

THE MAVERICK'S SUMMER LOVE

CHRISTYNE
BUTLER



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The Maverick's Summer Love

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Rumour has it that hunky out-of-towner Dean Pritchett has a special interest in single-mum Shelby Jenkins. Shelby's been fending off town gossip forever, but when the green-eyed carpenter got into a fistfight trying to defend her honour, everyone found out it was true! Sweet Shelby fears his love won't last. Just what are your intentions, Mr Pritchett?

Содержание

About the Author	6
The Maverick's Summer Love	7
Chapter One	8
Chapter Two	14
Chapter Three	21
Chapter Four	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32



“It’s been a while since...well, I’ve done this.”

“How long is ‘a while’?” Dean asked.

She closed her eyes, took a breath and then tipped her head back to look straight at him. “Six years.”

Dean’s heart stopped for a moment, before it went into overdrive. To be the first man she’d slept with after such a long time...

“Shelby, maybe we should think about this—”

Her fingers halted his moving lips. “I have been thinking about this, in ways I never allowed myself before I met you. Please tell me I’m not the only one.”

He nodded, his throat too constricted to allow him to speak. How many times had he woken up, reaching across his empty bed, wanting and wishing she was there?

“No thinking about the past or the future, okay?” Her voice was soft. “Not tonight. Tonight is about right here, right now...you and me. That’s enough.”

“Is it? Is what’s about to happen here enough for you?”

“It’s everything.”

About the Author

CHRISTYNE BUTLER fell in love with romance novels while serving in the United States Navy and started writing her own stories six years ago. She considers selling to Mills & Boon® Cherish™ a dream come true and enjoys writing contemporary romances full of life, love, a hint of laughter and perhaps a dash of danger, too. and there has to be a happily-ever-after or she's just not satisfied.

She lives with her family in central Massachusetts and loves to hear from her readers at chris@christynebutler.com. or visit her website, www.christynebutler.com.

The Maverick's Summer Love

Christyne Butler



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my husband, Len, whom I met nineteen years ago this month... Who knew a rebound could have so much bound!

Chapter One

“Well, aren’t you the picture of domestic bliss.”

Dean Pritchett didn’t look up from his e-reader. Even though his most recent download was an old favorite he’d already read numerous times, there was no need. He had a feeling his brother wasn’t done yet.

“Hmm, you seem to be enjoying that spin cycle a bit too much,” Nick continued, his voice laced with typical sarcastic humor. “I think you’ve been cooped up in this trailer too long, little brother.”

Shifting his weight as the decades-old washing machine beneath him finally switched into high speed, Dean stayed put despite his brother’s teasing. He’d learned the first weekend of staying in this government-sponsored mobile home that perching something heavy, like himself, on top was the only way to keep the appliance from dancing across the tiny laundry room’s floor during the last cycle.

“You’re just jealous because I got here first.”

“I’d rather do my ‘spinning’ the old-fashioned way.” Nick propped one shoulder against the open doorway. “And it’s about time you did, too.”

He finally looked up. “I’ll pass. Thanks.”

“Wrong answer, bud. That might’ve worked when Dad and Cade were still here, but now I need a new wingman.”

Dean stared at his brother. He was the shortest of all the Pritchett kids, but built like a football player. All muscle. He had the same blond hair and blue eyes as their oldest brother and baby sister, unlike Dean who had inherited their mother’s deep green color.

Nick also had the charms that made sure he was rarely at a loss for company.

“You haven’t needed a wingman since you were fourteen,” Dean said, “and came home with the phone numbers of three cheerleaders in your pocket. All seniors.”

Nick returned his smile. “Yeah, those were the days. But if you think I’m going to let you sit here and stare at that gadget all night—” he snatched the tablet from Dean’s hand “—you’re wrong.”

“Hey!”

“At least tell me you’re reading something hot like the latest issue of *Biker Babes Gone Wild* —” He peered at the screen, then guffawed. “Wait, *The Collected Works of Jane Austen*? That’s chick stuff.”

“Jane Austen is a literary giant,” Dean shot back. “Her work is classic and timeless and she was Mom’s favorite author. She gave me my first book.”

“Okay, professor. At least it’s not Shake-N-Stir.”

The washing machine ended its run. Dean hopped down and reclaimed his e-reader, flipping the cover closed to put it to sleep. “That’s Shakespeare, you doof.”

“Whatever.” Nick pushed away from the door. “Come on, it’s time to put the books away and suck down a few cold ones. And change that shirt.”

Dean looked down at his gray T-shirt with the big block letters stating REAL MEN READ. “Abby gave this to me at Christmas. And it’s the last clean shirt I have.”

Nick eyed the pile of freshly folded laundry before yanking a snap-front Western-style shirt still warm from the dryer and tossed it at him. “Here, put this on. Girls in Rust Creek Falls love cowboys.”

Dean snorted. The Pritchett family had a working ranch back home in Thunder Canyon, about three hundred miles south of here, so technically they could be called cowboys. Lord knew he and his siblings had all worked the land alongside their father from the moment they could walk. And yes, he often wore a battered Stetson while he’d worked here in town to keep the sun out of his eyes.

But it was the family business, Pritchett & Sons Fine Woodworking, known for producing beautiful handcrafted furniture, where both he and his brothers made their living.

And what had brought them to this small ranching community last month.

Rust Creek Falls had been hit hard over the Fourth of July holiday by what was now called the Great Montana Flood. Dean had been one of the first to answer the call for volunteers to help rebuild the town, and soon his entire family joined in, setting up shop in the cluster of trailers on the west end of town.

Thankfully, most of the businesses in Rust Creek Falls were up and running again, except for the elementary school that suffered a lot of damage. Many private homes and ranches were still in need of work, especially those located south of the creek, which had become a raging river breaking through its levees during the storm.

Dean and his family had worked long days those first couple of weeks, but now their father and oldest brother had gone home to take care of the ranch and family business while Dean and Nick had chosen to stick around for the duration.

And maybe, for Dean, even longer.

“Come on, time’s a wastin’.” Nick nudged him out of the way and opened the lid of the washer. “I’ll take care of loading your dryer. You get pretty. We both know you’re going to take longer.”

