



MARRIED TILL CHRISTMAS

Christine Rimmer

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Married Till Christmas

«HarperCollins»

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Will they give into their desire's this Christmas? Nell Bravo has had her heart broken twice by Declan McGrath; she's not giving him another chance! But Declan has never forgotten her and when they end up married in Vegas, he's determined to make it work. She'll give him until Christmas, but that's it. Will Declan be able to win her heart before December 26th?

An impulse wedding...

Strong, sexy Nell Bravo won't be fooled again. After all, Declan McGrath already shattered her heart into pieces—not once, but twice. When alluring CEO Deck sweeps Nell off her feet in Las Vegas, though, she tumbles headlong into an “only in Vegas” fling with her first love. But Nell sure didn't bargain on a Vegas wedding!

...a lifetime of love?

It's taken a long time for Deck to finally capture the one who got away. And this time, he's charmed her straight to the altar. But Nell will stay married to him only until Christmas Day—unless Deck can prove that this time, it's for keeps. With the clock ticking, can Deck convince Nell that he truly is her one and only...or has Mr. Love-'Em-and-Leave-'Em broken a Bravo's heart for the last time?

There was definitely something...

Something she'd done that she probably shouldn't have.

Something...

Wait a minute.

Images from the night before flashed through her mind.

The Italian place. She'd had a little too much Chianti, hadn't she? And then, in the limo, sailing along the strip, making love. Drinking champagne.

But the champagne was no excuse. She hadn't been that drunk. She'd been perfectly cognizant of everything that happened.

When they'd just happened to stop at the place you get a marriage license, what had she done? Followed him in like a lamb to the slaughter.

And when he'd whipped the ring out of his pocket, had she said, “Declan Keallach McGrath, you hold on just a minute here. What is that ring doing in your pocket?”

No, she had not.

Instead, she'd let him take her hand and slip that ring onto her finger. And then she'd clung to him like paint as they'd rolled on down the strip to that wedding place called Now and Forever.

Now and Forever.

Oh, my God.

The mermaid wedding dress. The flowers. The Gardenia Chapel...

Sweet Lord in heaven.

What had she done?

* * *

The Bravos of Justice Creek: Where bold hearts collide under Western skies

Married Till Christmas

Christine Rimmer



www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHRISTINE RIMMER came to her profession the long way around. She tried everything from acting to teaching to telephone sales. Now she's finally found work that suits her perfectly. She insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine lives with her family in Oregon. Visit her at www.christinerimmer.com.

For my family, with all my love.

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[Chapter One](#)

“God, you are beautiful. That red hair, those big green eyes. That amazing body. And those lips. Baby, those lips were made for a man to bite. Can I tell you a secret?”

Nell Bravo had a one-word answer for that one. “No.”

But the handsome guy in the expensive suit wasn’t listening. He leaned extra close, breathing Booker’s Rye—and no, he wasn’t really drunk, only buzzed enough to get pushy. “I don’t usually go for tattoos on a woman.” He eyed the half sleeve of bright ink that swirled over her left arm from shoulder to elbow. “But, in your case, I’m definitely making an exception. I’d like to jump you right here at the bar.”

Nell considered summoning the energy to be offended, but that would be faking it. She’d never minded the brash approach, not as long as she was interested. Too bad she just wasn’t—and hadn’t been for a long time now.

Except for one man.

One man who managed to show up every time she turned around lately, a guy she was not letting close to her ever again, thank you very much—and that did it. That finished it. She’d had enough of the handsome fellow in the pricey suit.

Not only did he refuse to take a hint, he’d gone and made her think of the one person she wanted nothing to do with.

Ever again.

Not even in her mind.

Somewhere behind her, bells and whistles went off as a lucky slot player hit a jackpot. Nell grabbed her clutch, whipped out a twenty and slid it under her cocktail napkin for the bartender. “That’s it for me.”

“Whoa now,” said the guy beside her, whose name was Ron. “Put your money away.”

“Great to meet you, Ron,” she lied. “I’ve got your card and I’ll be in touch.” He owned Ron’s Custom Tile, with five stores in the Bay Area and Los Angeles. Her company, Bravo Construction, ordered a lot of tile. Maybe they could have done some business. Probably not now, though. Ron was just way too interested in looking down her dress. “Good night.” She spun on her stool, lowered her Jimmy Choos to the floor and set off for the lobby area and the elevator up to her room.

But Ron was no quitter. “Hold on a minute.” He was right behind her. “Baby, don’t go...”

Nell stopped in her tracks. When she turned, he almost plowed into her. “Look.” She pinned him with her coldest stare. “I don’t know how much clearer I can make this. I’m not interested in being jumped by you—right there at the bar, or anywhere in else in this hotel. Good night, Ron.”

He started to speak again, but she didn’t hang around to hear it. Instead, she took off, moving faster now, weaving her way past the rows of whizzing, dinging slot machines and on to the never-ending main casino floor. She flew past the gaming tables and more bars and restaurants, her high heels tapping hard over polished floors, ears tuned for the sound of Ron’s footsteps behind her.

Yep. The idiot was following her.

So what? He wasn’t going to catch her. She kept going, never once looking back.

Finally, she reached the blue-lit hotel lobby with its glittering waterfall wall and swirling peacock-colored carpet. As she veered by the concierge desk, she slipped her key card from her clutch.

Entering the marble-lined bank of elevators at last, she pushed the button to go up.

Unfortunately, no car was available.

Crap. Okay, she could just keep on going out the other end of the bay and circle back around, hoping to lose Ron in the process.

Or simply wait.

Screw it. She waited, which gave Ron the chance to catch up with her. When he reached her, she glanced the other way. Maybe ignoring him would do the trick.

Not so much. He grabbed her arm and pulled her around to face him. “Now, just a damn minute here.”

“Ron. You don’t look all that handsome with that mean scowl on your face.”

“I just want to—”

“No, Ron. I said no.”

“There’s no need to be rude, Nell.” He spoke through clenched teeth and he still had a death grip on her arm.

Nell felt a burning need to give Ron the sharp knee in the family jewels he very much deserved. But she kept her cool. “Seriously, Ron? This is going nowhere good. It’s a casino, in case you didn’t notice.” She pointed at the camera mounted up where the wall met the ceiling. “The eye-in-the-sky sees all. I only need to let out a scream and your evening will be downgraded from bad to a whole lot worse.”

His grip on her arm loosened. Before she could congratulate herself for some smooth handling of an iffy situation, she noticed that Ron’s narrowed eyes had widened and shifted upward toward something behind her.

Yanking her arm free, she turned.

Not possible. “Deck?” It couldn’t be.

Oh, but it was. Declan McGrath, all six foot four and two-hundred-plus muscled-up pounds of him, right here in Vegas. At her hotel.

“What a coincidence running into you here,” said Deck in that rough, low, wonderful voice of his.

Nell rolled her eyes so hard she almost fell over. “Coincidence, my ass. Don’t even try to tell me you’re here for the Worldwide Hard Surfaces Trade Show.”

“Okay, I won’t.” The corners of his mouth inched upward in the slow, delicious smile that used to make her life worth living. Years and years ago. Back when she was young and trusting, before he’d dumped her flat—twice. “God, Sparky. You do look good.”

