



HER MONTANA  
CHRISTMAS GROOM

TERESA  
SOUTHWICK

*Cherish*<sup>™</sup>

Teresa Southwick

**Her Montana Christmas Groom**

«HarperCollins»

## **Southwick T.**

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All Rose Traub wants is to fall in love, get married and have her happy ending. But, after dating every eligible bachelor in town, the sassy redhead is still looking for Mr Right. But that doesn't include handsome Austin Anderson. He's totally wrong for her in every way... so why is the town abuzz that they're dating?

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## **“Yeah, Red. I want you, too.”**

Austin took a strand of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers. “Pretty much from the moment we met, I knew we were heading in this direction.”

“You did?” Heart pounding, Rose stared up at him, the flames in the hearth highlighting the intensity on his face. His brown eyes went almost black. “Even though I refused to go out with you?”

His mouth turned up at the corners. “I knew it would be all the sweeter. What comes too easily isn’t cherished as much as what we have to work for.”

“And why did you persevere?”

“Because I couldn’t not pursue you.” He cupped her cheek in his hand. “I couldn’t walk away from you. I couldn’t stop wanting you.”

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the holiday season, Thunder Canyon style. What better time of year to see characters we’ve come to know and love find their happy ending?

Austin Anderson first appeared in my book *Taming the Montana Millionaire in Montana Mavericks: Thunder Canyon Cowboys*, the last series. He was one of those secondary characters who can take over the story if the writer doesn’t keep him under control. So it was great fun to create redheaded Rose Traub, a worthy heroine for the bad boy turned hero.

The themes of peace, joy and forgiveness are hallmarks of the season and the fabric of life in this tight-knit town. I love spending time at The Tottering Teapot, City Hall and Roots. Hope you do, as well.

Wishing everyone health, happiness and love in the new year. Merry Christmas and happy holidays.

Best,

Teresa Southwick

## **Her Montana Christmas Groom**

### **Teresa Southwick**



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**TERESA SOUTHWICK** lives with her husband in Las Vegas, the city that reinvents itself every day. An avid fan of romance novels, she is delighted to be living out her dream of writing for Mills & Boon.

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for her support and guidance through the fictional world  
of Thunder Canyon, Montana

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## Chapter One

Rose Traub hadn't wanted to get naked with a man since moving to Thunder Canyon, Montana. That was kind of a problem if you wanted to get married, and she wanted it bad.

"Rose?"

Austin Anderson's deep voice scraped over her nerve endings and snapped her out of it. "Hmm?"

"You okay?"

"Of course." She looked over at him, sitting in the driver's seat of the old truck. The two of them had just finished delivering Thanksgiving dinners to the town's invalids and people a little down on their luck this year. They'd left with the meals from DJ's Rib Shack and Austin had brought her back to pick up her car. "Why would you think I'm not fine?"

"You got quiet. I was afraid tryptophan fumes from all those turkey dinners put you to sleep. That's easier to believe than..."

"What?" she asked.

"That I bored you into a coma."

She laughed and shook her head. "You're great company, Austin, and you know it. Now you're just fishing for compliments."

"Busted." Lights in the empty parking lot illuminated the interior of the truck and his grin was clearly visible. "So you're not sorry about being stuck as my partner today?"

"Nope. It was fun."

He nodded. "Any regrets about moving to Thunder Canyon?"

"Nope."

She was only sorry Austin didn't fit her male fantasy profile because he was, by far, the most interesting guy she'd met. He was also very cute, in a Ryan Reynolds, sexiest-man-alive sort of way. If only... But wishing for what could never be was a waste of time and that was something she didn't have.

"Any regrets?" she mused.

Glancing out the truck window at mounds of white that had been plowed to the sides of the lot, she remembered the first snowstorm several days ago. It was beautiful but cold. Shivering, she pulled her knit hat more securely over her ears. "I'm not in Texas anymore. Living in the cold and snow is very different from reading about the seasonal range of temperatures online."

"You get used to it," he assured her. "Take it from me, snow is a lot better when you're inside with a big fire going."

"I've got a fireplace in my apartment. I'll have to learn how to use it," she said.

"I've lived here my whole life, except for going away to college. That translates to lots of experience. So if you need any help with that fire, you know who to call."

Was he suggesting something? Her heart skipped a beat, which was just plain stupid, and to read something romantic between the lines, more than a little pathetic. It was an involuntary reaction that smacked of desperation.

"I guess snow is the price one pays for living in the Montana mountains and I do love them. Thanks for showing me the ropes today, Austin." She started to reach for the door handle. "I should probably go—"

"How's the new job?" he asked.

She looked back at him, grateful for the excuse to stay a little longer. "It's good. Working for the mayor is great. Bo Clifton is enthusiastic and energetic. I almost feel guilty taking a paycheck for doing publicity and communications for his office because he makes it so much fun." She met his gaze. "Just between you and me, this is the first job I've had that wasn't for my family. Don't get me

wrong, I learned a lot at Traub Oil, but it feels good to know I have actual marketable skills and my family wasn't just feeling sorry for me."

"No, now I have a job with your family's company and they feel sorry for me." He laughed. "Seriously, working for Traub Oil Montana is a terrific career opportunity. I'm grateful to your brother Ethan for taking a chance on me."

"He's the lucky one. To find a hometown boy with an engineering background, a doctoral student researching green energy alternatives..." The complexity of what he did boggled her mind. According to Ethan, he was brilliant, innovative and passionate about this new technology. Not just a pretty face, she thought. "Ethan is really excited about the possibilities."

"That makes two of us."

Was she imagining that his gaze lowered to her mouth when he said that? Probably. Desperation did strange things to a woman.

"I'm glad things are going well with my brother because he can be focused, intense and demanding."

Austin's expression was ironic. "You just described practically every guy I know."

"Me, too," she said, laughing. "And I know a lot of guys, what with having five brothers."

"Lucky you," he said with mock envy. "I've got two sisters."

Rose had met the younger one, Angie, earlier at DJ's Rib Shack as the holiday volunteers had split into teams. Rose had already been assigned to ride along with Austin, a newbie learning the ropes from someone more experienced. Her attraction to him had been instantaneous, and she'd asked his sister a few questions. She almost wished she hadn't, but it was probably better to know up front that it wouldn't work. Still, the disappointment had not made her things-to-be-grateful-for-on-Thanksgiving list.

"Seriously, though, Ethan is a great boss. And I owe him for giving me a start." He rested his wrist on the truck's steering wheel. "We're definitely on the same page. Protecting Thunder Canyon and the environment is important to both of us."

She nodded. "I haven't lived here long, but I can certainly understand that this is a special place. Part of what drew me is that the town takes care of its own. I'm grateful to be a part of it."

"Remember that at dinner when everyone has to say what they're thankful for."

She laughed. "Does your family really do that?"

"Oh, yeah. It's tradition." His dark eyes were warm with humor. "Are you cooking or going somewhere for dinner?"

"I'm not cooking for which my family is thankful," she answered. "Ethan and Liz invited me to have dinner with them. What about you?"

"As far as cooking, I could engineer the heck out of trussing a turkey, but I'm not sure it would be fit to eat. It's going to be a quiet dinner, just me, Angie and Haley. But we're having dessert with the Cates clan because she and Marlon can't bear to be separated for too long. The two of them decided to have this one last holiday with their families. A quiet one because the wedding is day after tomorrow."

"I can understand that."

"Why?"

"Duh. It's a double wedding." Marlon Cates was marrying Haley Anderson and his twin, Matt, was marrying Elise Clifton. By all accounts it would be a fabulous affair. "I hear it's going to be the Thunder Canyon social event of the year. By the way, you'll look great in the family pictures."

Was it okay to say that? He'd never be her boyfriend, so it wasn't flirting. Just the truth.

"You think so?"

"Yes. And you're fishing for compliments again."

"Busted again. You'll be there, right?" he asked.

“Yes. Elise is the mayor’s cousin and he asked me to take notes for the press release from his office.”

“Just part of your job?” he asked.

