera in family vacation photos. Not brothers who embezzled from their bosses and left you holding the bag—or in this case the envelope.

And yet how could she turn her back on her brother? She'd been a second mother to him from the time she was in sixth grade. That's when their father had packed his things and left.

Matt had come home from school talking non-stop about the baseball team. He'd wanted to play in the city's youth league since third grade when his friends had all joined.

As soon as their father got home from work, Matt shoved the application form at him.

Their father waved it away and made a beeline to the fridge. "Those teams are expensive. We don't have the money for that."

Matt followed him, bouncing on his heels with undimmed excitement. "Coach Quinn said if you agreed to be the co-coach, they'll waive my fee."

Even back then, Olivia saw Coach Quinn's offer for the charity it was. Their friends' parents knew their family didn't have money.

Her father shook his head and pulled a beer from the fridge. "I don't have the time."

"But it would be fun," Matt insisted.

Her father shut the fridge door with a thud. "I said I don't have time. That's the end of it."

Matt's eyes, so happy just moments before, filled with tears. His chin wobbled and sunk to his chest.

Olivia had been peeling potatoes at the sink with her mother, cutting off the skins and leaving the vegetables pale and exposed. She didn't speak, just looked imploringly at her mother to see if she could change his mind.

Her mother never saw that look. She slapped her hand against the countertop. "You don't have time for any of us, do you? But when it comes

to hanging out with your friends in bars, you have plenty of time and money for that.”

After that gauntlet was thrown down among the potatoes, the fight escalated. It wasn't the first yelling match her parents had had, but it went on longer and became louder, the two of them throwing accusations at each other until her mother spat out, “I never should've married you!”

Her father slammed his beer can on the counter. “That's something I can fix!” He stormed out of the kitchen and punched the family room wall, leaving a gaping hole there as an exclamation mark.

Olivia's mother followed after him. “If you want to fix something, start with the wall!” More shouting reverberated down the hallway.

Olivia stood, silent and tense, the peeler still gripped in her hand, waiting for it to be over. The fight ended with her father packing things into a suitcase and stomping through the front door.

The whole time Matt had been clutching the baseball form to his chest like a shield. Their mother didn't come back to the kitchen. She stayed in her bedroom crying. The already peeled potatoes grew pink from neglect. Olivia took over her mother's spot at the counter and did her best to cut them, slicing at them like they were the cause of the problem. The chunks were uneven, a messy massacre. She threw them into the boiling water anyway.

Olivia wanted to tell Matt, “I'll pay the fee so you can play baseball.” But at eleven years old, she didn't have the money.

Over the next days and months, she wondered if everything might have turned out differently if she'd had some money stashed somewhere—if she'd saved all her birthday cash instead of spending it, if she'd had the foresight to know she'd need it.

She offered her brother the only thing she could. “I'll practice baseball with you sometime.”

He stared toward the front door, the paper growing limp in his hand. “Do you think Dad will come back?”

“Probably,” she said.

“What if he doesn't?” Matt sounded so worried, so afraid. His brown eyes had turned into wide circles of despair.

“Mom won't ever leave.” The words weren't quite true. Their mother had her own way of leaving, of retreating into herself when depression struck. “I won't ever leave you,” Olivia amended.

She'd done her best to fulfill that vow.

Olivia slipped the envelope full of money into her purse and sighed. She probably ought to go now. That way when she talked to her mother tonight about the situation, Olivia would know just how much trouble Matt was in.

Still, she didn't leave the room right away. Her mind was coming up with reasons, excuses she should delay. And then worse, it came up with all sorts of scenarios where Carson sneered at her and told her off before she could even explain about Matt.

That probably wouldn't happen. The two of them weren't in high school anymore. They were adults now.

Maybe Carson would be understanding.

Although probably not.

Carson Clark had never been known for his empathy.

CHAPTER 3 OF A LONGTIME (AND NOW NFL PLAYER) NEMESIS

Carson scowled at his phone. He'd called Matt five times today, and the guy still hadn't responded. Matt was supposed to bring a truck full of hand-scraped hardwood flooring to the cabin this morning so it could start acclimatizing to the house's humidity. The wood needed to be here for two to three weeks before installation could happen.

Instead, Matt had been a no-show, forcing Carson to fill in for him, ripping off door trim and baseboards. His foot was only a few weeks out of a cast and even though he wore a boot, he was supposed to stay off his foot as much as possible. It was beginning to ache, a sign he'd overdone it.

He shoved his phone in his pocket and limped into the kitchen. He was tired of this injury, tired of it slowing him down. He'd been powerful once, a force to be reckoned with on the field. Now he felt like an old man, and the sharp pains that occasionally shot through his foot were a reminder that his injury might never heal the way it was supposed to. His much-worked-for career in the NFL might already be over.