She gave him the same look she’d been giving Ron—a look of ice and steel. “How many times do I have to say it? Don’t call me Sparky.”

“I just can’t help myself.”

“You don’t want to help yourself.”

“That’s right. I never give up. And we both know it’s just a matter of time until you give in and give me a break.”

“You’re delusional.”

“I prefer to call it thinking positive.”

“Hold on just a damn minute,” Ron piped up from behind her. “What the hell is going on here?”

Nell turned to tell the tile man—again—to get lost.

But Deck stepped around her and took Ron’s arm.

Ron flailed. “What the hell, man? Let go of my arm.”

“In a minute.” Deck glanced back to pin Nell with a look. “Do. Not. Move.” And then he pulled Ron down to the other end of the enclosure and whispered something in his ear. Ron paled.

The nearest elevator dinged and the doors slid open. Several people filed out. Nell watched them go, thinking that she should get on and get away before Deck came back.

But then again, no. Just no. She’d been walking away from Deck for months now. Enough of that. This time he’d finally gone too far.

Following her to Vegas? Who did that?

She wasn’t surrendering the field this time. Not until she’d treated him to a very large piece of her mind. And maybe the kick in the cojones she’d almost given Ron.

More elevator cars arrived and more people spilled out as Deck whispered in Ron’s ear.

“Got it,” said Ron, blond head bobbing. “Loud and clear.”

“Fair enough.” Deck let go of his arm.

Ron backed away with both hands up. “But hey, like I said, she’s not wearing a ring.”

“A ring?” Nell demanded. Not that either man was listening.

“She’s naughty like that sometimes,” Deck said with a so-what shrug. “Now get lost.” Ron didn’t argue. He took off. Nell leaned against the marble wall, her arms crossed over her chest, as Deck turned her way again. “Good,” he said. “You’re still here.”

Where to even start with him? “You’ve got to leave me alone, Deck.”

He came toward her, so big and solid, all lazy male grace, in jeans that hugged his hard legs and an olive green shirt that made his hazel eyes gleam so damn bright—chameleon eyes, she used to call them. They seemed different colors depending on his mood and the light. He’d rolled his sleeves to his elbows, showing off strong forearms, all muscled and veiny, dusted with sandy-colored hair.

It just wasn’t fair. No man should be allowed to look that amazing. She wrapped her arms tighter around herself to keep her grabby hands from reaching out and squeezing those rock-hard muscles of his.

Because, she bleakly reminded herself, squeezing Deck’s muscles—or any other part of him, for that matter—was a big, fat never-again.

He kept on coming. She had to put up a hand. “That’s close enough.”

“I love that red dress. You should wear red all the time.”

“I know, I know. Goes with my hair, blah, blah, blah. Did you tell Ron we’re married?”

He smirked. “Worked, didn’t it?”

“Except, well, doesn’t that make me the kind of woman who takes off her wedding ring and goes trolling for a hot date with a stranger?”

Deck snorted. “Ron? Hot?”

“Well, theoretically speaking—and Ron’s hotness or lack thereof? Totally not the issue here.”

“Sparky,” he chided. “You would never cheat, I know that. The thing with Ron was only to make me jealous.”

Two elevators opened at the same time. People got off and others got on.

She waited till the doors slid shut to say, “There was no thing with Ron. And what do you mean, make you jealous? I had no idea you were in Vegas, and even if I’d known you’d followed me here, I would have zero desire to make you jealous.”

“But you did make me jealous. And I forgive you. You’re a high-spirited woman, always have been. You’ve got to have your fun.”

Where was this going? Somehow, once again with him, she was failing to make the point that he should give up chasing after her because she was never getting caught—not by him. No way. “I think it’s just possible that you’ve finally completely lost your mind.”

He slapped both big hands against his chest. “Go ahead. Hurt me. Call me names. I can take it.”

More elevator doors opened. If she ducked into one, he would probably just follow her. Dropping her key card into her clutch, she drew away from the wall and started walking backward. Deck came after her. They ended up facing off by a potted ficus plant around the corner from the constant flow of people going up and down floors.

“What now, Nellie?” he asked, his voice so gentle suddenly, the intimate sound tugging on a tender place inside her, a place she used to be so certain he had killed stone dead all those years ago.

Why wouldn’t it die? This...feeling she had for him, this stupid, impossible yearning for a man who had turned his back on her twice after promising she would always be the only one for him?

He just stood there now, close enough to reach out and touch, waiting for her to make her next move. Oh, she just ached to open her mouth and yell at him to leave her alone, get the hell away from her. But yelling would not only bring security running, it would be admitting that he was actually getting to her.

Which he was. And which he knew already. She could see that in his gleaming, watchful eyes.

It was bad enough that he knew. Losing her temper over it would only prove how powerfully he affected her. “Who told you I would be here?”

“Have dinner with me and we can talk about that.” He took a step closer.

“Forget dinner.” She stepped back. The ficus tree was right behind her. A trailing branch brushed her shoulder. “And I already know the answer to my question. Garrett told you I was here, am I right?” Her brother and partner in Bravo Construction liked Deck, damn it. Plus, there was the big, high-end house Deck had hired BC to build. Generally speaking, it was good business for Garrett to help an important client get what he wanted—but not when what he wanted was another chance with Nell. Garrett had no right to take a customer’s side against his business partner, who also happened to be his own flesh and blood. “I’m going to kill Garrett.”

Deck stuck his hands in his pockets. She read the move as an attempt to look easygoing and harmless. As if. “It wasn’t Garrett,” he said.

“Then who?”

“Your mother told me.”

Now Nell really wanted to start yelling. Willow Bravo had turned into a matchmaking nightmare over the past couple of years. She’d become obsessed with seeing her children married and settled down. At least until now Willow had shown the good sense to leave Nell out of all that crap.

But, one by one, Willow’s other four grown children had found marital bliss. That meant only Nell remained single and Willow just couldn’t let well enough alone.

“You pumped my mother for information about me?” Nell kept her voice low, but barely.

“Whoa. Settle down.”

“That’s just plain wrong.”

“True,” he said with zero remorse. “When it comes to you, I’ll do whatever I have to do. But I didn’t go to your mother. She called me. She said she hasn’t forgotten how much you loved me once.”

Nell pressed her lips together and expelled an outraged breath through her nose. “Admit it. She called you after you let her know that you’ve been trying to get something going with me.”

“Think about it, Nellie.” He looked way too pleased with himself. “How could she not know that I’ve been chasing you?”

He had a point.

In recent months, Deck had made himself famous in their hometown of Justice Creek with his relentless pursuit of her. He'd started his campaign to get her attention by going to the places she went—her brother Quinn's fitness center, her half sister Elise's bakery for coffee early in the morning and her friend Rye McKellan's pub. His constant presence at McKellan's had really annoyed her. She not only liked to hang out there—she lived above the pub in the loft next door to Rye's.

After a month or so of turning up just about everywhere she went, he'd called her and asked her straight out for a date.

She'd said, "Absolutely not and do not call me again."

He hadn't called again. But he had shown up at Bravo Construction to ask her to build his new house. She'd handed him over to Garrett.

Then he'd begun showering her with flowers and gifts. She'd refused to accept them. He'd hired a skywriter to blaze their names in a heart across the Colorado sky. She'd pretended not to notice.