Dean cuffed his brother on the back of the head before turning toward the tiny bathroom to wash up and change. It wasn’t as if he’d never been to the one bar in town. He’d gone a couple of times, but he tended to prefer books to most people he met.

Catching sight of the faded scar that ran down the center of his chest in the mirror as he buttoned up his shirt, Dean blamed his preference on a childhood filled with mysterious health problems that had kept him on the sidelines most of the time. Everything had changed, though, when surgery his freshman year in high school had fixed a faulty heart valve. Soon he was as athletic as the rest of his family, but that didn’t mean he’d morphed from a quiet kid to a charmer like Nick overnight.

Hell, most times he just kept his mouth shut and let the ladies do all the talking. He’d learned over the years that most of the female population found his silence a challenge they couldn’t resist. So he’d let them try. Even if they got him to talk, they rarely stuck around for long after that—a lesson he’d learned years ago.

Pushing away the memories, he shut off the light and walked down the hallway to the front of the trailer.

“See? You did take longer. We ready to go?” His brother waited in the living room, already sporting his familiar black Stetson. He grabbed Dean’s off a nearby hook and tossed it to him.

Deciding to go without the hat, Dean laid it on the coffee table, then checked his watch, surprised to find it already after nine. He figured he’d only have to stay for a beer or two before his brother found someone else for company. “Let’s go.”

They left their pickup trucks parked and took the short walk in the still summerlike night air from the group of trailers to the Ace in the Hole. It was a rough-around-the-edges bar, popular with everyone, from cowboys to millworkers and now the volunteers helping the town get back on its feet.

The bar’s parking lot on this Thursday night was filled mostly with trucks, a few cars and a handful of motorcycles. There was even an old-fashioned hitching post out front because local cowboys had been known to ride into town on horseback, even after dark. Lighted beer signs shone in the windows and an oversize playing card, an ace of hearts, blinked in red neon from its perch over the front door.

Once inside, Dean’s eyes adjusted to the dim lighting as he followed his brother to the already-crowded bar that ran the length of one wall. Booths hugged the outer walls and round tables surrounded a small dance floor in the middle of the room.

There was a sorry excuse for a stage in the far back corner, but tonight’s musical entertainment came from an antique Wurlitzer jukebox that still played three choices for a quarter. Pool tables filled the space in the far back and a couple of dartboards hung on the wall next to the exit door, all perpetually busy.

Dean and Nick grabbed two empty stools at the bar, but a lull in the music and the sound of a man's voice had them, along with the rest of the crowd, turning to face a booth in a far corner.

"Hey, everyone, could I have your attention for a moment?"

Dean recognized Collin Traub as the man rose to his feet. The pretty brunette next to him was his wife of less than one week, the former Willa Christensen. Both Dean and Nick had attended their wedding last Saturday. In fact, the entire town of Rust Creek Falls had been there to watch them exchange their vows.

"I have something I'd like to share with you," Collin said. "Something my wife and I just decided on."

"Are we hearing the pitter-patter of little feet soon?" someone called out.

Collin laughed along with the crowd, but waved off the suggestion. "Ah, I think it's a bit early for that, seeing how Willa and I have put off our official honeymoon to work with all of you, and the many volunteers who have joined us, on rebuilding our town."

Several people clapped and Collin waited until the noise died down again.

"We've pulled together since the flooding, and we've accomplished a lot in a short time, but there's still a long way to go. I know this town is going to come back stronger than ever." He looked down at his wife, who gave him a quick nod, then he addressed the crowd again. "Part of that strength is missing however with the tragic loss of Mayor McGee. His death during the flood has left a void in our town, so I've decided to join the election as a candidate to fill the mayoral seat."

A cheer rose from the crowd and soon Collin and his wife were surrounded by well-wishers.

"I guess folks around here think that's a pretty good idea," Nick said as a group of men greeted him with friendly hellos. He made a few quick introductions to Dean, including two waitresses who stopped by, one of whom wrapped an arm around Nick's shoulders for a quick hug before she continued on her way.

"Traub seems pretty popular. Just like you." Dean leaned closer to be heard over the jukebox. "Why am I here again?"

Nick shrugged and reached for the bowl of unshelled peanuts in front of them. "If you're talking about Faith, there's nothing there, man. She's old enough to be our...aunt. Besides, she's married."

"Never stopped you before."

His brother shot him a dark look. "You know, I was serious. You need to find yourself some company of the female persuasion. You're either working, cooped up in that trailer by yourself or hanging around with a bunch of kids."

Dean had to admit his brother had a point. When he wasn't relaxing in the trailer he could be found at the town park. He'd been taking a walk one night when a fight broke out during a pickup football game. He'd stepped in before two kids, barely in their teens, had gotten more than a few jabs thrown at each other and defused the situation. From then on, he'd been playing referee, spending more time at the park with the kids who hung out there.

Before he could reply to Nick's suggestion, a sweet voice called down to them from the center of the bar.

"Hey there, boys. Welcome to the Ace! I'll be right with ya."

Dean's gaze zoomed in on the petite blonde bartender. Now, there was someone he hadn't met yet in this small town.

Her shoulder-length hair whipped against her neck as she moved in a hurried but practiced pace, filling drink orders from both customers and staff. Dressed the same as the other waitresses in dark jeans and a black T-shirt that featured the bar's logo, she hadn't done any alterations to the shirt to show off the maximum skin possible like some of the others.

No, she just wore it pulled back in a knot at the base of her spine. A move that allowed a sliver of creamy skin to appear from time to time, and the deep V at the neckline offered a nice view of

her curves. she stood in profile to him, so he could see only half a smile, but the cowboy she placed a tall, frothy beer in front of seemed to enjoy it.

“What can I get you, Nick?” she called down to them again, directing her words over one shoulder as she continued to work.

“A couple of longnecks.” Nick added after tossing out their favorite brand, “Each.”

She nodded her head and turned away, pulling two icy beers from a cooler beneath the bar.

“Damn, she hardly looks old enough to be in here.” Dean felt a slow curl of heat ride low across his gut when she reached back and casually wiped her hands across her perfectly shaped backside. “Please tell me you haven’t tried to go after someone who’s almost jailbait.”

“Shelby? Naw, she’s not my type.”