“That and the Traubs have been friends with the Cates family for years.” She shrugged.

Austin studied her intently and there were questions in his eyes. “Double wedding. Social event of the year. Yet you don’t sound excited about it.”

“It should be great.” She hoped he didn’t see through the phony enthusiasm. “Are you looking forward to it?”

“Wearing a tux? Smiling until my face hurts? Being nice to everyone?” He shrugged. “Should be fun.”

“Now who doesn’t sound excited?”

“Who’s your lucky date?” he asked.

The question didn’t surprise Rose. She had gone out with more than a few guys here in town and earned a reputation as a “dating diva” which made her all the more pathetic for going solo to the wedding. But she couldn’t tell a lie. Even if she was tempted, he’d know when she showed up alone.

“I’m not going with anyone.”

“Then I’ll take you.”

Oh, God, he felt sorry for her. It was a pity invitation, but seriously nice of him. And that was such a problem. She’d seen him in action today and liked what she saw. He was funny, not scary-looking but scary-smart, and she’d spent a lot of time wondering if he was a good kisser. She could tick off at least five of her man-must-haves. Ironically it was number six on the list that was a problem. It was the same number that took him out of consideration. His sister Angie had told her how old he was and that made him six years younger than she was.

She’d always dated men at least five years older. It was the perfect age difference and part of her fantasy since she’d been a four-year-old flower girl at her first wedding. Going out with Austin wouldn’t put her in cougar territory, but definitely within growling distance as far as she was concerned. And that was unacceptable.

“I’m sorry,” she said, truly meaning that. “But I really can’t go with you.”

Austin was pretty sure that was regret in her big blue eyes. Rose. A beautiful, sweet name for a beautiful, sweet girl. Her hair was just dark enough to call auburn, but in the sun it was red. The freckles on her turned-up nose were extremely cute which was a contradiction to her voice. It was grit and gravel and gumption that scraped across his nerve endings in the best possible way. She was an intriguing combination of fire and ice that made him want to know her better.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?”

“Can’t you go with me?”

“Because I’m too old for you.”

Austin stared at her and figured if she hated his guts and would rather take a sharp stick in the eye than go out with him she could have come up with a better lie than that. He’d been lied to before, a betrayal so personal it left a mark that would never go away.

“How do you know how old I am, Red?” he asked.

“Someone mentioned it in the context of how much you’d accomplished for a guy your age.”

“So, what are you? Twenty-five? Twenty-six?”

Her full mouth pulled tight before she answered. “Just turned thirty.”

She looked like a college kid with her blue knit cap pulled low on her forehead and long, silky strands of red hair spilling over her puffy jacket.

“No way,” he said.

“Unfortunately it’s the honest-to-God truth.”

“Why unfortunate?”

“Because I thought I’d be married and a mother by now.” She sighed, a sound full of frustration and disappointment. “Back in Texas I knew a lot of women who wanted to get married but couldn’t find a guy. Men have it so much easier. They can snap their fingers and have women coming out of the woodwork.”

Austin disagreed. Not every girl was dying to get married and he’d showed the poor judgment to pick one of those. After that, getting serious was the last thing he wanted, although he was all in favor of having fun. He liked women. He liked Rose. Giving back through volunteering was something he did, but hadn’t expected it to be so much fun. He’d actually had a great time today. And he wanted a second helping.

“Go with me,” he urged. “What have you got to lose?”

“The title of cougar for one thing.”

“It’s not that big an age difference.”

“It is to me.”

“So you’d rather go alone?”

“Yes.” But there was no conviction in her voice.

He wanted to see Rose again because she was fun and the wedding would be more interesting if he could hang with her. But there was a stubborn set to the mouth he’d spent the better part of the day resisting the urge to kiss. He had to come up with a strategy to change her mind.

Life had thrown him some big curves, personal and financial. In spite of it all, he’d gone to college and become an engineer. He was really into taking things apart to figure out how they worked. Or building something new that had never existed before. There must be a way to use his skills.

Rose was in public relations for the mayor’s office. Spin was her business. She’d said straight out that she was looking for a guy, so that’s where he’d start.

Behind the steering wheel he angled his upper body toward her. “It’s easier to find a man when you’re with one.”

“What?”

“Think about it. They say it’s easier to find a job when you have one.” That hadn’t sounded as lame in his head. “If you’re alone at the wedding, a girl as pretty as you, the available guys there are going to wonder what’s wrong.”

“You mean like dandruff, halitosis or snorting when I laugh?”

“Yeah.” He frowned. This wasn’t going quite as he’d hoped. “Sort of.”

“Look, Austin—”

“Hear me out.” He held up a hand to stop her words. “If you’re seen with me, you get the Thunder Canyon seal of approval and men will come out of the woodwork.”

One corner of her mouth quirked up. “So that’s been my problem since moving here this summer? The great and powerful Austin Anderson hasn’t anointed my social life with his presence?”

“Well said.” He tried to be serious but couldn’t help laughing. “Seriously, tell me you didn’t have fun today.”

“I didn’t have fun today,” she said automatically.

“You’re lying.”

“Yes, to save you from yourself. It’s very sweet of you to ask me. Really. And I do appreciate the offer, but... No.”

“I don’t accept that.”

“You have to.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

“What part of no don’t you understand?” she demanded.

“Pretty much all of it. Never have.” Losing his mother when he was sixteen had made him want to give up and he had for a while. But folks in Thunder Canyon hadn’t given up on him and made him see that if a door closed you went around it. One foot in front of the other to get what

you want. “If I did, I wouldn’t be an engineer at all, let alone doing a doctorate program in green energy or working for Traub Oil Montana.” He took a breath and met her gaze. “Therefore, I have an alternate suggestion.”

“And that would be?”

“You’re looking for a serious relationship, but I don’t meet your criteria. I’m only looking to have fun—at my sister’s wedding. Nothing permanent. You told me I was great company today. Did you mean it?”

“Of course, or I wouldn’t have said it.”

“Then it’s official. As my Thanksgiving volunteer partner you passed the Austin Anderson friendship test with flying colors. There’s no reason we can’t attend the Thunder Canyon social event of the year in that capacity.”

“Friends?”

“Yeah.” And if it turned into friends with benefits, who was he to complain?

“You’re serious?”

“Completely.”

“We did have fun today. And I don’t want to go alone.” There was determination in her eyes even as the doubts refused to dissolve. “But if even one person makes a crack about robbing the cradle...”

“You’ll just have to whip out your ID and prove you’re at least twenty-one so no one thinks I’m perving on you.”

“Oh, please—” But she laughed, then pointed at him. “Okay, I’ll go with you, but only as friends. No strings attached.”

He wouldn’t have it any other way.

Rose walked into the three-story lobby of the Thunder Canyon Resort on the arm of Austin Anderson. People looked at them, but no one pointed and laughed, which was a relief. Still, when he’d taken her hand and slipped it into the bend of his elbow, it felt more than friendly. She’d opened her mouth to call him on it, but his disarming grin had taken all the bite out of her protest.

This was like dieting with a box of doughnuts in her hand. One touch and all her willpower went out the window.

“Wow,” he said. “Look at this place.”

When she did, her breath caught. She’d been to the resort a few times, but this evening it was transformed into a romantic holiday wedding scene. Two groups of chairs with a white runner separating them were set up on the gleaming inlaid floor and facing the huge stone fireplace. The mantel was draped with lighted green garland and trimmed with red bows. Individual poinsettia plants were arranged in the shape of a tree on either side of a raised dais. Hanging crystals reflected firelight, candles and small twinkling white lights.

Rose stared in wonder. “Just breathtaking.”

“I know what you mean.”

There was a huskiness in Austin’s voice that made Rose look up at him. He was staring at her and the gleam in his eyes made her heart skip.

“I was talking about the decorations,” she clarified.

“I wasn’t.”

In that instant two days of fretting over an appropriate outfit dissolved as it passed a test she hadn’t realized existed. She’d chosen a long-sleeved black dress with velvet sleeves and bodice and a full skirt fashioned from lace. Her peep-toed pumps were velvet, too. Then there was the problem of what to do with her hair. It was a cold, damp evening which made the priority all about control.