Every time he would come up with a new way to get her attention, she would shut him right down. She'd never imagined he'd follow her all the way to Sin City.

Yet, here he was again.

"I'll be having a serious talk with my mother," she said. "And you should be ashamed of yourself, pumping her for information about my whereabouts when I have told you repeatedly that once was more than enough when it comes to you—I mean, twice when you count how you came back to me after breaking up with me, only to break up with me all over again."

"I'll say it once more. I didn't pump your mother for information. She called me and volunteered it. And as for me dumping you, that was more than a decade ago. It was high school. We were only kids. I was messed up and not ready. We're different people now."

"No, we're not. I'm still the girl who would have taken a bullet for your sorry ass. And you're the guy who fooled me twice. That's two times too many." And yet, here she was, backed up against a ficus tree, arguing with him when there was supposed to be nothing she had to say to him.

And he still wouldn't give it up. "If you won't have dinner with me, how about a drink? We can discuss how much you despise me in comfort—and in depth."

"I never said I despise you," she muttered grudgingly. Was she weakening? Oh, all right. Maybe a little. She added more firmly, "You just need to catch a flight back to Justice Creek and leave me the hell alone."

"One drink, Nell." The man had some kind of radar. He knew he was getting to her. "One drink won't kill you. And I get it. You don't want to be seen out with me. You don't want anyone to imagine you might be thinking of giving me another chance."

"Because I'm not."

"But look at it this way." He lowered his already velvety tone even more, down to an intimate, just-you-and-me growl. "This is Vegas and you've heard what they say about Vegas. No one ever has to know..."

It was a really bad idea and she needed to walk away.

But she just couldn't help comparing him to Ron the tile man—to every man she met, as a matter of fact. He wasn't the guy for her, but he was kind of her gold standard of what a man should be—well, aside from the way he'd smashed her heart to bits two times running.

No, she couldn't trust him. But he was hot and funny and smart. He was that perfect combination, the one she couldn't resist: a big, down-to-earth blue-collar guy with a really sharp brain. And he'd been after her for months now.

Okay, it made her feel like a fool to admit it, but lately she'd been having these crazy urges to go ahead and let him catch her.

She wouldn't, of course. He would never catch her again.

But it was Friday night in Vegas, and going back to her room seemed beyond depressing. Friday night in the second week of November and she was alone when all of her siblings were happily married—half siblings, too—and there were four of those.

She was the only single Bravo left in Justice Creek. Too soon, it would be Thanksgiving and then it would be Christmas, with all those family get-togethers where everyone would be coupled up but her. Even her aggravating widowed mother was getting remarried.

And, one of these days, Nell wanted to be married, too.

Unfortunately, only once in her life had she found a guy who really made it happen for her. That guy was standing in front of her now. And he just wouldn't let it go. He kept coming after her. With him constantly popping up every time she turned around, how was she supposed to stop comparing every guy she met to him?

It just wasn't right. It needed to stop.

But running away from him had gotten her nowhere.

"One drink, Nellie," he said again, his voice a rough-tender temptation, his eyes eating her up and, at the same time, daring her to look away.

What could it hurt, really? Maybe she would actually get through to him at last.

Maybe tonight he would finally get the message. They could speak reasonably to each other and she could convince him to give up the chase. Come to think of it, she hadn't tried talking to him civilly, woman to man, yet. And walking away time after time just wasn't cutting it.

She sucked in a slow breath. "One drink."

For about half a second, he looked totally stunned, the way he had all those years and years ago, when she'd taken the desk in front of him the first day of sophomore English and then turned around and grinned at him. He'd gaped at her, his expression one of complete shock. But only for a moment. Then he'd looked away. She remembered staring at the side view of his Adam's apple, thinking he was hot, even though one of his battered sneakers had a hole in the toe, his shirt screamed hand-me-down and his hair looked like he'd cut it himself.

He was lean and rangy then, his shoulders broad but not thick, more hungry looking, like some wild animal, always ready to run. It had taken her weeks to get him to talk to her. And by then, she was a goner. She'd just known he was the guy for her.

Wrong.

The grown-up Deck had lost the stunned look. Once again, he was supremely confident, totally at ease. He said, "Well, all right then, Nellie. I know just the place."

Chapter Two

Declan McGrath had done what he set out to do. He'd created the success he'd always wanted.

This year, his company, Justice Creek Barrels, had made number 245 on the Inc. 5000 list of America's fastest-growing companies. The broke nobody from the wrong side of town had officially arrived.

He had it all. Except Nell, who was stubborn, full of pride and unwilling to let go of the past and admit that they belonged together.

Didn't matter, though. She could keep on refusing him. He wouldn't give up.

And, one way or another, she would finally be his.

This, tonight, was a big step. She'd actually said yes to him, even if it was only for a drink. He had to go carefully with her, he reminded himself. If he got too eager, pushed too fast, she'd be off like a shot.

Still, as he led her to a quiet corner booth at the casino/hotel's most secluded bar, he had a really hard time suppressing a hot shout of triumph. Or at the very least, a fist pump or two.

She slid into the booth on one side and he took the other. The light overhead brought out the deep, gorgeous red of her hair. Her eyes, green as a secret jungle lagoon, watched him warily.

God, she was beautiful. Even more so than when she used to love him. And back then she'd been the most beautiful girl in the world. All the guys had wanted a chance with her.

But she'd only wanted him.

He'd thrown her away. Sometimes even a smart guy made really bad choices.

It had taken him eleven years and a failed marriage to face the truth that he was one of those guys. He didn't love easy, but when he finally did, that was it. She was it, the one for him. For four never-ending months now, he'd been actively pursuing her. In all that time, she'd never given so much as a fraction of an inch.

Until tonight.

Her mother had been right. He'd needed to get her away from Justice Creek and all the reminders of how bad he'd messed up with her back in the day. Vegas was the perfect place to finally get going on the rest of their lives together.

Now, if he could just keep from blowing this...

* * *

Nell tried to figure out where to begin with him as the waitress came, took their orders and returned with their drinks.

When the waitress left the table for the second time, Nell took a sip of her cosmo and jumped in. "Why me—and why won't you take a hint that I'm just not interested?"

He stared into his single malt, neat, as if the answer to her question waited in the smoky amber depths. "I don't believe you're not interested. You just don't trust me."

"Duh." She poured on the sarcasm and made a big show of tapping a finger against her chin. "Let me think. I wonder why?"

"How many times do I need to say that I messed up? I messed up twice. I'm so damn sorry and I need you to forgive me. You're the best thing that ever happened to me. And..." He shook his head. "Fine. I get it. I smashed your heart to tiny, bloody bits. How many ways can I say I was wrong?"

Okay. He was kind of getting to her. For a second there, she'd almost reached across the table and touched his clenched fist. She so had to watch herself. Gently she suggested, "How about this? I accept your apology. It was years ago and we need to move on."

He slanted her a sideways look, dark brows showing glints of auburn in the light from above. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"So then we can try again?"

Should she have known that would be his next question? Yeah, probably. "I didn't say that."

"I want another chance."

"Well, that's not happening."

"Yes, it is. And when it does, I'm not letting you go. This time it's going to be forever."