At first, buying and flipping the 6,000-square-foot cabin had seemed like not only a good investment but a good way to spend his time while he did physical therapy and waited for his foot to recover. Nolan Gordon, the Broncos' head coach, had mentioned to Carson that his wife wanted to buy a summer home in Montana. A secluded place in the woods with acreage where his family could retreat for a couple of months each year to enjoy nature. Something in the range of five million. He'd thought Carson might know of a place since he was from the state.

So when Carson came back home to Lark Springs and found a fixer-upper near national forest land that had gone into foreclosure for three and a half million dollars, it seemed the perfect project to renovate and sell. The land was beautiful—worth the money alone. The cabin sat nestled on seventy-five acres and was only a couple of hours away from Yellowstone.

Lark Springs, the closest town, was an hour away, and although the town was by no means cosmopolitan, it had a quaint tourist vibe. People came to fish, kayak, or just enjoy the summer sun at the river. The town was big enough to have the things people needed—basic shopping, several restaurants, and medical facilities.

Buying the cabin hadn't seemed that risky. After all, he knew a fair amount about construction work. Those jobs had always been the highest-paying ones a teenager could get in Lark Springs during the summer, and Carson's size and strength had always gotten him a place on the crew. Besides, he already had an interested buyer. And Coach Gordon had grown even more interested when Carson showed him pictures of the place.

Perhaps the mountain views and stretches of pine trees had entranced Carson more than they should have. As he made the decision to liquify some of his investments for the bulk of the down payment, he told himself that if Coach Gordon didn't want the place, maybe he would keep it for himself. Once he started playing football again, he'd have the money to pay it off.

Carson's father had added two hundred thousand of his savings for the down payment, and Carson had taken out a short-term loan for the rest. When Mrs. Gordon found out that he'd decided to flip the place, she'd sent him a list of design requests—all high-end, including a new deck. But Mr. Gordon assured Carson that if he renovated it to her taste, they'd buy the property.

Even after adding in materials and labor to renovate the place, Carson could give the Gordons a good price and still clear a nice profit. And perhaps the best part, he planned on doubling his father's investment. His father wasn't one to take charity, but investments were different.

Choosing Matt Travers as a project manager had turned out to be a mistake. There was no doubt the guy knew his stuff, but in the month and a half they'd been working on the place, he'd fallen behind schedule and frequently left early despite that fact. The idea of working overtime to catch up didn't seem to occur to him. Matt would've never made it on a football team. You showed up to practice whether you were tired or not.

Carson slumped into a folding chair he'd set up by the newly installed kitchen cabinets. They still needed the knobs and drawer pulls attached. Ditto for the ones in the laundry room and all of the bathrooms. But it was after four, and the crew had been here since seven—a long day when you were doing manual labor. He told them he would see them tomorrow and put his foot up on a nearby step-ladder. He'd rest it for a bit before hobbling outside to the two-bedroom guest house he stayed in. The cabinet hardware could wait until tomorrow.

His phone rang. *Matt*. It had better be Matt with a good excuse for taking the day off.

Instead, the caller ID showed Coach Gordon's name.

Carson answered the call. "Hey, Coach. How are you doing?"

"Can't complain," Mr. Gordon's booming voice replied. He was a large man in his mid-forties, the sort of person Hollywood would've cast as the mayor of some backwater town—a character who never looked completely comfortable in a suit. "I wanted to touch base with you about the cabin. My wife is taking a cruise in mid-July and wants to see it before she leaves. We thought we'd come July fourteenth. I know that's five days early, but we don't mind if you're not finished. You'll be close enough that we'll get a good idea of what it will look like."

"Sure. If that's what you want." Carson would have to make sure that the crew was all on their best behavior that day.

"Good. Irena is looking at a couple of other places in the Yellowstone area, but I'm hoping she likes your place best."

Had he heard that right? "She's looking at other places?" Carson had known that the deal was always conditional upon whether Mrs. Gordon liked the cabin, but this was the first time he'd heard that she was looking at other places.

"Yes. The woman loves to shop. She can't buy anything without checking out multiple options." Mr. Gordon sighed with the toleration of a martyr. "I can't go clothes shopping with her. She's got to try on fifteen things before deciding on one."

Carson remained silent for a moment. He wanted to say, "I thought we had an agreement. You told me as long as I renovated this cabin to your wife's tastes, we had a deal. You should've mentioned all this before I let her pick out expensive flooring, cabinets, and fixtures—not to mention the deck."

Making Coach Gordon angry wouldn't increase the chances of a sale, though. Carson rubbed his forehead and tried not to sound irritated. "We've spent a lot of effort and money following her instructions."

"I know you have. I'm sure the place will look great. You would've had to pay an interior designer a lot for her suggestions. She's got talent. Could've been a professional."

That's how Coach Gordon was spinning this—his wife had just been giving them free design advice? How should Carson respond?

Before he could find the right words, Coach Gordon said, "I'm sure she'll like your place the best. She just wants to be certain before she buys. Like I said, you know women."

"I vaguely remember them. I've been too busy with this house to actually see any of them." Perhaps Carson wasn't as good at squashing his irritation as he should be.