She’d done a soft side part, then pulled it sleekly back from her face and tucked the mass into a knot behind her right ear. The way Austin was looking at her, a hairstyle would be all she had any chance of controlling.

People were moving past them and the room was quickly filling up.

“I better go sit down.” The words came out a sort of husky whisper that she hoped he didn’t notice.

“Right.”

They moved to the chairs and Rose was about to take one in the back row.

“Not here.” Austin walked around the outside formation as the aisle was blocked off for the ceremony. He led her to the front row on the bride’s side.

“But this is reserved for family,” she protested.

“I’m family and you’re my— You’re with me.” He winked, then glanced at his watch. “I have to go do a thing. The wedding planner has us on a tight schedule.”

“What happens if you’re late?”

“I don’t want to find out.” He shuddered, then touched her arm. “I’ll be back in a little while. Don’t run away.”

Rose nodded, sat and blew out a breath. Her face was hot, but that had nothing to do with the flames snapping and popping in the fireplace and everything to do with Austin.

She should have turned down his invitation, but he’d caught her in a weak moment, when she was feeling sorry for herself about attending this high-profile event all alone after being a high-profile dater since relocating here. It would be a lie to say that she wasn’t really glad he’d walked her in, but everyone was bound to talk. No doubt tomorrow it would be all over town that she was officially desperate enough to poach from a younger dating pool.

So be it. The damage was done, but there wouldn’t be more fuel for the fire because she and Austin weren’t an item. This was a one-shot deal. Just friends.

In the row of chairs just behind her people took their places. Then someone touched her shoulder and she turned. Her brothers Ethan and Corey bookended Liz Landry, Ethan’s fiancée. All three smiled at her.

“Hey, little sister.” Ethan took Liz’s hand and linked his fingers with hers.

“You look beautiful, Rose,” Liz said. “I love your dress.”

Corey leaned forward and said, “How did you score the best seat in the house?”

It really wasn’t. She was several seats from the aisle where the brides would pass. Those empty chairs were probably reserved for family. She was just a... What did she call herself? Not a date. “My friend Austin, brother of the bride, asked me to go with him. He sat me here.”

Rose could see that all of them had questions, but a quartet started to play chamber music and she was saved by the strings. The sweet notes of the musical instruments soothed her nerves. Not that it mattered. This event was about two brides and two grooms who’d found true love and soon would pledge their lives to each other. She truly envied them.

When Frank and Edie Cates, parents of the twin grooms, took their seats on the opposite side, it was clear that the time line was progressing. A few minutes later, Betty and Jack Castro came down the aisle. They were Elise’s biological parents but hadn’t raised her. Last year she’d learned that she and Erin Castro were switched at birth and taken home by the wrong families. It had been a shock to both women, one that Rose couldn’t imagine. But Rose’s brother Corey had helped Erin come to terms with the past and now they were happily married.

Next down the aisle was Helen Clifton who’d raised Elise, the woman she would always call “Mom.” Once the parents were in place the pace picked up. The music stopped and a gray-haired man stepped to the middle of the dais with a Bible in his hands. A clue that he’d be administering the vows. Then the twin grooms appeared beside him with their best men, Marshall and Mitchell Cates. The unmistakable dark hair, eyes and similar features marked them all as brothers.

The minister said, “If you’ll all please rise.”

The guests did as asked and the musicians played a processional. First down the aisle was Erin Castro Traub. Rose stole a look at her brother Corey who was smiling proudly at his wife, the love

of his life. Next was maid of honor Angie Anderson, stunning in a simple red silk strapless dress and carrying a bouquet of white orchids.

When the two attendants were in place, the traditional wedding music cued Elise Clifton. She came down the aisle on the arm of her brother, Grant. Her long dark blond hair was a cascade of curls held in place by a diamond head band. She looked like a Greek goddess in a one-shouldered satin beaded gown. Matt beamed at his bride, eagerly taking her hand.

It was time for bride number two and Rose looked back just in time to see Haley kiss Austin's lean cheek, then put her hand in the bend of his elbow. She looked like a princess in her strapless, full-skirted organza gown. Her floor-length veil flowed from a diamond tiara that held her upswept brown hair in place. Rose glanced at Marlon Cates who couldn't take his eyes off the woman who would shortly be his wife.

As he placed his sister's hand into her groom's, Austin said, "She's always taken care of Angie and me. Now my sister finally has someone to take care of her. Don't let her down, Marlon."

"Never."

Rose felt a double dose of emotion lump in her throat and not only because it was a doubly happy moment. A wave of sorrow washed over her. Neither bride's father was there and Rose didn't know why. She only knew that someday when she got married, her father wouldn't be there, either. No giving her away. No father-daughter dance. Charles Traub had died when she was only two and she had no memory of him. Her brothers had always talked about him as if he walked on water and she envied their recollections. She was sad for what was lost to her, for once-in-a-lifetime memories that could never be made.

And then Austin was standing beside her. He leaned down to whisper, "My work here is done."

Suddenly there was no room in her head for anything but him. He was movie-star handsome. He smelled good and cleaned up pretty nice. But did any man look like a toad in a traditional black tux? She thought not.

Still, a wicked grin and a nice suit didn't make her any less too old for him. The magic of the wedding venue with lights, flowers and brides in beautiful dresses couldn't erase the difference in their ages. More memories that could never be made. She forced herself to focus on the now, details swirling in her head for the mayor's press release.

The ceremony moved quickly in spite of double vows and rings, but there was twice the applause and cheers when the twins kissed their new wives. Rose was sure the four of them were relieved. In their shoes she would be. But when this part of the evening was over, she would have the reception to worry about.

It was being held in the Gallatin Room, the fine-dining restaurant at the resort. She would breathe easier when it was okay to mingle on her own. That didn't mean she wasn't grateful to Austin for walking her in, but the less time they spent together the better. No point in needlessly firing up Thunder Canyon gossip.

But after the two newly married couples led the recessional down the aisle, Austin grabbed her hand before she could strike out on her own.

"The formal part is over, now it's time to have some fun. Stick with me and I'll show you a good time."

That's just what Rose was afraid of.

## Chapter Two

Austin nodded to his boss, Ethan Traub, as he led Rose back the way he'd come from walking his sister to her groom. He envied Haley. Marlon was a great guy and the two were deeply in love. Now they had their whole lives ahead of them. It was everything Austin had once badly wanted.

The Andersons had been a traditional family before his father walked out. Austin still remembered being a little boy and blaming himself because he'd done something bad. His mom made him see it wasn't his fault and they moved on. Then she died and Haley took over, missing out on her chance to go away to college. There was nothing conventional about that, but his sister did a great job with all the responsibility.

Still, he had vivid memories of that short time when he'd had a father and mother. And he'd wanted to have a family of his own, but the dream died when Rachel ran out on him. Now he just wanted to have fun.

With Rose.

Her hand was tucked in the bend of his elbow and he put his fingers over hers, then glanced down. She was eyeing the people filling the chairs they passed as if they were going to accuse her of something bad. Rose didn't know it yet, but he was the one with increasingly dishonorable intentions. Did she really not know how badly he wanted to kiss her?

She was so beautiful. The other day he hadn't noticed the dimples in her cheeks when she smiled. Or the way her eyes turned down slightly and crinkled at the corners when she laughed. Don't even get him started on the way she filled out her dress. The velvet bodice clung to her curves and the lacy skirt was all sugar and spice and everything nice, equal parts sweet and sultry.

But she was hung up on the age difference. While he appreciated her honesty, to him it was just a number and numbers held no mystery. She, on the other hand, was a puzzle he couldn't wait to solve.

He bent down and whispered in her ear, "Have I told you how beautiful you are tonight?"

The look she gave him was sassy, saucy and sexy. "Are you taking that line out for a spin to see how well it works?"

"Actually, no. I've used it often without a microgram of sincerity. But this time I really mean it."