She almost grinned. Because that was another thing about Deck. Not only did he have big arms, broad shoulders and a giant brain.

He was cocky. Very, very cocky.

And she was enjoying herself far too much. It really was a whole lot of fun to argue with him. It always had been. And the most fun of all was finally being the one in the position of power.

Back when they'd been together, he was the poor kid and she was a Bravo—one of the Bastard Bravos, as everybody had called her mother's children behind their backs. But a Bravo, nonetheless. Her dad had had lots of money and he'd taken care of his kids, whether he'd had them by his wife or by her mother, who was his mistress at the time. Nell always had the right clothes and a certain bold confidence that made her popular. She hadn't been happy at home by any stretch, but guys had wanted to go out with her and girls had kind of envied her.

And all she'd ever wanted was Deck. So, really, he'd had all the power then.

Now, for some reason she didn't really understand, he'd decided he just had to get another chance with her. Now, she was the one saying no. Payback was a bitch, all right. Not to mention downright delicious.

He finally took a slow sip of his Scotch. "Look. It almost killed me to lose you. But I couldn't afford you then. You have to know that. I had things to do, stuff to make happen." His eyes were brown in this light, brown and soft and so sincere. "I had nothing to give you then."

"I wanted nothing from you and you know that. Nothing but your love."

He looked away. She stared at the side view of his Adam's apple. Just like old times. "Come on, Nellie. I had too much to prove. It would never have worked then."

He was probably right. "And it's not going to work now." She leaned across the table toward him, held his gaze steady on and concentrated on trying really hard to get through to him. "I don't trust you. I can't trust you. It's not that I hate you. I don't. I don't despise you. I just want you to let it go. Leave me be and move on."

He drank more Scotch. "Have dinner with me." She opened her mouth to say no, but then he reached out and covered her hand with his. The words backed up in her throat. "Just dinner." His grip was hot and a little bit rough, and it felt unbelievably right.

How could that be? Words and breaths and even her heart felt all tangled up together in the base of her throat, all tied in hot, sweet, hurtful knots. She opened her mouth to tell him no and he slid his thumb under her fingers, into the vulnerable secret center of her palm, and squeezed, just a little.

Impossibly, she squeezed back. The light from above caught in his eyes, burned in them.

She swallowed, hard. "It would...only be dinner."

The flame in his eyes leaped higher. Dear, sweet Lord, had she really said that? She needed to take it back this instant. She pulled free.

He didn't try to hold on, just slid his hand back to his side of the table and said in a neutral tone, "Only dinner. That's good."

And she couldn't help thinking that, really, what could it hurt? Here, in this glittery, sprawling desert city where nobody knew them? It could be a good way, a graceful way, to finally say goodbye.

* * *

He took her to the hotel's French restaurant, Quatre Trèfles. The food was wonderful and there were several courses, different wines offered with each new dish.

Nell drank sparingly. She planned a full day at the trade show tomorrow and didn't want to be hungover. Plus, she needed all her wits about her when dealing with the impossible man across the white-clothed table from her.

Deck looked so good by candlelight. It burnished his thick brown hair and brought out the wicked gleam in his eyes. She had to watch herself around him, she really did. She wanted to handle this goodbye evening with grace.

There was actual chitchat. He asked how she'd gotten into business with Garrett. She explained that after two years at Colorado State, she'd had enough of college. Garrett was doing pretty well building houses. She'd started out working for him. They got along well together.

She laughed. "He's always calling me a pain in his ass."

"But he couldn't get along without you."

"You've got that right. A few years back, he wanted to start building spec houses. I put in some of my inheritance for that and we became partners."

Deck talked about his barrel business, which he'd started eight years ago in the garage of the house he'd been living in then. At the time, he'd tended bar at Teddy's Bar on East Central Street. Essentially, Justice Creek Barrels found and sold whiskey and wine barrels to winemakers, breweries and distilleries. His company also made barrel furniture and other custom barrel-based gadgets and knickknacks. In the time he'd been building JC Barrels, he'd also managed to get a business degree, taking classes online and at State.

She asked about his sister, Marty. “I heard she got married.”

“Yeah. His name’s Hank Jackson. He’s a good guy.”

“I’m glad.”

“They live in Colorado Springs. And as of three weeks ago, I’m an uncle.”

“Wow.” Nell remembered Deck’s younger sister as too thin and painfully shy, one of those girls who seemed to want to be invisible. “A boy or a girl?”

“Little boy.”

“Have you seen him?”

He nodded. “Hank called me when Marty went into labor. I drove straight to the hospital.”

“You were there for the birth?” For some reason, the thought of him jumping in his big, black Lexus SUV and racing to be there for his nephew’s birth did a number on her heartstrings.

“Well, I sat in the waiting room for four hours, until the baby was born. Eventually, they let me in to see them. Marty was exhausted, but she was smiling. And I got to hold the baby. They named him Henry, after Hank.”

“Give Marty my best?”

“Sure.”

“And, um, your dad?” Keith McGrath had been a major issue between them, when it all went to hell. Maybe she shouldn’t have mentioned him, but avoiding the subject would have felt like cowardice on her part. Plus, the whole point of spending this evening with him was to let the past go.

“I don’t see him often.” Deck’s voice lacked inflection. He sounded careful. Too careful. “But he’s all right. He manages an apartment complex in Fort Collins, does a little carpentry on the side. He’s, uh, been doing pretty well the past couple of years.”

“Excellent.” She allowed herself a small sip of wine.

Deck regarded her distantly for several uncomfortable seconds—and then he changed the subject, which was fine with her. Great, as a matter of fact. It was only an evening they were sharing, not the rest of their lives. Yes, she wanted to talk honestly, but they didn’t need to get into anything too messy.

After dinner, they gambled a little.

And then, around ten, he suggested, “Take a walk outside with me?”

She wanted to, she really did. But it was too cold out and, really, she ought to just tell him good-night. “It’s windy and in the forties out there and my jacket is upstairs.”

“No problem. We’ll go up, get our coats. You can put on some walking shoes if you want to.”

She let him take her arm and lead her to the elevators.

They went up to her floor first. She let him in her room, because to make him wait in the hallway would have been as good as admitting she felt awkward being with him in a room with a bed. It only took a moment anyway, to change into flats and grab her coat.

They got back on the elevator. He had a suite on the penthouse floor. She stood in the living area and gazed out over the waterfall lagoon below and the lights of the strip farther out as he disappeared into the bedroom.

“What do you see down there?”

She turned and gave him a smile. “Bright lights.” He’d thrown on a gorgeous leather jacket and she couldn’t help remembering his hand-me-down shirts and beat-up Vans with the holes in them back when they were kids.

Down on the main floor, they went out the lobby entrance, under the porte cochere and around the famous waterfalls and the minilake out front. As they strolled under the palm trees, she buttoned up her coat against the wind.

And when he took her hand?

She let him. Because this was a real goodbye at last, and it felt good to be with him finally in this friendly, easy way. If touching him still thrilled her more than it should, well, so what?

She wouldn't act on that thrill. She was only enjoying a last, companionable evening with an old flame, making peace with the past, ending things gracefully.