"Megan hasn't come up for a visit?" Mr. Gordon asked, surprised. "The next time I see her, I'll tell her she needs to be more attentive."

Little chance that would do any good. Megan was the special teams coach's daughter. Beautiful, sophisticated, the perfect trophy girlfriend. They'd dated for two months before his injury. She'd been supportive at first—checking in with him to see if he needed anything, visiting so he wouldn't get bored. When his injury hadn't healed well, and he needed a second surgery, her attention cooled.

The coaches were always optimistic about his recovery in front of him, but his agent wasn't one to pull punches. He'd told Carson that if he missed this season, there was no guarantee the Broncos would want him for the next one.

Carson already knew that. Just like he knew that the average career in the NFL was under four years. He'd played for three.

After Carson moved back to Lark Springs to recuperate and oversee the house renovations, Megan ghosted him. She evidently wanted a man who was making serious cash and would happily spend it on her. If Carson couldn't be that person, she was going to move on to the next guy who could.

"Yeah," Carson said into the phone. "Tell Megan she should come up. I can teach her how to use a nail gun."

She wouldn't come. He'd already made an invitation, and she'd told him that manual labor wasn't her thing. She'd made it clear she thought it was bad enough that he'd stooped to such a thing.

And *that* would teach him to go for the trophy girlfriend type. How had he never seen how materialistic she was before? The only reason Carson hadn't officially broken things off with her was that he liked the idea of making a full recovery, rejoining the team, and then when she wanted to pick things up again, he could dump her in person.

"Well, at any rate," Mr. Gordon said, "you'll be done soon and then you can move back to Denver and get reacquainted. I'll have my assistant send

you our flight plans so you can have someone pick us up at the airport.”

“Great,” Carson said. “I’ll see you then.”

He hung up, shut his eyes, and tilted his head back. If the Gordons didn’t buy the property, he wasn’t sure how many other people could afford a multimillion-dollar cabin in a remote area of Montana. He wasn’t sure *he* would be able to afford it. Not when his position with the Broncos was no longer certain. The last thing he wanted was to be jobless and stuck paying the mortgage on an empty home.

He was just going to make sure Mrs. Gordon loved the place, and that meant making sure it was done by the fourteenth. Carson glanced around at the cement floors and unpainted walls, doing the calculations. He’d have to hire a few more people, but the date was possible. He would make it happen.

Instead of calling it a day, Carson picked up the box of handles for the cabinets and hobbled off to get a drill.

AUTHOR NOTE AND DEDICATION

When I first got the idea for this story, I hesitated to write it. The heroine kisses her teacher—which is certainly not behavior I would ever advocate for teenage girls. A teacher-student romance just seems tainted with the sort of creepiness that should be avoided at all costs.

And then I remembered my husband's grandparents, Leo and Lucile Rallison. By the time I entered the family, Lucile was a white-haired widow who resembled Mrs. Claus. (And was as perpetually cheerful and chatty as I always imagined Santa's wife to be.)

Leo first met Lucile when she was a senior and he was an agricultural teacher at her high school. As soon as he saw her, he was interested in her. He wasn't sure whether she was another teacher or a student, but he was interested.

When he found out that she was a top scholar, he went out of his way to be friendly to her. One day after a basketball game, he asked her if he could walk her home. Lucile told him that she had come with a friend, and she would be walking home with her friend, so Leo walked them both home.

At school, Leo would smile and wink at Lucile just to see her blush. Although it generally wasn't permitted for a teacher to date a student, at the end of the year, Leo got permission from the principal to ask Lucile to the prom. Permission was granted, and it was her first date. (She said she felt pretty smug going to the prom with a teacher.) At the dance, one of the other teachers joked with the boys that they needed to dance with Lucile now because the next time they saw her she might be a married woman.

The prediction wasn't too far off. They married two years later, settled down, and proceeded to have nine children. She said of Leo, "He was all I had dreams of for a companion: tall, dark, and handsome; and he loved me." My husband's father was their oldest child. Their descendants now number into the hundreds.

I've always thought their romance was a sweet story. It avoided the whole creepiness issue because the two so clearly loved each other. He wasn't using his position of authority to get something that was improper. He didn't hide his courtship—and he didn't kiss her until they had been seeing each other for six months. He had real and honorable feelings for her, evident by their marriage.

So I went ahead and wrote my story about Elsie and Kye. This one is for you, Leo and Lucile. I'm glad you fell in love! It led to me falling in love with your grandson.



Note from Janette

I hope you enjoyed the book! Is it too soon to ~~beg~~ ask you for a review? Yes? No? (I don't want to be one of those needy authors.) But I would really appreciate two sentences on Amazon (or more if you're one of those people who always went above and beyond in your English classes.) Authors love you. Consider it your good deed for the day.

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And if you want to be in the know about all my new releases, sales, and occasionally weigh in on my cover choices, sign up for my newsletter. You'll get a free copy of my novel *Fame, Glory, and Other Things On My To-do List*.

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Janette

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