"So you're not practicing on me hoping to reap the benefits of my vast experience?"

"For a mature woman," he teased, "your manners could use some fine-tuning. It's customary when a man pays you an honest compliment to simply say thank you."

"Thank you," she repeated automatically.

They stopped in the crowd of people who were filling the open lobby area. "A reciprocal compliment would be nice, too."

She looked him up and down, then moved around him to, presumably, inspect the rear view. Completing the circle, she said, "You'll do."

"Wow." He whistled. "Praise like that could turn a guy's head."

"Oh, please. Excluding my brothers, there might be one, maybe two men in this room better looking than you. I can't believe your ego needs massaging."

"It's just fine, thanks." He put his arm around her waist and drew her to a protected corner as the guests waited to file into the dining room for the reception. It was with great reluctance that he removed his hand. "I'm surprised at you. With five older brothers you should recognize teasing when you see it."

Her expression turned thoughtful. "Did you tease your sisters?"

"Still do. Every chance I get."

"And yet you were on your best behavior when you walked Haley down the aisle."

He could see the question in her eyes, why him and not Haley's father. But Rose was too polite to ask. "My father abandoned the family when we were kids. Haven't seen him since."

“Oh.”

Austin saw the sparkle in her eyes fade to sadness and wished he could take back the words. Maybe put the sass back in her smile. “Sorry, didn’t mean to be a downer.”

“You’re not.” She glanced past him. “Looks like they’re letting people in to the reception. I think I’ll get in line, too.”

When she started to walk past him, Austin put a hand on her arm. “Not so fast. Are you trying to ditch me?”

“Because we’re here as friends with no strings attached, ‘ditch’ seems harsh. I thought I’d just mosey on in and watch single guys swarm around now that I have the Austin Anderson stamp of approval and they don’t need to be afraid.”

He’d set those parameters. It seemed the only way he could get her to go with him. But the idea of a bunch of guys hitting on her made him want to put his fist through a wall.

“Tell you what,” he said. “There’s a receiving line. We’ll say hello to the bride and groom and the bride and groom and then I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Done. Except I’ll buy my own.”

“It’s an open bar.”

“Big spender,” she teased.

Austin rested his hand at the small of her back, urging her to the end of the line. It didn’t take long to reach the couples of the hour standing just outside the double doors leading into the Gallatin Room.

Rose hugged Matt Cates, then his new bride. “Congratulations. You look stunning.”

“Thanks,” Matt answered.

Elise smiled radiantly. “She meant me, although you do look fairly spectacular, husband.”

Austin had been a couple years behind the twins in school, but they all knew each other well. He shook hands, then hugged Matt’s wife. “I suppose it’s too late to talk you into running away with me?”

“Sorry.” The pretty blonde shrugged. “It was too late a long time ago.”

“If you change your mind...”

“Not a chance,” she said.

Rose moved on and gave Marlon a hug. “Congrats. I wish you every happiness.”

“Thanks, Rose. Hey, Austin— Or should I say ‘bro’?”

“I answer to either.” And he truly meant that. The connection was legal now, but he felt as if he did have a brother. He met his sister’s gaze and didn’t miss the spark of interest in his “date.”

“Haley, have you met Rose Traub?”

“No.” The two women shook hands. “Marlon and I have been traveling and planning the wedding. But I heard you moved here from Texas.”

“Yes.” Rose smiled. “When I was here for my brother Corey’s wedding I fell in love with Thunder Canyon.”

“Who wouldn’t,” Haley said. “But I don’t understand what you’re doing here with my brother.”

“What?” Rose looked like a kid who just got caught cheating on a test. “Why?”

“Because he’s an obnoxious jerk.” Haley gave him a teasing smile. “But I love him anyway.”

“Back at you, Hay.” Clearly his sister was joking, but Rose had gone directly to the bad place and he wasn’t sure how to get her out of it. He slid his arm around her waist. “Let’s go find our table.”

“With any luck it’s in a dark corner behind a plant.”

“You’re overly sensitive. It’s not that much of a difference. You just had a birthday.” He decided it was best not to put a finer point on it with numbers. “And in two months I’ll be a year older. See? We’re practically the same age.”

“Nice try. With hinky math like that it’s a wonder you got into an engineering program at all.” She shot him a rueful look.

Austin followed Rose, mesmerized by the sway of that feminine skirt. There were white cloth-covered tables three deep lining the perimeter of the room with the center open for dancing. Poinsettias in red and white with candles on either side made up the centerpieces. In the far corner, wedding gifts were piled up and there were two bars set up on either side of the room. Austin guided her straight to the closest one.

“I’d like a glass of chardonnay,” she said.

The bartender, in crisp white shirt, red tie and black pants, had dark hair shot with gray. “May I see your ID?”

“What?” she asked.

“Identification,” he repeated. “It’s illegal for me to serve alcohol to anyone under twenty-one.”

“I’m way over that,” she assured him.

“Okay, but I need to see some proof of that.” His tone was polite and professional.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No.” He didn’t budge.

“He’s a friend of yours,” she said to Austin, suspicion lurking in her eyes. “You put him up to this. It’s a practical joke.”

“I’ve never met him before,” he assured her, giving the guy a what-are-you-going-to-do shrug.

She blew out a breath, then opened her tiny beaded black evening bag, pulled out her driver’s license and handed it over.

The bartender checked the date and looked surprised. “Wow, I’m usually not that wrong.”

“And I haven’t worked that hard for an alcoholic beverage since... Actually ever.”

“Did you even try to get a drink before you were old enough?” Austin asked.

“No.”

“Good thing.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve probably always looked about twelve.”

“Thanks, I think.” She took a sip of the pale gold liquid.

“What’ll you have?” the bartender asked him.

“Beer. Bottle is fine.”

“Coming right up.”

“Hey,” she said to the bartender. “How come you didn’t ask him for ID?”

The guy grinned. “Because I can tell by looking that he’s legal.”

Austin saluted a thanks with his bottle and they walked across the open dance floor to find their table. Rose was frowning and clearly in a snit.

“What’s bugging you, Red?” he asked.

“Like you don’t know,” she grumbled.

“I’ve always looked older.” He shrugged. “It’s why I was able to get a tattoo when I was under age.”

“No way.”

“Yeah.” He took a sip of his beer. “It’s a beaut, too.”

“Where is it? Show me.”

“That would require undressing—”

She slid him a wry look and shook her head.

Too bad. He would very much like to undress her and see if she had more freckles on the curvy body under her lace and velvet dress. She was really stubborn about the age thing and if he was as smart as everyone thought, he’d throw in the towel. The problem was, he liked her. She was a real firecracker and it had nothing to do with the color of her hair.

Austin was inclined to hang in for a while and see if he could fire her up.

After dinner, Rose sat alone at the table watching couples on the dance floor. Until a few minutes ago she and Austin were one of them and she'd really liked the feel of his arms around her. Then his sister Angie had commandeered him for the chicken dance. What wedding was complete without that?

Everyone seemed to be having a great time. What was not to like? The whole event had lived up to its advance billing as the social affair of the year. It was completely enchanting. This room looked as magical as the resort's transformed lobby with twinkling lights wrapped around bare white branches and the poinsettias added a touch of red. The brides were perfect and perfectly happy with their hunky, handsome grooms.

It was the ultimate romantic fantasy and Rose was having serious doubts about her own ever coming true. Of course her brother Jackson chose that moment to sit down beside her. His fiancée, Laila Cates, pulled out the chair next to his.

"Hey, sis."

"Hey, yourself. Hi, Laila."

"Hi, Rose." The other woman smiled. "Love the dress."

She appreciated the compliment, but it didn't lift her spirits. How she longed to rest her head on her big brother's strong shoulder, but he wouldn't understand. Besides the fact that he was a guy's guy, he'd found the love of his life. Blonde, blue-eyed and beautiful, Laila looked like she'd stepped off a page of *People* magazine. And handsome Jackson, with his dark hair and eyes, could be in the movies if he wasn't doing community outreach and public relations work for Traub Oil Montana.