Good.

Happy he managed not to say the word aloud, Dean forced his gaze from the girl, surprised at the instant attraction coursing through his veins. An attraction that was all wrong considering how young she must be.

“Besides, she’s twenty-two, so don’t go all righteous on me, Grandpa.” Nick grabbed a second handful of peanuts and started cracking the shells over a bowl filled with discarded casings.

Jeez, that was young. Not that at twenty-eight he was that much older, but still. “You’re not interested, but you know her age?” Dean asked.

“Rosey told me.”

Before he could find out who Rosey was, the angelic blonde headed their way. She placed the bottles on the bar in front of them, quickly popping off the caps. “Sorry, Nick. You know Rosey’s rules. No double fisting allowed. Except on Sundays.”

“And then you better be praying,” Nick added, finishing what Dean guessed was a well-known proverb around the bar. “I thought I’d give it a shot anyway. Shelby, have you met my brother Dean?”

This time she looked right at him and that heat burned just a little bit hotter when he caught the full power of a pair of baby blue eyes, a perfectly straight nose and lips naked of any dressing but a sweet, if not aloof, smile. “No, I don’t think I have.”

For a reason he couldn’t explain, Dean shot out a hand across the bar at her. “Dean Pritchett.”

She stared at him for a moment before she placed her hand in his, the tips of her cool fingers gliding against the calluses on his. “Shelby Jenkins.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Thankful the words came out sounding normal, he tightened his grip just a bit. “Shelby.”

“Likewise.” An emotion he couldn’t read flickered across her eyes as she pulled free from his touch. “You boys have fun. I’ll check back with you in a few minutes.”

Gripping his beer, Dean watched her walk away before drowning his suddenly dry throat in a rush of cool liquid. His next thought popped out of his mouth before he could stop the words. “What’s a nice girl like her doing working in the Ace in the Hole?”

“Who are you talking about?” Nick pulled his attention from the flat-screen television showing a ball game.

Dean tipped his bottle in Shelby’s direction. “Our bartender.”

His brother’s voice dropped to a low whisper. “Well, the word around town is she’s too nice actually, if you know what I mean.”

The meaning behind the words stung. Nothing got Dean’s ire up more than stupid rumors.

He’d dealt with them as a kid when his weight gain and lack of stamina in gym classes had caused the other kids to talk about him behind his back. Even after the surgery, when long-distance running had brought him lean muscles and track awards, there were still comments about him being the guy in the class that girls loved to be friends with, but nothing else.

Dean looked down the bar at Shelby. With her big blue eyes and glossy blond hair, she looked like an angel. An innocent angel. “That’s a crappy thing to say.”

The hard edge in Dean's words brought forth a confused frown from his brother. "I guess you're right." Nick straightened and reached for his beer. "I'm just repeating what I've been told."

"You can't believe everything you hear."

Nick nodded in agreement, but then turned his attention back to the game.

By the time they were on their second beers, delivered by Shelby without a glance in his direction, even when Dean had paid for the drinks, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

Turning around, he found Jasmine "Jazzy" Cates and Cecelia Clifton, two more of Thunder Canyon's volunteers.

"Look who's here!" Cecelia offered a big smile. "Dean, I think this is the first time I've ever seen you in the Ace."

"Yeah, my brother thought he might need a babysitter tonight."

The girls laughed and Nick greeted them, suggesting the four of them grab an empty table. Dean added a couple of singles to the change Shelby had left on the bar, pushing the pile toward the inside edge so she'd see it.

He started to follow when his phone vibrated in his pocket. Pulling it out, he saw it was a call from Abby, their brother Cade's wife. "Save me a seat," he called out. "I'm going to take this."

Stepping into the corner near the door, Dean pressed the button. "Hey, Abby. Did Dad and Cade make it home okay?"

"A few hours ago. I'm calling from your dad's place. He and Cade are parked in front of the television watching the Rockies get their butts kicked."

"Yeah, we're doing the same at the local watering hole."

"Ah, Cade told me about that place. Not quite the same as the Hitching Post, huh?"

Dean pictured the Western-style restaurant and bar back home in Thunder Canyon that had gone through a complete renovation last fall. "Not even close."

"At least the town has a place where people can relax and have some fun. Your dad and Cade told us about all the work you guys have done since you've been up there."

"There's still a long way to go," Dean said. His sister-in-law went quiet for a moment and Dean thought they might have lost their connection, something that still often happened as the town had gotten its cellular service back only a few days before the volunteers arrived.

"That's one of the reasons I'm calling, Dean." Abby's voice was low, but he could hear the concern in her words. "My sister, Jazzy, went up there with the first group and the family has heard from her only a couple of times since she's been gone."

"She's been a great help, Abby, working right alongside the guys when we cleaned out the flooded elementary school." Dean looked over at the subject of their conversation, sitting next to his brother with a beer in her hand. "In fact, she and Cecelia are here tonight with me and Nick."

"Oh, good." Relief colored Abby's tone. "Could I ask a favor? Keep an eye on her? She went through a pretty bad breakup last month, one that none of us in the family understand, because the guy she was dating seemed perfect for her."

As if babysitting Nick wasn't bad enough. "Ah, look, Abs, I don't think it's my place—"

"I'm not asking you to spy for me. Just make sure she doesn't do anything...stupid. Please?"

Dean blew out a breath. He couldn't say no to Abby. "Yeah, I can do that."

Seconds later, Dean had shoved his cell phone into his pocket when the sound of shattering glass caught everyone's attention.

He turned and found one of the waitresses standing toe to toe with Shelby over an upturned tray and broken beer bottles on the floor. He wondered for a moment if they were going to go from shooting evil glances to swapping right hooks, but then Shelby seemed to check herself and took a step back.

“Well, someone is getting lucky tonight.” Shelby’s voice rang out as she bent down to grab a couple of the broken bottles, holding them aloft in concession to the cheers and laughter from the crowd before tossing them into a nearby trash bin. “At least lucky enough to get a beer on the house.”

Dean fought the urge to help her clean up the mess. Especially after the waitress only grabbed her tray and went back to a nearby booth.

Shelby spotted him and the foot he’d put forward shuffled back. The message in her gaze was loud and clear.