At a little after midnight, he took her back to her room. He didn't try to kiss her at her door. Which was great. A kiss would be too intimate and she would have ducked away.

With a whispered "Goodbye, Deck," she went in and shut the door.

* * *

The next day, she half expected to find him waiting in the hallway outside her room when she went down for breakfast.

He wasn't. And she was not disappointed. Last night had been perfect. She'd had a great evening with him; however, it really was over between them and had been for eleven years. He must be on his way home by now.

After breakfast, she went to the trade show and spent the morning watching installation demonstrations and connecting with granite, marble, tile, concrete and quartz composite distributors. At around eleven, she met up with Sherry Tisbeau, who lived in Seattle and worked with her husband, Zach. Tisbeau Development built condos mostly. Nell had struck up a friendship with Sherry a few years back. They'd met in LA at Build Expo USA. This trip, Sherry had brought along Alice Bates, the Tisbeau office manager.

At half past noon, just as Sherry was suggesting they ought to go get some lunch, Nell spotted a guy who looked like Deck. He lounged against the wall by a granite dealer's booth about twenty feet away, a glossy brochure in front of his face. Her pulse started racing and her stomach got quivery.

As she gulped and stared, he lowered the brochure, revealing that gorgeous, dangerous slow smile. Every nerve in her body went on red alert. It felt amazing. Invigorating. And scary, too.

She knew she was in trouble and somehow didn't even care.

She turned to Sherry. "Listen. I see an old friend and I need to spend some time with him. I'm going to have to take a rain check on lunch."

Sherry gave her a hug and reminded her to keep in touch. A moment later, the two women were gone and Deck stood at her side.

She met those eyes and felt as light as a sunbeam, fizzy as a just-opened bottle of Dom Pérignon. It had to stop. She needed to remind him that they'd said goodbye last night. And then she needed to leave. If she hurried she could catch up with Sherry and Alice.

About then, she noticed the lanyard around his neck and the official trade-show badge hanging from it.

"You stole someone's badge," she accused.

His grin only deepened, revealing that dimple on the left side of his mouth. "They wouldn't let me in here without one." Way back when, she used to watch for it, that dimple. She used to hope for it. It only appeared when he let himself relax. He rarely relaxed back then. He was constantly on guard.

How completely things had changed.

He took the badge between his fingers. "But then, luckily, I found this one on the floor outside—and it's not stealing if I found it on the floor."

Just turn and leave him standing here. Walk away and don't look back.

But she didn't budge. Instead, she opened her mouth and something stupid came out. "We're here in Vegas. Stuff happens in Vegas and that stuff is meaningless. That's all this is."

He gave her the lifted eyebrow. "Meaningless, you mean?"

"That's right. It's just for now. Nothing more. Nothing changes when we go home. I have my life, you have yours."

For way too many glorious seconds, they simply regarded each other. She had that sense she used to get with him, when they were together so long ago. The sense that they were the only two people on the planet.

Finally, he asked, "Hungry?"

She slipped her arm in his. It felt absolutely right there. “Starved.”

* * *

She never returned to the convention floor.

They had lunch and then they played the slots. She had a great time.

Was she being an idiot?

Oh, absolutely. She knew she shouldn’t give the guy an inch.

But he was so much fun—a lot more than he used be, now that’d he’d found the success he’d always craved. There was an easiness about him now, a confidence that made him even more attractive than before, if that was possible. She liked just being with him.

And why shouldn’t she indulge herself? Just a little. Just for this short time that they were both here in Vegas.

She got lucky and won a thousand-dollar jackpot. She collected her winnings.

Then he suggested a couple’s visit to the hotel spa, of all things. No way she was passing up an offer like that.

They took mud baths side by side and he told her all about the things you could make with a barrel, everything from cuff links to wall clocks, chandeliers to yard art. They got massages, their two tables pushed together. It was intimate in the most relaxing, luxurious sort of way. And she went ahead and allowed herself to love every minute of it.

After that, they had facials, then mani-pedis. Somehow, he looked manlier than ever, sitting in that pedicure chair as a sexy blonde took an emery board to his toes.

It was a little past six when he left her at the door to her room.

“I’ll be back for you at seven thirty,” he said in a tone that teased and warned simultaneously. “Be ready.”

She was ready, all right. In her favorite short black dress, sleeveless and curve-hugging with a cutaway back, her red hair pinned up on one side by a rhinestone comb, wearing killer black heels with red soles. His eyes darkened when she opened the door to him, and his gaze moved down her body, stirring up sparks. He wore a gorgeous graphite suit and she wondered how she’d gotten here, about to spend an evening that could only be called romantic with the penniless, dark, damaged boy she used to love, the boy who’d grown up to run his own company and look completely at ease in the kind of suit you couldn’t buy off a rack.

She grabbed her beaded clutch and her metallic Betsey Johnson wrap and off they went.

Down at the lobby entrance, beneath the porte cochere, he had a car waiting. She sat beside him on the plush leather seat and stared out the tinted side window as they rolled by one giant pleasure palace after another, the bright lights melting into each other, gold, green, red, purple, blue. Eventually, the driver turned down a side street and stopped in front of modest-looking restaurant with a red-and-white-striped awning over the door.

Inside, they sat beneath a stained glass ceiling with chandeliers shaped like stars. They had champagne and caviar, lobster bisque and the best filet mignon she’d ever tasted, the meat melting like butter on her tongue.

Okay, yeah. It was dangerous, doing this with him. Every moment she spent near him she could feel herself giving in to him, the sharp edges she used to protect herself leaving her, morphing into vulnerable softness that invited his touch.

He leaned across the table and so did she. She shouldn’t have, but she was full of a happy, giddy sort of longing—to savor every minute, to get closer.

And closer.

And then he touched her, so lightly, a brush of his index finger across the back of her hand, over the bones of her wrist, up her forearm, drawing the nerves with him, making a trail of pleased sensation along her skin. She shivered, a hot kind of shiver, the kind that promised forbidden delights to come.

“It really can’t happen,” she whispered.

“Why not?” That voice of his, sweet and rough, was like raw molasses pouring out.

She was in trouble. Worse, she was loving it. “A thousand reasons. It’s over. You know it. It’s been over for years.”

“Nellie.” His finger at her elbow, sliding higher, over the bright tattoo that covered the evidence of what he had been to her. “It doesn’t feel over. That’s what I know. And you know it, too, whatever lies you think you have to tell yourself.”

She caught his hand, gently pushed it away. She sipped more champagne and treated her taste buds to another wonderful bite of buttery steak. “This is like some kind of dream. And I really need to wake up.”

A moment later, he somehow had her hand in his. He turned it over, smoothed open her fingers and pressed those warm, soft lips of his into the heart of her palm, his breath like a brand on her skin, his beard scruff tickling just a little. “Remember that first time?”

“Oh, God. In a tent.” They’d been seventeen. It was the summer between their junior and senior years, and they’d hiked up into the National Forest, to Ice Castle Falls, pitching the patched-up tent he’d brought in the center of a clear spot, a miniature meadow not far from the falls.

She’d told her mother that she was going camping with a group of kids. Willow might have been Frank Bravo’s accomplice in cheating on his wife Sondra for more than two decades, but when it came to her daughters, she had certain rules. No overnights with a boy as long as Nell was underage. So she’d lied and said she was sharing a tent with Shonda Hurly, a friend from school. Deck hadn’t needed to make up stories about his plans. His father had a lot of stuff going on and pretty much let Deck do what he wanted.