"You look really pretty tonight," Laila added.

Rose smiled at the woman who would be her sister-in-law. "I might have had a shot at mildly attractive until you sat down."

"Oh, please." She waved off the compliment.

Jackson's dark brown eyes glowed with pride and love when he looked at her. "My sister is right."

"About what?" Rose demanded. "That I have to wear a bag over my head?"

"No, that the woman I plan to marry is as beautiful as she is sweet and caring."

"Yeah." Rose nodded grudgingly. "If she wasn't, I could take great pleasure in hating her guts."

Laila laughed and like everything about her, the sound was beautiful. The least she could do was snort. "That's probably the highest praise and most sincere compliment I've ever received."

"But true." Rose sighed. "Darn it."

"You're not happy for me?" Jackson glanced at his fiancée. "For us?"

"Of course I am. Truly."

"What's wrong?"

"Everything's fine." If she pretended long and hard enough, maybe that wouldn't be a lie.

"Look, Rosie, you ought to know by now that fooling me isn't going to happen. So why won't you tell me what's up with you?"

"Because you really don't want to know."

"Yes, I do. We do," Jackson said and Laila nodded her agreement.

Rose looked at the happy, perfect couple and loneliness sucked her in further. This room was filled with happy, perfect couples and that was hard to look at when you weren't part of one. Especially when she'd worked so hard to make it happen. She'd dated a lot of guys, but not one of them was her prince and a happy ever after wasn't looking hopeful.

"I think there's something wrong with me," she finally said.

Jackson frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"It would be easier if I could blame my singleness on a lack of men. But no one would buy that excuse because I've dated more than any girl in the history of Thunder Canyon."

"We noticed." Her brother's tone was wry.

“Don’t start on me. The thing is, you’d think out of all those men there would be a spark, some chemistry, some hope, but not so much. There’s no magic. No zing. No lightning. No sizzle.”

Except with Austin Anderson.

It was proof that fate had a bizarre and warped sense of humor. From the moment he’d picked her up for this wedding, her skin had tingled. Being near him made her chest feel tight and don’t even get her started on the zing and sizzle when he’d held her in his arms on the dance floor.

Rose met her brother’s gaze. “The guys I’ve met are all great, so the only possible conclusion is that there’s something wrong with me. Maybe my standards are too high.”

“Maybe you’re afraid.” Jackson’s gaze never wavered.

“Of what?”

“Being hurt. You haven’t had a long-term relationship since the jerk in college.”

Rose was surprised that, not only had he been paying attention to her romantic life, but that he had also remembered. And the memory shouldn’t still sting, but it did. She wanted very much to change the subject, but blowing off the question gave the past more power than it should have.

She looked at Laila. “When I was in college there was this pre-med student. We were together over a year and I was in love with him. Graduation was coming up fast for both of us and it was time to fish or cut bait. He cut bait.”

“Why?” Laila glanced at Jackson who nodded.

“He fell into the poor-but-proud group. I believed that love was all we needed.” She shrugged. “He chose medical school over marriage.”

“That’s too bad.” Laila’s blue eyes brimmed with sympathy. “Sounds like the timing was just off.”

Apparently that was Rose’s fatal flaw—attraction to ill-timed men. The only one who interested her was born too late. Or she was too early. Either way that made him too wrong.

“Will you two excuse me?” Laila squeezed her fiancée’s hand. “I’m going to the ladies’ room.”

“I’ll be waiting.” There was love and longing in Jackson’s eyes as he watched her weave through the crowd to the door.

Rose felt equal parts of envy and pleasure that the two had found each other. She loved her brother and wanted him to be happy. “She’s a keeper.”

He nodded. “You and Austin Anderson looked pretty cozy out on the dance floor.”

The words snapped her back to attention even as she wondered if Jackson Traub had turned into a mind reader. She wasn’t sure what annoyed her most: that he’d noticed her with Austin or that he was right about the cozy part. If he’d noticed, surely other people had, too. That’s just what she’d wanted to avoid.

“What are you talking about? Cozy?”

“Laila mentioned it.”

“What?” she hedged.

“That you and Austin seemed to be having a good time,” he answered. “She hoped that’s a sign that things are looking up for him.”

“For Austin? I don’t understand.”

Jackson shrugged. “Apparently he had a bad experience with love.”

Surely he’d misunderstood Laila. It was hard for Rose to believe that someone as handsome, sexy and smart as Austin wouldn’t have women falling at his feet.

“What happened?”

“Not a clue. It was before I moved to Thunder Canyon.”

Rose tried not to be curious about Austin’s past. It was none of her business. Because she’d scratched him off her list, whatever had taken place would not impact her. They were nothing more than friends. But friends cared about each other. And confided their concerns. It would help to know the details of his bad luck.

“Laila probably knows his story,” she suggested.

“Probably,” he agreed.

“You should ask her.”

“Why?” Jackson’s look was skeptical.

Rose couldn’t meet his gaze. She glanced away and saw the man in question coming toward them with a beer in one hand and a glass of white wine in the other.

“No reason,” she said. “He’s a nice guy and I can’t imagine what woman in her right mind would dump him.”

“Maybe that’s it.”

“What?”

“She probably wasn’t in her right mind,” Jackson suggested.

“You should ask Laila.”

His dark eyes narrowed. “You seem awfully interested.”

“Not really.” She willed herself to look indifferent when every nerve in her body was quivering with questions. “It’s just that we’re friends.”

“Okay.”

“So you’ll find out what happened?”

“I’ll ask Laila.”

“Promise?” Rose said.

“You want a pinky swear?”

She did, but the words would never pass her lips. “A solemn brotherly promise is sacred enough for me,” she teased.

Jackson glanced at the doorway, clearly looking for Laila. “I think I’ll go find my lady.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

He stood, then tapped her nose. “There’s nothing wrong with you, Rosie. If anyone says different, I’ll beat him up.”

“I’d like that,” she agreed laughing.

“Seriously, if you need me, I’m there.”

“I know.”

She watched him walk away and meet his love at the door.

“Who is Jackson beating up?” Austin put the white wine in front of her.

“Guys with tattoos.” That was something else about this particular man that tweaked her curiosity.

It was nothing more than being nosy. Curiosity was better than feeling sorry for herself. And how stupid was that? She had a great job. A family who loved her. And Traubs didn’t give up. She wasn’t a couple today, but tomorrow? Anything was possible. Still, she felt the tiniest twinge when Austin set the glass of wine in front of her, shades of regret that he could only be her friend.

“Thanks.”

“So you’re sure I can’t talk you into looking at my tattoo?”

She laughed and realized how much easier it was to share in the joy of this beautiful evening when he was around. With luck, the romantic magic would shift in her direction. If it held, she wouldn’t have to kiss too many more frogs before one of them turned into a handsome prince.

## Chapter Three

And another frog it was.

There was no way Rose would kiss Harvey French. With her elbow on the wooden table, she rested her cheek in her palm and tried to look interested in what the guy was saying. Two days ago she'd been at the wedding with Austin and now, with her tush perched on the red vinyl seat in a booth lining the big room at Lipsmackin' Ribs, she was missing him more than she could say.

Harvey was an attorney she'd met in the mayor's office that morning and he'd asked her to dinner. Note to self, she thought, when a guy asks you to dinner, be sure to find out where. This place was a big clue that would, as Mr. I'm-the-best-attorney-on-the-planet say, go to character. And his was as repulsive as the short, tight, blue-and-white, belly-baring T-shirts this restaurant made its waitresses wear.

It was a big red flag. Not only was this place competition for her cousin DJ, there'd been some weird stuff going on between the competing restaurants.

As far as a kiss transforming this guy, in the fairy tale it was all about looks and Harvey was already handsome. He was blond, blue-eyed and broad-shouldered. The gray suit and red silk tie he wore were expensive. And yet...

Kill me now, she wanted to say. A direct meteor strike would be sudden and painless, unlike this never-ending, excruciating date. And they hadn't ordered yet, just drinks. But there wasn't enough liquor in the world to improve his personality.