Back off.

He turned instead to join his friends, taking the empty chair next to Jazzy. Nick and Cecelia were on the crowded dance floor with separate partners. Dean angled the chair to face the bar. Yeah, so he could keep an eye on Shelby and no, he didn’t know why, but something about her tugged at him.

Moments later, she emerged with a tray full of beers for the cowboys at a nearby table. Chatting with the group, she even allowed one of the men to trail his fingers along her forearm before stepping back with that same aloof smile for the interloper she’d given to him.

When she turned around, she caught him watching.

Her eyes narrowed for a moment and Dean wondered if he should be the one to look away. However, Shelby simply spun on the heels of her cowboy boots and made her way back to the bar.

Dean downed half of his beer before he noticed the growing pile of scraps on the table. “You determined to peel that off in as many pieces as possible?” he asked Jazzy, watching her pick apart the silver label with her fingernail. “I thought the object was to remove it in one—”

“Don’t start, Dean. Not tonight.” Her grip tightened on the bottle, but then she swiped a hand across one cheek.

Ah, damn. Tears. “You okay?”

“Just dandy.”

He thought back to what Abby had just told him. “Want to talk about it?”

She flipped a long blond curl over one shoulder and then looked directly at him, her eyes now dry. “As a matter of fact, I don’t, but thanks for asking.”

Boy, he was doing worse than the Rockies, who were getting beat up by the Atlanta Braves to the tune of a dozen unanswered runs. “How about we dance instead?”

Jazzy placed her drink back on the table. “No, thanks. I just want to sit here, okay?”

Dean nodded. “Okay, but if you need someone to talk to—”

“You’re a good friend, Dean.” Jazzy leaned in close and placed a lingering kiss on his cheek. “But please shut up.”

Doing as he was told, Dean leaned back in his chair, his gaze automatically going to the pretty bartender.

His brother’s words about Shelby played again in his head. There was no way those rumors could be true. Not with the way she’d dismissed him. And why did he even care that she looked at him as if he wasn’t much more than something she needed to scrape off the bottom of her boots?

Chapter Two

Typical man. Never satisfied with what's right in front of him.

Shelby Jenkins could be thinking about any of the male patrons at the Ace in the Hole tonight, but no, the man who continued to occupy her thoughts, even a day later, was Dean Pritchett.

All because she'd caught him looking her way more than once last night.

Despite the fact he'd had a pretty girl practically sitting on his lap, kissing him. The same pretty girl he'd left with a few hours later.

Okay, so Shelby would admit she'd been looking at him first when their gazes had met in the mirror behind the bar, but only because she had finally counted the money he'd left behind on the counter when he, his brother and their friends had moved to a table.

A 100 percent tip on a bar tab for four beers?

Her first thought had been to give the cash back to him. She was well aware of the many barroom games and Shelby wasn't interested in being a player.

Or being played.

Then again, her bank account needed every dollar she managed to squirrel away and if the handsome blond cowboy thought a hefty tip was going to score points, she had no problem letting him think that way.

Or setting him straight if he tried to use his generosity to his advantage.

Shelby looked over the dwindling Friday night crowd as closing time approached, automatically double-checking the beer taps to make sure they were shut down. Last call had been twenty minutes ago and she was already deep into her nightly routine, knowing all the necessary steps by heart.

Being eighteen and needing a job that kept her days free, she'd started working at the Ace in the Hole as a waitress. Moving behind the bar a couple of years later had been a breeze as she'd easily picked up the necessary skills watching the other bartenders and practicing after hours.

Along the way, she'd also learned a few hard lessons about hooking up with a random cowboy or two. After two attempts at human companionship failed even before the first dates ended, Shelby decided casual sex just wasn't for her. She didn't enjoy being a means to an end.

Besides, once they found out she wasn't as wild and unattached as they first thought, their interest in her vanished quicker than morning dew. So, being lonely was something she'd learned to deal with.

She'd suspected the Pritchett boys had been talking about her long before the ladies joined them, especially after the way Dean had held tight to her hand when they were introduced, but she never let on. She was used to the gossip—it'd been tailing her since she was sixteen—but it made her sad that even newcomers seemed to judge her.

Then again, Dean had almost come to her rescue last night when Courtney, one of the bar's newest waitresses and one of Shelby's oldest enemies, had walked right into her with a tray full of drinks. She'd held her tongue when Courtney hissed the accident was all her fault. Then made it clear to the cowboy she could handle things like she always did.

On her own.

She'd cleaned up the mess, played to the crowd as expected and even smiled sweetly at the cowboys when delivering a fresh set of drinks, courtesy of the house.

She flinched remembering the hot, sweaty touch from one guy who got a little too friendly. Something one too many of her customers felt they had a right to do from time to time.

Small towns. Born, raised and vilified as one of Rust Creek Falls' fallen angels, Shelby had just about all she could take of small towns.

Which was why her long-held goal of getting out of Rust Creek Falls had moved up from someday to as soon as possible.

“You keep rubbing the bar that way, you’re going to put a hole clean through it.” The raspy voice drifted over Shelby’s shoulder. “Or make the last few cowboys in this joint jealous.”

Realizing she’d been wiping down the same section of the scarred surface for the past few minutes, Shelby tossed the rag into the sink. “I thought you had headed home, Rosey.” She turned and eyed her boss. “Don’t you have company waiting back at your place?”

“Sam kept me waiting for the last three months. He can keep his pants zipped for a few more minutes.” The owner of the Ace in the Hole walked around the end of the bar, pausing to easily flip over a couple of the stools so that they rested upside down on the bar’s surface. “Besides, I can’t head out without the proper send-off. Just wouldn’t be right.”

A nearby table of cowboys didn’t bother to hide their obvious stares as Rosey, looking mighty fine in her tight jeans, blousy pirate-style top and cinched leather vest, walked by. With her shaggy, jet-black hair brushing her shoulders, high cheekbones and slender build, Rosey looked years younger than someone who’d recently celebrated her sixty-fifth birthday.

Still, their low groans filled the air when Rosey stopped in front of the jukebox, digging into her jeans pocket. Anyone still in the bar knew what was coming.