Across the table, still holding her open palm in his hand, Deck said, “I couldn’t believe I got so lucky, to spend a whole night with you.”

“Too bad about the ants.” She laughed and he laughed with her. And then the laughter faded. They watched each other across the table, the tender old memory fresh and new between them. They’d gotten down to their underwear before they realized they’d pitched the tent on an anthill. “I did a lot of shrieking, as I recall.”

“They were all over you.”

She’d slithered out of the tent, twisting and turning in the moonlight in her white cotton panties and sports bra, madly slapping ants away. Deck had followed her out. He’d put his hands on her shoulders and told her to stand still. And she had. She’d stilled—for him. And he had run his hands all over her, starting with her hair, her neck, her shoulders and on down, until all the ants were gone and there was only his tender, wonderful touch.

Then he’d gathered her close to him, pressed his lips to her temple, her forehead, her mouth. She’d kissed him back, twining her arms around his neck, whispering of her love.

It was chilly up there in the mountains at night, even in summer. So they shook out their clothes and put them back on and moved the tent to the other side of the cleared space.

And then they’d crawled back inside, wrapped their arms around each other—and been each other’s first time. She remembered it as awkward and intense. And beautiful, too.

Even later, after he’d stomped all over her heart, she couldn’t quite bring herself to regret choosing him for her first.

* * *

The car was waiting out in front when they left the restaurant.

She felt so soft and pliant by then, her mind a happy haze from the champagne and the wonderful food, the sweet, shared memories—and Deck. Laughing with her. Touching her. Reminding her of just how good it used to be.

When he pulled her down across his lap, she let him. She kicked off her shoes, folded her legs on the seat and gazed up at his wonderful face as the bright lights flowed over him, turning his skin

from gold to red to blue. He smelled of some dark spice, familiar in the deepest way. She could ride like this forever, her head in his lap, wrapped in the scent of him.

In no time, the car glided in beneath the porte cochere at their hotel. She sat up, smoothed her hair and slipped her shoes back on.

Inside, he took her hand and she let him. He led her straight to the elevators. They went up. She made no objection when the car kept right on gliding upward past her floor.

At the door to his suite, she hesitated. “We’re going to have to...” That was as far as she got, because his arms went around her.

“Listen,” he said.

“What?”

And then he kissed her for the first time in over a decade.

She couldn’t suppress the low, pleased hum that escaped her as his lips met hers. He just felt so good. And, well, she wanted it, that kiss, wanted those strong arms around her. So she didn’t push him away.

On the contrary, she pulled him closer, sliding her hands up that hard chest of his, up and over his thick shoulders to clasp around his big neck. He tasted of the cinnamon in the coffee they’d had after dinner—hot and wet and so very right.

Her wrap slithered to the rug at their feet and she hardly noticed it was gone.

He was...bigger. Broader. More encompassing than before. She’d known that already. After all, she had eyes. But there was something so much more immediate about feeling it, about having him hold her, surround her. His body gave off waves of heat. That hadn’t changed. And he smelled even better than she remembered—of that unnameable, too-tempting spice and also faintly of some no doubt ridiculously expensive cologne.

“We have to talk,” she blurted out anxiously when he finally lifted his head.

“That’s a bad idea.” His hands brushed up and down her arms and she knew he was soothing her, settling her to his will. The ploy should have annoyed her, would have annoyed her if only his touch didn’t set her on fire.

How long had it been since she’d felt this way, like she might burst out of her skin with longing? Like if she didn’t make love with this guy tonight, she just might crumple to the floor in a swoon of unsatisfied lust, of thwarted desire?

Too long. Forever. A lifetime, at least.

Not for eleven years, if she let herself be painfully honest about it. Deck just...did it for her in a big way.

No other guy even came close.

Not that she would ever tell him that.

Somehow, she made her lips form the words that had to be said first. “We need to set boundaries.”

A couple of swear words escaped him.

She put the tips of her fingers to those wonderful lips. He stuck out his tongue and licked them. She almost gave it all up right then, grabbed him close again, kissed him hard and long, demanded he take her to his bed right this minute.

But no. Things had to be said. Though she shouldn’t be doing this, right now her yearning exceeded her need for self-protection by an alarming degree. She just couldn’t resist him tonight.

But they needed a clear agreement as to how it would be. “We talk first.”

“Nellie—”

“We talk first or I’ll say good-night.”

“You can’t go now.”

“Watch me.” She tried to step back.

He only held on. But at least her insistence had gotten through to him. He gave in to her demand with a reluctant nod. “All right. We’ll talk.”

Bending, he picked up her wrap and handed it to her. She took it gingerly, draping the filmy, glittery fabric over her arm as he turned away to run his key card past the reader. The green light flashed.

He pushed open the door.

Chapter Three

He led her into the sitting area. “Drink?”

“No, thanks.” She set her wrap over the back of the sofa and smoothed it with nervous hands. Everything felt strange suddenly. She shouldn’t be here.

There was no excuse for her to be here, to give in to him in this massive, impossible, stupid way.

He took off his suit jacket, tossed it over a chair and loosened his beautiful blue tie. His shirt was a gorgeous, lustrous light gray and his watch was a Blancpain. She knew because her father used to have one and she had wanted that watch so bad. She would have worn it proudly if he’d only left it to her. He hadn’t. He’d left it to her half brother Darius, the oldest of the nine of them, which she’d eventually let herself admit was fair.

“What?” He gazed at her with equal parts desire and impatience.

She kept the sofa between them, resting her hands on the back of it. “I need your agreement that this isn’t going anywhere, that it’s just for now, for while we’re here in Vegas.”

He dropped into a big white chair. Spreading his knees wide, he rested his arms on the chair arms, like some barbarian king holding court. “How many times do we have to go over this?”

“Until I’m sure that you agree and understand my, er, terms.”

“Your terms.” He seemed to taste the words and to find them not the least to his liking. “We don’t need terms. Just do what you think you have to do. I’ll do the same.”

She was suddenly absurdly glad for the fat sofa between them, as if it was any kind of real barrier, as if it could actually protect her from what she would do with him here tonight. “I just don’t want you to get any ideas about how things could change when we go home. They won’t. When we’re home, I’m not getting near you. I’m going to pretend that tonight never happened.” She waited, expecting some sort of response from him.

Sprawled back in the chair, he just stared at her. She felt her skin heating, her resolve weakening. It was absurd—she was absurd. But something had happened since last night, when she’d given in enough to have a drink and dinner with him. Something had happened as she’d spent the afternoon and evening with him today. She’d had the advantage before.

But that advantage was gone. She really ought to miss it more.

And still he said nothing.

Oldest tactic in the book: the one who speaks first loses.

She spoke. “Yeah, okay. I want you, Deck. I want you a lot. And I’m starting to get that this is something we just need to do. We need to get it out of our systems, find closure between us once and for all...”

Dear God. What was the matter with her, spouting all this tired psychobabble? Talking about “getting it out of our systems,” like sex was a juice cleanse. And “finding closure,” as though closure was something a person could misplace.