"I really took them apart in court," he was saying. "It wasn't even a contest."

"Oh?"

"It cost them a bundle to defend against my client's cause of action. I buried them in paperwork, tied up the legal team answering motions in court. It was a beautiful thing to behold."

"Really?" Rose kicked herself. The single word would signal encouragement to continue, which was the last thing she wanted. He was probably black and blue from patting himself on the back. If she heard one more party-of-the-first-part, fiduciary duty or jurisprudence, she'd scream. Or choke him.

"They were forced to finally settle out of court. I was making it too expensive for them to continue defending against it. Although, just between you and me, there was no merit to my client's lawsuit."

Rose stared at him. It was lawyers like him who gave every attorney who'd passed the bar a bad reputation. Time to change the subject to something neutral. Like her new hometown. The weather.

"Thunder Canyon is a great place to live," she said. No "I" anywhere in that sentence.

"I've lived here all my life. Did I mention I played football?"

By her count he'd mentioned it four times. She remembered because she'd responded the same way three times and this made number four. "In Texas we take our football seriously."

"So you said." Harvey sipped his whiskey and soda.

Color her surprised that he'd noticed. She'd hoped that bringing up Thunder Canyon would segue into his asking why she'd moved. How she liked Montana. Did the cold bother her? Was it true that the best way to ride out a snowstorm was in front of a fire? She remembered Austin offering to help her build one and just the memory had her sizzling.

Rose flashed back to how handsome he'd looked in his traditional black tux at the wedding. She remembered delivering dinners with him on Thanksgiving and his joking about boring her into a coma. No danger of that happening. He was fun. Unlike the buffoon sitting across from her.

The buffoon continued, "In high school, I was quarterback of the football team when we won our division and went on to state."

"Is this a colder winter than usual in Montana?" she asked.

“No, I remember football practice and games in the snow. Although our season went longer because we were always in playoffs when I was the quarterback.” The ice in his empty glass clinked when he swirled it. “It was good training for practicing law. Everyone tries to knock you down, but you dig in and don’t let them.”

“Words to live by.” That was as close to neutral as she could get.

She studied him. Good-looking. Smart enough to become a lawyer. From a nice family. On paper he was everything she wanted in a man if you left out the boring and self-centered part. He hadn’t asked her anything and apparently didn’t care how she was adjusting to her new life in town. Call her perverse, but she let the awkward silence drag on because everything that popped into her mind to say would only lead him into another topic about himself.

“I’m pretty good on a pair of skis,” he said. “But there’s nothing like the adrenaline rush of snowboarding.”

“Oh?” She couldn’t resist. “I bet that’s good practice for a career as a lawyer, too. Fall down, get back up.”

“Smart girl. I decided on a career as an attorney because knowing the law gives you power. And the money’s good, too.” He grinned and winked.

Dear God, did he really just wink at her? She barely held back a shudder. “So I’ve heard.”

“I’ve got the mayor’s ear.” He lowered his voice as if he was sharing a national security secret and all the families eating ribs in booths and wooden tables around the room were spies. “If your brother Ethan needs local legal counsel for Traub Oil, I’m his guy. Or if he’s looking to merge the legal departments of Texas and Montana under one roof, I could help with that, too.”

The “aha” light came on and all became clear to Rose. This blowhard wasn’t attracted to her any more than she was to him. He had an ulterior motive for asking her out. If Harvey hadn’t picked her up at her apartment, she’d have walked out right that second. But her place was a long hike in the cold and she was wearing heels.

She stood up suddenly. “Excuse me, Harvey. I’m going to the ladies’ room.”

Before he could answer, she turned and hurried through the place. She passed waitresses wearing short, tight blue shorts and a big red lip imprint on their T-shirts feeling as exploited as they probably did. Following the back wall, she finally found the alcove with doors that said “Men” and “Women” staring at each other. She pushed open the female door and blew out a long breath, grateful that it was quiet and she was alone.

“That pompous windbag. Conniving, underhanded, self-absorbed jerk. How dare he use me to get Ethan’s legal business?”

There must be a way to cut this abomination of an experience short. It wasn’t practical to simply walk out and she couldn’t insist he take her home immediately. Working with him could get awkward if he wasn’t exaggerating the truth and really did have access to the mayor.

Bo Clifton had probably known Harvey a long time. There could be press releases with critical wording that might require legal tweaking, to keep the mayor out of hot water because of unfortunate phrasing. How could she gracefully end this horrid encounter before committing justifiable homicide? It would be self-defense because if it lasted any longer, Harvey French would bore her to death. But if she choked him, there could be jail time involved. That would upset her family and she didn’t think she’d do well in jail.

Although she was sick of Harvey, pretending to come down with an illness was problematic. Her acting skills weren’t that good. There was only one thing to do, what she always did when she was in trouble.

She pulled her cell phone out of her purse and brought up her contact list, then hit Jackson’s number. The last thing he said to her at the wedding was that if she needed him he would be there. Time to put up or shut up.

Rose worried her lip as the phone rang three, four, five times. Darn it. He wasn't answering. Just when she was afraid the call was going straight to his voice mail, Jackson finally picked up.

"What?" He sounded crabby and breathless, as if he'd been running, or...

Oh, no. Shoot, shoot, shoot, she said to herself. With caller ID, he already knew who was calling, so she had to say something. "It's Rose."

"Are you okay?" The words were laced with alarm.

"Fine, physically. I have a date, but—"

"You called to tell me you have a date? What am I? Your BFF? That's not breaking news. It's business as usual for you."

"No, Jackson, listen. I'm with him right now—"

"Why is your voice echoing?"

Rose leaned her shoulder against a tile wall. The mirror and sink were beside her. She stared at her reflection, the desperation on her face, and hoped it was as clear in her voice. "I'm hiding in the restroom, so technically he's not here now. He's waiting for me at the table."

"I don't need a play by play—"

"Stop yelling at me and listen. You have to get me out of here."

"Are your legs painted on? Just walk out."

"He picked me up, I don't have a car. The thing is, I met him at work. There's no graceful way for me to handle this and it could get awkward at the office."

"Rose—" Annoyance grated in his voice.

"Please, Jackson. I wouldn't have bothered you if there was any other way. I'm begging you to get me out of here. Think of something so he won't be offended. He's got an ego on him." She added the final argument. "I'm at Lipsmackin' Ribs."

"Traitor."

"It wasn't my idea," she protested. "He surprised me. But do you see what I'm up against?"

There was a long silence before he finally said, "Give me fifteen minutes."

"Thanks, Jackson."

Rose reapplied her lipstick, then went back to the table. "All freshened up."

He looked a little miffed. "The waitress was here to take our order, but I didn't know what you wanted."

That surprised her from the man who thought he knew everything. On the other hand, she didn't want him to be on the hook for food she had no intention of eating.

"We've been so busy blathering away that I haven't had a chance to look at the menu." She gave Harvey a bright smile, something it was possible to do now that help was on the way.

It was actually closer to twenty-five minutes before Jackson finally showed up. He stopped beside the booth and scowled. "I've been looking for you."

"Jackson?" She put as much surprise as possible into her voice. "I'm on a date here. Harvey French, this is my brother Jackson Traub."

"Nice to meet you." Harvey put out his hand and they shook.

"What are you doing here, Jackson?" Her performance wouldn't win any awards, but it was the best she could do.

"Your cell phone is off. There's urgent family business and I'm here to get you."

"Can't it wait until Harvey and I have dinner?"

"No." There was a dangerous glint in her brother's dark eyes and she wondered if she'd pushed it just a little too far.

"Jackson wouldn't be here if it wasn't important." She pretended regret when she looked at Harvey. "I'm so sorry, but it looks like I have to cut our evening short."

"Only if I get a rain check," Harvey said.

“Only if...” That wasn’t an outright lie. She stood and grabbed her coat and purse. “Thanks for the drink.”