The musical tastes of the Hole’s clientele ran strictly country, from the old standards of Johnny Cash and George Strait to the latest hit from Nashville’s newest queen, Taylor Swift, but not Rosey. A child of the sixties, Rosey loved her golden oldies, especially the doo-wop classics.

Shelby propped her elbows on the bar and grinned. By the time her boss deposited four quarters and started punching in her choices, a group of people in one booth headed out. When the first “shoo-doop, shoo-do-be-doop” filled the air, one of two tables packed with cowboys finished the last of their beers and departed, as well.

“Really, Rosey? Must you play those old songs every night?”

The sweetness of the feminine voice coming from the corner booth didn’t hide the snarkiness that easily wiped the smile from Shelby’s face.

High school antics reared their ugly heads again.

“Nobody likes that ancient music,” the prissy blonde, sitting across from two of her friends, continued. “Except maybe for those born back in the dark ages.”

Rosey stopped by a recently vacated table and cleaned up the mess left behind. Walking past the booth, she waved an empty beer bottle in the girl’s direction. “Finish up your froufrou drinks, ladies. It’s past your bedtimes.”

The smiles disappeared from their faces and they went back to talking among themselves. Shelby took the bottles from her boss and deposited them in the nearby recycling bin, pleased that she’d somehow managed not to break a single one. “How do you do it?”

“Hey, I’ve been dealing with wiseass remarks from customers barely over the legal drinking age too long to let one that lame bother me.” Rosey leaned in close and gave her a quick bump, hip to hip. “Don’t let them get to you.”

Easier said than done. Even with years of practice.

Shelby forced a smile back to her face as she turned to her boss. “I’m barely over the legal drinking age, remember? I went to school with those girls.”

“Yes, but you’ve got an old soul. Not to mention a totally different perspective on what’s important in life. More so than that cosmopolitan crew over there.” Rosey jerked her head toward the booth. “Although they’ve been pounding the drinks pretty hard tonight. You okay closing up alone?”

This time Shelby’s smile was genuine as she leaned in and gave Rosey a quick hug. She considered her boss one part Cher, one part Betty White and 100 percent best friend despite the years separating them.

“It’s just the sorority girls and that last table of cowboys in the corner, new hires out at the McIntyre ranch.” She took a step back. “I’m sure everyone will be gone before Elvis leaves the building.” Rosey always ended her selections with a love song from the King. “I’ll be fine.”

“Ah, excuse me. Am I too late to get a beer?”

The deep male voice had Shelby spinning around.

Dean Pritchett.

He stood just inside the bar's front door dressed more casually tonight in faded jeans and a simple black T-shirt. A ball cap that had seen better days sat perched on his head.

“I thought you might be closed,” he continued, tipping up the cap's frayed brim as he moved farther inside a few steps. “Then I heard the jukebox and decided to try my luck.”

“Last call is done, gone and put to bed.” Shelby's standard answer fell from her lips even as her mind registered that he was alone. No brother and no pretty blonde friend in sight. “Sorry. We're closing in less than fifteen—”

“We-e-ell, we might be able to find a spare cold brew,” Rosey drawled, interrupting her. “That is, unless you have a problem with the music selection?”

Cocking his head to one side, he seemed to listen intently for a moment before he spoke. “How can anyone have a problem with The Tokens? ‘In the Still of the Night’ is a classic.”

Rosey's face lit up with a bright smile as she pointed a perfectly manicured fingernail at him. “You can stay. Shelby, get this man a beer.”

“Thank you, ma'am.”

“Oh, please, don't ‘ma'am’ me. The name's Rosaline Marguerite Shaw with too many other former last names to get into.” The older woman stepped forward and held out her hand. “Everyone calls me Rosey.”

Shelby grabbed a cold beer from the cooler, watching as Dean shook hands with her boss and fell under her charming spell, just like every other man who met her. So why the sudden twist in her stomach?

“Dean Pritchett.” He leaned forward after ending the handshake, his forearms braced against the bar. “This is a nice place you got here, Rosey.”

“My last ex wanted his freedom more than he wanted the Hole. Sometimes I wonder who got the better end of the deal.”

Shelby plopped the icy bottle, twist cap still in place, on the bar. “That will be three bucks.”

Dean straightened and reached for his pocket.

Rosey waved off his efforts. “No need, sugar. This one is on the house.”

“Thanks, Rosey.” Dean spoke to her boss, but his deep green eyes were trained on Shelby.

His steady gaze bothered her more than she would admit. Why was he here? And coming by so late?

Not to mention he's alone.

Shelby tried to ignore the little voice inside her that had to point out that fact. Again. It'd been years since a guy had managed to occupy any space in her head. There just wasn't room with everything else she had going on in her life right now.

Rosey was right. For someone so young, she was an old soul and sometimes that old part seemed to reach out from deep inside her to take over every weary bone in her body.

“Shel, honey? Did you hear me?”

Blinking hard, Shelby realized she hadn't heard a word her boss had said. Knowing Rosey, that wasn't a good thing. “I'm sorry, what?”

Rosey's deep red-painted lips twitched, as if she was fighting a losing battle with a grin. Oh, boy, Shelby was in trouble. What exactly had she missed? Her gaze flew to Dean, but he seemed very interested in the bowl of unshelled peanuts sitting on the bar that hadn't been there a minute ago.

“I asked if the cash register is all set,” Rosey said.

“Oh, right. Yes. It's ready to go.” Turning away, Shelby walked to the other end of the bar, her boss on her heels. She quickly opened the register, handing over the locked money bag knowing Rosey planned to take it home with her tonight.

Shutting the drawer with a push, she remembered something. “Hey, did you see my letter? I thought I left it tucked beneath the cash drawer.”

Rosey sighed. “I thought I told you to burn that thing after you showed it to me yesterday.”

She had, using a few colorful adjectives that were typical for Rosey. “I know, but—”

“But nothing. What did your mama say when you showed it to her?”

Shelby remained silent.

“She didn’t say anything because *you* never told her what you were doing in the first place.”

Rosey guessed correctly. “Oh, sweetie. Why not? Your mama would have supported you.”

“I know that. She would have supported me so much that she couldn’t have kept her mouth shut about it. Everyone in Bee’s Beauty Parlor would have known and then...” Shelby’s voice faded for a moment. “I just didn’t want it to be public knowledge.”