Those phrases were meaningless, really. Just the stuff people said when they were about to do something stupid.

And facing him now across the nonbarrier of the sofa, she knew absolutely that having a Vegas fling with Deck was a giant bowl of stupid with several spoonfuls of trouble sprinkled on top.

But she was going to do it anyway, whether she could get him to agree to her terms or not. She was going to do it because she couldn’t bear not to. Because she was almost thirty and he was the

only man she'd ever been in love with. Because one thing had not changed: when he touched her, it all felt perfectly, exactly right.

He said, "I want you, too, Nellie. I always have."

Bitterness rose in her. Too bad that didn't stop you from throwing me away.

Then he held out his hand to her. His eyes were soft and yearning, wanting her the way she wanted him.

And in the space of an instant, her bitterness turned achingly sweet. She couldn't scoot around that sofa and grab on to him fast enough.

His fingers closed around hers and he gave a tug, bringing her up flush between his spread knees. Already, he was hard for her, the ridge of his arousal obvious beneath his fly. The sight of it thrilled her, almost had her dropping to her knees to get closer, to make short work of his belt and his zipper, set him free to her eager touch, her hungry mouth.

He brought her hand to his lips, licked the bumps of her knuckles, causing havoc inside her, bringing up goose bumps along her arms. "I have a request."

"Yeah?" It came out on a hungry hitch of breath.

"Take everything off. I want to see all of you. I've waited so long..."

* * *

Breathless moments later, she stood before him wearing nothing but the rhinestone comb.

"Nellie," he said, low and dark and wonderfully rough. "You are more beautiful even than I remember. That shouldn't be possible. But you are." He commanded, "Bend down here."

She bent from the waist. It felt like heaven, to bend to him, to give in to him. For now, for tonight and tomorrow, she had no need to resist him. She would have this night and tomorrow. Then on Monday, she would go home and set about pretending that none of it had happened.

Did that make her a liar and a coward and a fool?

Absolutely.

Her hair brushed his cheek. He framed her face with his strong hands. "Kiss me."

She didn't have to be told twice. Their lips met in a kiss that burned her down to her core. His tongue came invading. She welcomed the tender assault on her senses. He made her belly quiver. Without even touching them, he made her nipples ache and tighten.

As he kissed her, he slid the comb from her hair and dropped it to the little table by the chair. Freed, the red waves fell around them. He speared his spread fingers up into the thick mass of it, rubbing it into her scalp as though bringing up a lather, then closing those big fingers into fists, pulling a little, drawing her mouth even closer, sealing their lips together hard and fast, dipping his tongue in deeper.

When he finally loosened his hold on her, she had to remind herself to breathe. Lifting away a little, she stared down him, dazed with want. He gazed back at her, pupils dilated, black holes she could get lost in, never to be found.

They were both breathing hard. She felt herself falling into him, wrapping herself in his heat and his hunger that so perfectly matched her own, vanishing into him, though neither of them had moved.

"You won't get away, Nellie," he whispered. "I won't blow it this time. You and me. That's how it's supposed to be."

"Don't go there." She made her voice as low and rough as his. "Or I am leaving."

They glared at each other, a battle of wills.

And then he gave her that slow, dangerous grin.

Suddenly, they were both laughing.

His hands clasped her waist and he came up out of the chair. She gasped at the speed of the move, canting back, making room for him—and let out a shriek of surprise as he boosted her high and laid her over his shoulder. "Deck!"

But he wasn't listening. He put his hand on her bare bottom, spreading his fingers, holding her where he wanted her. "Steady. I've got you."

And then he was moving, headed for the open bedroom door.

* * *

He laid her down on the turned-back bed. "Don't you dare move."

She only chuckled, grinning up at him, bringing her arms up and sliding them under the pillow beneath her head.

His eyes blazed down at her and he muttered a string of dark, delicious promises—of what he would do to her, how much he wanted her, all the ways he was going to drive her wonderfully, totally insane. And then he got out of his clothes, tossing them every which way, over a shoulder, in the general direction of the bedside chair. He threw that fancy watch at the nightstand. It dropped to the carpet. He just left it there.

When he came down to her she grabbed him close, her mind and heart and body ready, so ready, to be with him. There was no past or future tonight.

There was only right now.

And then he was kissing her, a thousand kisses or maybe a million. He said he needed to put his mouth on every single inch of her body.

She indulged him that. Gleefully, eagerly, she braced her hands on his shoulders and pushed him lower, murmuring huskily, "Wait. I think you missed a spot. Oh! Yes. There..."

Was it as good as she'd imagined it might be in her forbidden, delicious fantasies?

Better. So much better.

There was time for teasing. And there was time for overwhelming, intense kisses, for his big fingers inside her, playing her so well that she shattered in the space between two ragged breaths.

And, after that, he only played her some more, adding his wonderful mouth to the equation, until she was crying out, clutching his head, begging him, "Please, please, Deck. Please make it now. Oh, yes. Like that..."

After the third time he carried her to the peak, tumbling over, she took charge, pushing him to his back, worshipping every hard, glorious inch of his body the way he'd done to hers. She traced the tendons and veins on those big arms of his, bit the hard, high bulge of his biceps, followed the crisp trail of hair across his broad chest.

And on down.

She wrapped both hands around him and lowered her mouth to him. Somehow, for a little while, he held his natural inclination to take control in check. She savored every second of having all the power, taking him deep, relaxing her throat.

Taking him deeper still.

In the end, he couldn't help himself. He had to take the lead, even in her pleasuring of him. He cradled her head between his big hands, holding her still for him.

She relaxed into it, letting him do what he wanted with her. It was glorious, so good. And at the last second he did let go, he let it happen, let himself go over. She looked up at him on his knees above her, his big head thrown back, a long, deep groan rolling from his throat.

She drank every drop of him. He tasted like the ocean, salty and rich.

Then he pulled her up to him, into his arms, settling her close to him in the tangle of sheets and blankets. He stroked her hair, traced the bumps of her spine, rested his broad hand in the naked curve of her waist.

Did she sleep for a little? It seemed she must have.

There were dreams, of the two of them, in the good times, years ago. Laughing together by a campfire, sharing a whole conversation in a glance across a classroom, walking the hallways at Justice Creek High, his arm across her shoulders, his body pressed just right along her side.

Invincible. That was how she'd felt with him. That as long as they were together, nothing could beat them. They ruled their private world of two.

He never knew what might happen at home. His father always had some big plan in the works that never seemed to pan out. Deck had never talked about it much, but Nell knew things hadn't been easy for him and Marty. The way Nell understood it, Keith McGrath loved his family, but he was just always distracted. He couldn't seem to get a job and hold on to it. The McGrath family struggled constantly just to get by.

Nell's issues weren't nearly so bad. But it was no fun, what went on in her family. When her dad's first wife died, he'd married her mother and moved Willow into the house he'd built for wife number one. Nell had still been living at home then, so she'd moved, too. It was awful, going home to the house that had belonged to her father's first wife, to her resentful half sister Elise and Elise's best friend, Tracy, who had been taken in by Elise's mom years before, when Tracy's parents died suddenly. Elise always acted so prissy and ladylike. However, being ladylike didn't stop her from coming up with new ways to torture Nell. It was a war in the Bravo mansion back in those days, a war in which Nell fought just as dirty as Elise.