She lifted her hand in a wave, then turned and followed her brother outside. His new luxury SUV was parked at the curb, proof that he was settling down. Rose opened the door and got in. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“Yeah.” He turned the key in the ignition and the dashboard came to life, highlighting his angry expression.

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“Good, because you owe me big time. Laila and I were just about to have a—romantic moment.”

That’s what she’d been afraid of. His hair was uncombed and looked as if Laila had been running her fingers through it. Beneath his sheepskin-lined jacket his shirttail was hanging out, as if he’d dressed in a hurry and didn’t take the time to tuck it in. There wasn’t much she could say, but she had to try.

“I’m so sorry. I feel terrible about that, but I was desperate.”

“That’s what you get for going out with someone from work.”

“How else am I supposed to meet men?” she asked.

Jackson’s only response was an angry look. In the silence that followed, she realized he was driving in the opposite direction from where her apartment was located.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

A few minutes later her brother pulled up in front of The Hitching Post and turned off the car. “I didn’t make up the part about urgent family business.”

Rose narrowed her gaze on him. “What’s going on?”

“Come with me.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No.” He came around the car and met her on the sidewalk. The streetlight illuminated his features and there was a very real possibility that the glare on his face was permanent. Without another word, she followed him into The Hitching Post.

Unlike Lipsmackin’ Ribbs on Tuesday night, this place was quiet. Divided by a half wall, there was a restaurant on one side and a bar on the other. Rose was pretty sure they were going to the other.

Her suspicion was confirmed when she saw her brothers Dillon, Ethan and Corey at a table with the best view of the painting behind the old west-style bar. In the picture, a scantily clad and scandalous Lily Divine stared down at the men with a “come hither” challenge in her eyes.

“Bet she didn’t have any trouble getting a man,” Rose grumbled.

And that’s when she saw Austin Anderson on the restaurant side sitting at a table with his sister Angie. Family night at The Hitching Post, just her luck. They saw her and waved and she lifted a hand in response. For a second she thought about breaking rank and joining them because it was clear Jackson had mobilized Traub reinforcements for some reason.

All her brothers were there except Jason who was still in Midland, Texas. Whatever the four in Thunder Canyon had to say was probably not something she wanted to hear. And she really would rather Austin didn’t have a front row seat. He’d already seen her get carded and a stern talking to by the Traub tribe was not another humiliation she wanted him to witness.

“You know, Jackson, I think I’m going to skip this family reunion,” she said.

“If you take one step toward that door, I will put you over my shoulder.” It didn’t seem possible that his fierce look could intensify, but the angry stare got angrier and stopped her cold.

“Okay, let’s get this over with.”

“My sentiments exactly. Laila’s waiting.”

Rose moved around him and with head held high, walked to the table where her brothers waited. All of them were at least six feet tall, broad-shouldered and dark-haired. She'd told Austin they were the best-looking men at the wedding, but right this minute she would take back those words and substitute annoying.

She took the last open seat at the table for four. The three of them had beers and there was a fourth that Jackson picked up. Nothing for her.

Dillon, the oldest, rested his forearms on the table. "Jackson called me after you sounded the alarm, Rose. I decided a family meeting was in order."

"Why?" This wasn't unprecedented, but it didn't happen very often.

"Consider this an intervention," he said, a very doctor-like thing to say. Because he was a doctor, the word choice made perfect sense.

The meaning? Not so much. "What for? I don't smoke, do drugs or drink too much."

"You're addicted to dating," Corey said.

"You're not serious," she scoffed.

"Yeah, we are." Jackson pulled over a chair from the adjacent table. "You date too much."

"Define too much." Her chin lifted a notch.

"So many men, so little time." Dillon took a pull on his beer. "Off the top of my head there's Nick, Dean and Cade Pritchett."

"Okay, so—"

"John Kelly," Corey added. "The mortgage banker."

"Yeah." Rose struggled to put a face with the name. "He was very banker-ish."

"You don't remember him, do you?" Ethan looked thoughtful. "Zach Evans. He's a rancher."

"Rob Lewis, chamber of commerce president." Corey turned his beer bottle.

They continued to add names to a list that became pretty impressive. She was amazed that her macho brothers had paid so much attention to her love life. Or, to put a finer point on it, her lack of love life.

"They don't even know about Harvey French." Jackson's eyes narrowed.

"Then I'll tell them," she said. "He's a lawyer and asked me out because he wants to get Traub Oil Montana's legal business. And possibly the Texas stuff, too."

"Jerk," Ethan muttered.

"My sentiments exactly. That's why I called Jackson," she defended. "So if we're done here—"

"Not so fast," they all said.

Ethan nailed her with a look. "You've got to stop, Rosie. Take a break."

"I can't do that." She folded her arms over her chest and looked at each of them defiantly.

"Yeah, you can. Get your head on straight," Corey suggested. "Decide what you're looking for. Separate the wheat from the chaff."

"What does that even mean?"

If this was a job, they'd be telling her to work it, put in the hours, make herself indispensable. This was even more important. It was her life, her happiness. Why should finding love require any less dedication than her career?

Jackson leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees. "Some soul searching couldn't hurt, Rose. You need to figure out why no guy is generating sparks."

That wasn't completely true, she thought. There were enough sparks with Austin to start a fairly frightening forest fire. She glanced over at him and saw he was looking at her. The expression in his eyes set off a fireball in her belly, proving her point. She grabbed Ethan's beer and took a drink to put out the blaze. This thing with Austin was nothing. It couldn't be.

"Jackson's right," Corey agreed. "Time-out."

"Since when are you guys the dating police?"

"Since always." Dillon met her gaze. "It's what big brothers do."

They were also men and didn't get it.

"I'm a grown woman. You can't ground me," she protested. "Don't think I don't appreciate all you do, but—"

"No excuses. Cold turkey." Jackson took a sip from his bottle. "I bet you can't go a month without a date."

That touched a nerve, but she pushed down the competitive streak. "A woman of my advancing years can't afford to sit on the sidelines that long."

"Don't talk to me about piling up the years." Dillon, the oldest sibling, shook his head. "You're just a baby."

"Hardly," she said. "And you don't understand. You all found love without even trying."

The four of them stared at her, then started laughing.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"It's never as easy as it looks." Amusement still lurked in Corey's light brown eyes. "Jason is the last unattached Traub brother and he's still in Texas. Maybe it's something about Thunder Canyon."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," she said. "And I've got to keep myself out there—"

"No." Jackson shook his head. "That's what we're trying to tell you. Time-out, for Pete's sake. I double dare you to put the brakes on the dating wagon for thirty days."

Double dare? Rose gritted her teeth. He knew her too well. She never turned down a double dare, darn him.

"You're going straight to hell, Jackson Traub." She glared at him and figured the expression was just as fearsome as his.

He looked completely unimpressed. "A brother's gotta do what a brother's gotta do."

Frustration knotted inside her when they all nodded in agreement.

"And if any one of us catches you on a date before time is up, it's back to day one, plus two weeks," Jackson warned.

"A month and a half?" she cried.

"Double dare," he reminded her. "Technically I could double the stakes, but I'm cutting you some slack."

She blew out a breath. "Done."

"And remember, this isn't Midland." Jackson pointed a finger at her. "Thunder Canyon is a small town and word spreads real fast, so don't be trying to pull anything. We've got eyes and ears everywhere."

"I'll get even with you. Every last one of you," she warned, treating each of them to the Rose Traub double dare stare. "You won't know where or when, but payback is coming."

"Yeah, we're scared." Dillon stood and the others followed suit.

He patted her head. Ethan tapped her nose. Corey ruffled her hair. Then the three walked away, leaving her with Jackson. As Rose watched their backs, her gaze drifted to Austin. He was frowning at his sister and it reminded her that her brother was supposed to get her information about him.

Rose watched Jackson shrug into his jacket. "So," she said, "what did Laila say about Austin? Did you get details about why his love life has nowhere to go but up?"

"You're not dating for a month." Jackson stared at her as if she had two heads. "What do you care?"

"I don't."

That was a big, fat lie.