“Look, you earned that degree the hard way. While I don’t even want to think about how it’d be harder than a whore’s heart to run this place without you, they should have considered themselves lucky to get you. Their loss.”

“They didn’t want me.” She kept her voice low. Damn, it still hurt more than it should to say those words aloud. “Even after all that volunteering I did last month with the summer school program...they didn’t want me.”

“Then they’re morons and I’m worried for the younger generation of this town.”

Shelby nodded, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat. “Thanks, Rosey.”

“Honey, you need to get your mind off all that stuff.” She tucked the money bag beneath one arm and cocked her head toward the end of the bar. “Something tells me that hunky cowboy could assist you in that endeavor.”

Pushing the strands of blond hair away from her face, Shelby refused to look even though she could feel his gaze on her. After last night it felt...familiar. “Pass.”

“You’re alone too much.”

“I’m never alone.” Shelby reminded her. “Not for the last five years and that’s exactly how I want it.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

Yes, she did. It was a heated topic of discussion they’d shared in the past, but she just wasn’t up to it tonight. “Weren’t you on your way out?”

“Yes, I am, but you play nice. I have a feeling that young man came in here for a particular reason.”

Shelby had no doubt that was true. Nipping that reason in the bud was next on her to-do list. “Have a good night, boss.”

“Oh, honey, when my Sammy’s in town, it’s always a good night.” Rosey shot her a quick wink and then disappeared into the back.

Focusing her attention on the register, Shelby pressed the sequence of buttons to run the end-of-day reports and sent them to Rosey’s computer. She then logged off and shut down the machine.

No sense in putting off the inevitable, Shelby squared her shoulders and started back to the end of the bar.

“Oh, teacher, teacher...”

Shelby froze as Darlene Daughtry’s voice rang out across the bar. She looked over at the booth, spotting both her high school nemesis’s phony expression of innocence and the folded piece of white paper she fanned herself with.

Was that her letter? No, it couldn’t be!

“Oh, my bad. I guess I should have just called for a waitress.” Darlene’s pageant-practiced smile disappeared. “And you would have come running.”

Shock filled Shelby as she realized what Darlene held in her hand. Shock that gave way to a long-familiar, burning shame.

She hated that certain people in this town still had the ability to make her feel that way, after all these years, with just a few choice words.

For all her hard work, there were some things a person never stopped paying for no matter how much time had passed.

Refusing to give Darlene the satisfaction of rushing to the booth, but determined to get everyone out of this place, Shelby set her gaze straight ahead and kept walking, grabbing a nearby tray just so she'd have something to hang on to.

First things first.

Dean looked up as she approached. She expected to see a familiar flirty gleam in his eyes, the same look she'd seen so many times from so many others. His calm and steady gaze confused her, as did the still-unopened beer bottle in front of him despite the growing pile of peanut shells next to it. "Look, I know why you're here. Not interested."

"Excuse me?" He tapped the side of the bottle with one finger while cracking open another shell with a simple squeeze of his fist. "I just came in here for a beer."

"Then I suggest you drink it because the bar is shut off and so am I." Her mind flew back to the girl he'd been with last night. "Can I say it any plainer? I have zero interest in anyone who's obviously already taken."

He started to speak, but Shelby kept on walking. Rounding the end of the bar, she started for the booths, but a warm hand gripped her arm.

She spun around, jerking from his hold, an unnecessary move as he'd already let her go.

"You're wrong," Dean said.

The story of her life. "Am I?"

He moved in closer, his work-scarred boots snugging up against the tips of her sneakers. She automatically lifted the round tray to her chest, placing it between them, almost like a shield. Dean's gaze dropped to the tray for a moment before he took a step back.

"I'm not taken." He pressed a hand to the center of his chest as if to emphasize his words, his voice a low whisper. "Jazzy, the girl you saw me with last night, is an old friend from back home. She was having a rough time and just needed someone to talk to."

Shelby pulled in a deep breath through her nose, fighting for control. It didn't work. All she did was take in the clean, outdoorsy scent that seemed to radiate from this man, a scent that managed to make its way through the typical smoky and boozy odors of most who hung out in the bar.

Suddenly very tired, she was ready for everyone to leave. Including Dean Pritchett.

Grabbing the beer bottle off the bar, she pushed it against the back of his hand, forcing him to grab it before it crashed to the ground. "Well, I *need* to close up. Take your beer and find somewhere else to drink it."

She spun away from him and stalked over to the booth where Darlene and her friends sat, ignoring how her heart hitched when she heard the Hole's front door gently bang shut behind her.

"I'm afraid it's closing time, ladies," Shelby said with her best phony-customer service voice. "Are you all finished?"

"Hmm, are we finished?" Darlene spoke to her friends, ignoring Shelby as she propped a bent elbow on the table, her fingers tightened around a piece of paper in her hand.

"Oh, did you see the news today?" she continued, batting her mascara-heavy false eyelashes. "Preseason football starts this weekend. Isn't that exciting?"

The other two smirked in unison. Shelby knew what was coming. The contents of the letter were just the tip of the sword that Darlene planned to jab right through her.

As much as Shelby tried to avoid any talk of the biggest news to hit Rust Creek Falls in decades, even with the flooding last month, it didn't work. The extensive damage to the town had stemmed the tide a bit, but now things were looking better with the reconstruction going on, and suddenly everybody was a fan of a certain East Coast professional football team thousands of miles from here.

All because of local boy Zach Shute.

The best high school football player to come out of western Montana in years, Zach had graduated from college with a stellar career and was drafted in the first round. At twenty-four, he was a little bit older than most rookies, but his college days had been delayed for almost a year.

Thanks to Shelby.

“You must be very excited about Zach’s prospects.” Darlene looked at her now. “I heard professional ballplayers make very good money.”

All three girls turned to her and waited. “I wouldn’t know,” Shelby said, forcing the words out.

“Really? One would think you’d be the first in line to hit up that poor boy for a big fat check.” Her fingers relaxed and the letter fell to the table, soaking up the moisture from their now-empty glasses. “Seeing how your career as an educator seems to be over before it even started. but is that really such a surprise? Did you really think the town would want *you* teaching their children?”