But sometimes, even though you don't believe it could ever happen when life is crappy, things do get better. It had for Elise and Nell. Now, she and Elise were tight. They would do anything for each other. Too bad they didn't know back then how it would all work out.

It was the same with loving Deck, really. She'd been so happy with him in high school. Looking back, she was glad she hadn't known how it would turn out with him. She'd had no clue that he would shatter her poor heart and that it would take her forever to recover from losing him.

Like that ancient Garth Brooks song that her mother used to love, where life was a dance and if you'd known ahead of time how bad a loss was going to be, you might have just said no to whatever was destined to break your heart.

But if you said no to love, you would miss the dance.

And, really, now that she was over it, over him, she could let herself admit that the dance of their young love had been pretty damn spectacular.

She could honestly say now, at last, after all these years, that she wouldn't have missed loving Deck for the world.

As for this brief, thoroughly magical reunion they were sharing? No way would she have wanted to miss this, either.

She tipped her head back to look at him.

His eyes were open, watching, waiting.

She offered her mouth and he took it.

The magic began again.

And when he got the condom from the bedside drawer, she took it from him, rolling it down over him. He rose above her, his eyes gleaming almost golden in the light from the lamp.

He came into her and she took him, deep and true. She wrapped her whole body around him and they moved together, in perfect rhythm, all the way to the top of the world and over into free fall.

She called his name, among other things. She had no idea what crazy words came out of her mouth as her body pulsed around him.

All she knew was that it was perfect, this moment. This last dance together with the boy she'd once loved beyond all reason.

He wasn't that boy anymore. And she was no longer the girl who had given her heart and trusted him not to break it.

Which was fine. As it should be.

And this, tonight, was just what she'd needed, a Las Vegas fling with the grown-up Deck McGrath.

* * *

In the gray light of the next morning, he reached for her. She melted into him. They made love, sweet and slow.

After the loving, they ordered room service. They had breakfast in bed and then made love again. They took a long bath. Together.

And made love again.

More than half the day had passed and all they'd done was eat breakfast and take a bath—oh, and the lovemaking. Lots and lots of lovemaking. She was dizzy with it, swept away into a beautiful, sensual dream, a private fantasy, a lush, secret world containing just the two of them.

By late afternoon, he let her go down to her room. But only long enough to shower, put on a little makeup and get dressed. He was at her door a half an hour after she'd left his suite.

He started kissing her. No surprise where that led.

Finally, they both agreed they needed to get out, have some dinner. The big bed would be right there waiting for them when they returned.

She put her dress back on. He ordered a car and off they went to an Italian place he knew about. The food was wonderful and there was a really nice Chianti. Maybe she had a little more of that than she should have.

They got back in the limo.

Deck shut the privacy screen between them and the driver. They glided up and down the strip, making love. Even through the tinted windows, the bright lights reached them and played a symphony of color across their naked skin.

There was champagne. Dom Pérignon.

“When did you order champagne?” she asked, sitting there naked, feeling satisfied, shimmery all over, somehow. It was really quite wonderful.

He said, “You are so beautiful, Sparky. Bold and strong and so damn smart. More than any man deserves in this life. There is no one, no one, like you.”

His words poured over her. They made her feel special. Treasured. Loved.

He never did answer about the champagne, not that she really cared. He popped the cork and gently pushed her down onto the seat so he could pour the bubbly treat on her belly. He sipped it from her navel. She wove her fingers in his hair and sighed in delight.

He said more thrilling things, lots of them, whispering them against her bare skin—that he loved her, that she was and always had been the only woman for him.

She took what he said as part of the fantasy he was weaving around her. No, they weren't real, his vows of love and forever. She didn't believe them.

But they sure sounded good. They went down just right with the champagne, with the feel of his hot, hard body pressing close, with the endless pleasure he gave.

It was paradise, pure and simple, to be held in his arms.

When the limo slowed and glided to a stop, she opened her eyes and asked, “Where are we?”

He chuckled. “Put your dress back on. We'll go check it out.”

“An adventure?” That sounded delightful.

“That's right. Nell and Deck's big adventure.” He helped her back into her clothes. Once she was dressed again, she sat there grinning like a fool as he put on his shirt, his boxer briefs and his pants. She wasn't really drunk, just...kind of high. High on pure pleasure, on sexual satisfaction.

He was fully dressed now. He held up her coat and she put it on.

Dazed, happy, glowing all over, she let him help her from the car.

They were at the Clark County Marriage License Bureau, of all things. That made her laugh. “Oh, you are kidding me.”

He took her hand. “Come on, let's go inside, just for fun.”

“But...it's nine o'clock on Sunday night.”

“Sparky, this is Vegas. They almost never close.” He gazed down at her expectantly.

She thought about how much she was loving this, every minute of this night, the two of them together, kind of hazy from the alcohol, loose and easy all over from the beautiful lovemaking. What a great way to feel. She was ready for anything.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s go inside.”

She followed him in.

After that, well, whatever he suggested, she couldn’t say yes fast enough. She let him take a number and when their turn came, she whipped out her driver’s license and signed where the clerk pointed. It was all very simple. Smooth and easy as you please.

When they returned to the limo, they had a marriage license.

Really, why was she doing this? She wasn’t that drunk. She didn’t understand herself. She ought to...

But then he started kissing her again. And it was a game they were playing. Delicious. Thrilling. In a way, the whole thing was like a dream, her dream, from so long ago, the dream that didn’t come true.

Somehow, impossibly, it was coming true tonight.

It wasn’t that far to the wedding chapel—well, it was more of a wedding complex, really, a series of pink stucco buildings and a parking lot dotted with palm trees and spiky succulents. The limo slid to a stop and Deck pulled a small velvet box from his pocket.

Inside was a gorgeous ring. He slipped it on her finger, a perfect fit, and she thought, He’s got this all planned.

That should have alarmed her, right?

Definitely.

But the ring was so beautiful, with a large square-cut diamond, smaller diamonds glittering along the platinum band. And everything just felt...right somehow. Tonight, she was living the teenage fantasy she’d once believed in so passionately—the fantasy of her and Deck and happily-ever-after.

The years between then and now had somehow folded in on themselves. He’d never taken a buzz saw to her heart, never married someone else.

Her life with him, the love he’d always promised her. Their own personal forever...

It was coming true at last.

The chapel complex had it all, everything two people needed to say “I do,” Vegas style.

The woman in the lobby area greeted Deck by name. “Mr. McGrath.” She practically cooed at him. “Welcome to Now and Forever.” She aimed a thousand-watt smile at Nell. “And it’s a delight to meet your beautiful bride.” The woman took Deck’s black credit card and sent him to the men’s boutique to rent a tux.

Another woman came for Nell. “I’m Anita. And I’m so glad you’ve come to us for your special night. Follow me.”

In the bride’s boutique, Nell chose her dress. It was perfect, that dress, with a low back and lace sleeves—a mermaid dress, clinging to her body all the way to her knees and then opening out in a fishtail of lace and glittering beads. A seamstress quickly pinned and tucked at the waist and down over her hips, creating a perfect fit. And then she whisked the dress away to alter it on the spot.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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