Even worse than lying to her brother, she couldn't stop thinking about Austin Anderson.

## Chapter Four

Austin supervised a group of teenagers who were putting lights on the Christmas tree at ROOTS. He could have helped, made suggestions about spacing and symmetry, but it was their tree and they didn't need adults butting in. That was part of the philosophy here. Supervise for safety, advise only when asked. Watching the kids joking and laughing, talking and teasing, he wished there'd been a hangout like this when he was growing up. It had been Haley's dream and she'd pulled rabbits out of a hat to make it happen.

The mural she'd painted of teens playing sports, using computers and texting on cell phones filled the wall that faced Main Street. She'd found an old couch, a recliner that no longer reclined, ugly lamps and scratched tables that the kids could use without worrying about messing anything up. They came to talk, vent, do homework and have fun. Thanks to a long list of volunteers, there was always an adult on the premises.

Tonight he was that adult.

If only Rose Traub saw him that way. Somehow he was going to change her mind about him, although so far he didn't have much of a plan about how to make it happen. Last night he'd seen her at The Hitching Post with her brothers who appeared to be pulling rank. He recognized the big brother body language and remembered how young and defiant she'd looked. Austin recognized that body language. He'd gotten an advanced degree in young and defiant.

Angry voices in the corner around the tree got his attention and he moved to defuse the situation. Three girls watched the two boys as arguing turned to shoving. Understanding from personal experience how a flood of testosterone could drown a guy's common sense, Austin quickly moved in to separate them.

He pushed his way between the teenagers who were both skinny and shorter than he was. But a stray punch thrown was always a concern.

"Break it up, guys," he said. "Use words."

"He already did that." The shaggy-haired blond had fire in his blue eyes. "He was talkin' trash about my sister."

"No, dude—I said she was fine." Black hair and eyes along with low-slung jeans screamed bad boy.

The image attracted girls for some reason and Austin should know. Growing up, he'd excelled at that phase and never lacked for attention from the opposite sex. Then his luck with girls ran out. About the time he'd graduated from college, he'd thought he was grown up enough to have his own family, but the girl he'd asked had easily resisted him.

The bell over the front door dinged, but before he could see who came in, the two combatants lunged at each other again. Austin put his hands out to keep them apart.

"Knock it off, Evan," he said to the blond. "Looking out for your sister is a good thing, but I guarantee she won't thank you for punching out the dude who's giving her a compliment." He gave the tough guy a hard stare. "It was a compliment right, Cal?"

Rebellion crackled in the dark eyes, then backed off a notch, signaling a truce. Full surrender would take time. And maturity.

"Yeah," the kid finally said. "I didn't mean anything."

"Didn't think so." Austin dropped his hands. "Take five, guys, and grab a soda. Cool off."

In the back room there was a refrigerator with fruit, cold drinks and water. A pantry was full of crunchy snacks. Not only could teenage boys consume unbelievable quantities of food under normal circumstances, sometimes kids also weren't getting enough to eat at home. There were families in financial need because of job loss in the recent recession. Austin hoped the green engineering process he was working on would create employment opportunities for some of them.

“Is it always this exciting around here?”

Austin knew that voice belonged to the redhead on his mind. There was a wide grin on his face when he turned.

“Rose.”

She lifted a mitten-covered hand. “Hi.”

“It’s usually pretty quiet in here,” he said, glancing at the doorway where the teens disappeared. Their voices drifted in from the back room.

“I know it’s wrong to condone fighting, but—” She smiled. “A brother protecting his sister’s honor.”

“It’s what we do.” He’d stepped in to defend Angie when Haley had brought home a teen in trouble. Although it turned out he’d misinterpreted the situation. But Rose wasn’t talking about him. “This is a pleasant surprise.”

Not his smoothest dialogue. Maybe he should pull out his bad boy alter ego and see if it still worked magic.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Good. You?”

“Fine.” She was bundled up in a puffy jacket, navy cashmere scarf, matching hat and mittens. Black slacks and boots completed her winter look. “How’s Angie?”

“Busy. Between college classes and work, she’s got a lot on her plate.”

“Sounds like it.” She pulled off her jacket and mittens which meant she wasn’t in too big a hurry to leave. “I saw you with her last night.”

“Yeah.” When Rose had walked in, he could hardly keep his eyes off her. “We stopped for a quick burger.”

“The Hitching Post has pretty good ones.”

“Arguably the best in town,” he agreed. “Is there something you wanted? Not that I’m pushing you out the door, but—”

“Right, I’m not the typical demographic for ROOTS.”

“We specialize in rebellion, group therapy for angst-related issues and anger management. It’s a lot about healthy, positive ways to channel hormones.”

She laughed. “What a diplomatic way of saying I’m too old to be here.”

“Not from where I’m standing.”

They were in the middle of the room with no convenient place to hang mistletoe, but he’d never wanted some of that twig more in his life. It would give him an excuse to kiss her. And he badly wanted to which was becoming a chronic problem. Every time he saw her, the urge to take her in his arms was stronger.

With every lamp and overhead light on in the room, he knew the pink that crept into her cheeks was a blush and not from the cold outside. That was good, right? At least it was some reaction to him.

“I just walked over from the mayor’s office to deliver some Christmas cheer in person,” she said.

“You walked?”

“It’s only a couple of blocks and the night is gorgeous and clear.”

“Not too cold?” Austin asked skeptically.

“I bundled up.”

He could see that. While the Eskimo look was cute, he did like her in the black lace dress that was like sex in motion when she walked. “So what’s the news?”

“As you know, I handle public relations and communications for the mayor’s office.”

She seemed a little nervous, and from his perspective, just happened to be the cutest communicator he could imagine.

“The mayor hasn’t decided to revoke the ROOTS permit, has he?”

“No,” she said quickly. “Just the opposite. Sort of. I mean I’m not here with another permit. You don’t need two. But Mayor Clifton and the town council believe this place has proved to be beneficial to the teenagers. There’s been a definite drop in nuisance-related complaints since it opened. He’s allocating funds for tutoring and more computer equipment.”

A sudden burst of laughter from the other room told him the boys had let go of their anger as boys usually did.

Austin grinned. “That’s great. Haley’s on her honeymoon, but I’ll let her know when she gets back. She’ll be really happy to hear about that.”

“The press release is going out tomorrow, so I wanted to stop by for a minute and deliver the good news.”

“I’m glad you did.” And not just because the equipment and scholastic help were so badly needed. “Some kids don’t have a computer at home and they’re not likely to broadcast that by using the ones at the library. It’s an academic disadvantage without access at home. Plus, this place has become the cool place to hang out. Putting a subtle emphasis on study might make schoolwork a little cooler, too.”

“I see what you mean.” She smiled. “This is the best part of my job.”

The kids drifted back into the room and after a curious glance at the newcomer, they resumed stringing lights on the tree.

Austin looked back at Rose. “Actually, by showing up you saved me a phone call.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I was going to ask you out, but now I can do it in person.”

“A date?”

The distressed expression on her face meant this was not starting out well. “When a guy invites a woman to dinner, by definition it’s called a date.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“Afraid? Why is it a problem? Because I’m not your ideal age?”

“No.” She hesitated. “I mean yes, you’re not. But that’s not the only thing.”

“What else?”

“I’m on a dating diet.”

That was pretty close to the lamest excuse he’d ever heard. He could see the headline now. Former bad boy crashes and burns. Reputation on life support. Irritation chipped away at him and he didn’t want to set a bad example for the kids.

“How about some coffee?”

“No, thanks.”

He took her arm anyway and led her into the back room. This discussion wasn’t for curious teenagers to hear.

Austin folded his arms over his chest and stared down at her. “Now tell me what you really want to say.”

“I just did.”

His eyes narrowed. “Dating diet? Really? If you don’t want to go out with me, just say so.”

“I actually did that and you wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Then explain to me the dating diet.”

“It’s actually the result of a double dare.” Her expression was completely honest, which was refreshing. She answered in her characteristically straightforward way. “My brothers told me that I need to take a break from dating.”

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