Shelby’s fingers itched to snatch up the letter, but she wouldn’t give her old rival the satisfaction.

Not that it mattered. The contents had been short and sweet. Just two paragraphs telling her she’d been turned down for a teaching position at Rust Creek Falls Elementary School.

Despite the loss of the building in last month’s flood, the town was still planning to hold classes any way they could and now that she had her early-childhood education degree, she’d wanted to teach. Shelby had hoped a year in the local school system would add more cushion to her savings and give her some experience to help her find a job in a new city far away from Rust Creek Falls.

She’d done her student teaching in nearby Kalispell, but when she found out the elementary school had openings, she’d jumped at the chance to prove to everyone, to herself, that there was more to Shelby Jenkins than her dubious past.

None of that mattered now.

“I think it’s time for you all to leave.”

“Really?” The girl in the corner, Shelby couldn’t even remember her name, smirked. “We’re not the only ones still here, you know. What about that table of cowboys back in the corner? Why aren’t you kicking them out?”

“Probably because she wants to keep them all to herself.”

Darlene reached for her wallet and cell phone as the three of them scooted out from the booth. Shelby’s fingers gripped the drink tray so hard that she feared her bones would crack. She forced herself to take several steps back, putting as much space between her and this witch as possible without looking as if she was running away.

At one point, she’d tried to understand Darlene’s stinging malice toward her. After all, Darlene and Zach had been a steady item for two years before Shelby joined the cheerleading squad her sophomore year in high school. By the following spring Zach had ended things with Darlene right after the junior prom and moved on to Shelby, who’d foolishly thought dating the star quarterback was the answer to her dreams.

But that had been five years ago. High school should be ancient history for everyone by now. Except one of them had a daily reminder—

“Oh, here’s a tip for you.” Darlene paused, her friends already waiting at the door for her. She unzipped her wallet, yanked out a square foil packet and tossed it onto the table. “Use one of these this time, okay? I think everyone will be happier in the long run.”

All the air disappeared from Shelby’s lungs. The strength in her legs went as well, causing her to sway as Darlene brushed past her. She jutted her foot out to keep from losing her balance and Darlene’s platform sandals caught the edge of Shelby’s sneaker. Arm twirling couldn’t save her and seconds later, Darlene face planted on the floor.

Her friends gasped as she scrambled to her feet and spun around, her face contorted in an angry sneer. “You did that on purpose, Jenkins.”

Had she? Shelby wasn't sure, but there was no way she could convince Darlene of that. Nor would she try. No, what she wanted to do was yell, to get into this evil girl's face and tell her she couldn't talk about the most important thing in her life. . . .

She turned away, her gaze drawn back to the table. The slamming of the door told her Darlene and her friends had left, but she didn't move as everything in her line of sight faded to black except for that single item on the table.

She blinked hard, hoping it would disappear. When it didn't, she cleaned away everything, the empty glasses, used napkins—the trash—with one sweep of her arm. Dropping the tray on the now-empty table, she leaned forward, bracing her arms to keep herself upright as she struggled to catch her breath, familiar accusations rolling through her mind.

How could you be so stupid?

This is the last thing I need right now.

There goes my life!

The loud laughter behind her stopped Shelby from heading down a road that led only to heartache. She shook her head, pulled in a deep breath and quietly reminded herself that she was the lucky one.

Turning around, she walked across the room. “Okay, boys, it's closing time. You all need to head out.”

The four cowboys did as she asked, two helping their one friend who was having trouble putting one foot in front of the other. She smiled her thanks as they walked away, and started to clear away their empties, but froze when she felt an arm snake around her waist.

“Hmm, why don't I stick around so we can have some fun?” Heavy, beer-laden words slurred in her ear as male fingers tightened on her hip.

Shelby fought against the tears that threatened by blinking hard. Could this night get any worse? She never let her guard down and got this close to customers, especially those who stayed until closing time.

“No, thanks.” She tried to angle her body away from him, but he practically had her pinned against the table. “I still need to clean up.”

“I'll help ya.” His breath stank of cigarettes and his rough beard scraped against her cheek. “My buddies are already gone—”

“And you should join them.”

Suddenly, she was free from his mangled hold. Shelby hurried away, moving around to the other side of the table in time to watch Dean escort the sputtering cowboy toward the door.

“H-hey! I wasn't go-going to do nothing!”

“I'm sure the lady is pleased to hear that in case you ever want to come back again.” Dean's voice carried back across the bar as he strong-armed the man outside. “But it's time for you to leave anyway.”

This time she couldn't hold on. She'd reached her limit and when her legs gave way, Shelby sank into the closest chair.

“I need to get out of here.” Dropping her head, she covered her face with her hands, rocking back and forth repeating the words again and again. “I need to get out of here. I need to get out of here.”

“Any special place you want to go?”

She jerked upright. Dean had returned and knelt in front of her. He'd tossed his hat on the table, making it easy for her to see the sincerity in his gaze.

“Just name the spot, darling.” His mouth hitched upward in one corner, making his smile tentative and sweet at the same time. “Name it and I'll take you there.”

Chapter Three

Incredible blue eyes stared back at Dean. Eyes the color of the crystal clear falls located in the mountains outside of town. They were also wide and unblinking, which worried him as much as the way he'd found her huddled in one of the simple wooden chairs, after he'd come back inside from making sure that the drunken cowboy left with his buddies.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered, her hands clenched tightly in her lap.

Her voice was as shaky as the rest of her. He found himself wanting to pull her into his arms, hold her close and tell her everything was going to be all right.

Which was probably a lie.

He had no idea what the heck was going on other than a drunken cowboy manhandling her and a booth of female customers that took childhood bullying to a new level.

"Offering to play chauffeur?" That got him a small smile, so he continued, "I came for a beer, remember?"

She nodded, still holding his gaze. "But you left."

"No, I just stepped outside to get some fresh air. When I saw your last customers leave, minus one, I figured I should come back in and make sure you were okay."

This time she closed her eyes and turned away. Two deep breaths didn't seem to help. She was still shaking. When she captured her bottom lip with her teeth and bit down, he just about lost it. "Hey, can I get you anything? A glass of water maybe?"

She shook her head.

"Something stronger?" It felt wrong to ask her that. She looked so innocent, but his brother had assured him she was of age and they were in a bar after all. "I'm pretty sure you've got just about everything here."

That got her attention. Eyes open, she looked at him again and he was glad not to see any tears in those blue depths. She drew in another breath, this one a bit more steady, and nodded.

"Okay." Dean backed away, rising to his full height. "Pick your poison."

"Hot chocolate."

Hot—What? "Hot chocolate?" he repeated.

She nodded again. "And don't spare the marshmallows. I need lots and lots of marshmallows."

He looked around, spotting the swinging door that led to the kitchen. "I'm guessing I'll find what I need in there?"

"No, the cabinet beneath the register. There's one of those automated machines with the tiny cups. Just pop one in and press the button."

Dean knew what she was talking about. They'd bought one of those gadgets for their father a few years ago for Christmas. The old man loved it. "And the marshmallows?"

"There should be a fairly new bag and a couple of mugs, too."

Dean crossed the bar and found everything just where she said. An assortment of single cups featuring flavored coffees, teas and hot chocolate lined the top shelf and the mugs, both looking well-used, sat next to a bag of miniature marshmallows. One of the mugs was stamped with Property of SEAL Team One, Naval Amphibious Base Coronado while the other featured a group of cartoon princesses.

He grabbed the princess mug, made the hot chocolate and returned. By the time he got back to her, her fingers were relaxed when she reached for the mug.

"What made you choose this one?" she asked, still a bit shell-shocked. "Don't think I know any Navy SEALs?"

He shrugged, having gone purely on instinct and handed her the spoon he'd brought with him.

“Well, I do.” She paused to blow on the contents of her mug and poked at the melting marshmallows on top. “Samuel Jackson Traven, retired SEAL. He’s Rosey’s special someone.”

Dean leaned against the nearby table. “I guess a spitfire like Rosey would need someone with the stamina of a Special Forces kind of guy to keep up with her.”

This time she smiled, still looking down at her mug before bringing it to her lips to take a sip. “You figured that out after only just meeting her?”

“I’m a pretty good judge of people.”

Shelby choked, but waved him off when he reached for her. “I’m—I’m fine. It’s just still too hot.”

Dean watched as she stirred her drink, then scooped the gooeyness on top into her mouth. A small sigh escaped when her lips closed over the spoon, a sigh that went straight to a part of him that had no business responding.

He tightened his grip on the table’s edge, remembering the anger that flared in his gut when he’d come back in and found that drunk manhandling her. A protective—no, almost possessive—instinct he’d never felt before reared its ugly head and he wanted to do more to the guy than just haul his ass outside.

Why? What was it about this girl that brought out that side of him?

“Boy, that’s good.” Shelby’s words pulled him from his thoughts. She sat a little straighter in the chair, resting the now half-empty mug in her lap. “Ah, thanks.” She lifted her gaze to his. “Thank you for coming to my rescue.”

“You’re welcome.”

She held his stare for a long moment, then broke free and looked around the bar as if she was seeing it for the first time. A quick shake of her head and she was on her feet.

Turning her back to him, she started cleaning the table. “I’ve still got a lot of work to do.”

He moved out of her way. “Let me help you.”

“No.” Her reply was sharp and biting. She glanced over her shoulder, bit down on her lower lip for a second time, then said softly, “I’ve got this, but thanks again.”

“Okay.” He took a step backward, hands held wide in mock surrender. He then jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I’ll just get the trash from the booth over there.”

“No!” She whirled around, clutching the bottles and her mug to her chest. “I don’t need any help. Really. Everything is fine...I’m fine. The Ace is closed now and you’ve done your good deed, so you can just head on home.”

After witnessing that lost look in her eyes a few minutes ago, and knowing the cause of it was still out there somewhere? Not gonna happen. “I’m guessing you upend all the chairs and stools to sweep the floor?”

She sighed and stared at him for a long moment. He could almost see the internal battle she had going on inside her head. Not that he blamed her. Working in a bar probably meant she was hit on a lot and sometimes not as directly as what had happened a few minutes ago.

Was he hitting on her? Yeah, okay, maybe he was.

Finally, she gave him a quick nod before brushing past him in the direction of the dirty booth. Dean started with the closest clean table and by the time Shelby had wiped down the booth and locked the front door from the inside, he was working on the barstools.

“Hey, where should I put this?”

She turned, surprise on her face when she saw him holding the still-unopened beer bottle in his hand. “The beer cooler is behind the bar on the far left. I guess you weren’t really interested in a beer, huh?”

No, he’d come back here tonight for just one reason. To see her.

Yeah, he was definitely hitting on her.

Shelby hadn't waited for an answer before disappearing through the swinging door. She returned a minute later with a couple of brooms and a dustpan. She paused but relented and passed one over to him when he held out his hand. Their fingers brushed and that same flicker that had crackled between them when he touched her before was still there. The widening of those beautiful eyes told him she felt it, too.

She spun away and headed for the back corner of the bar. He went to the front and they worked silently as an Elvis ballad filled the air. When they met in the middle of the room, Shelby grabbed a nearby trash barrel and took command of the dustpan. They finished just as the last notes of the song faded away.

She never once looked directly at him.

"Is that it?" Dean asked. "Or are we breaking out a mop and a pail of soapy water?"

"No, we don't wash the floors until the weekend is over unless a customer gives us a reason to —" A faint buzzing filled the air, cutting off Shelby's words. "Oh, darn it!"

She handed him the broom while fishing a cell phone out of her rear pocket. Tossing the dustpan into the trash can, she grabbed it and headed around the end of the bar while the thumb of one hand flew over the phone's flat screen.

Replying to a text message? Was someone wondering why she hadn't come home yet?

Dean hadn't considered that. There was no ring on her finger, but that didn't mean anything.

He'd been surprised after walking Jazzy back to where she was staying at Strickland's Boarding House last night to find Shelby Jenkins still on his mind. He was intrigued by her, a feeling he hadn't experienced in a long time, and he found himself wanting to know her better.

Now he knew why she'd spent most of last night frowning in his direction.

She thought he was already involved with someone. A misconception he'd cleared up earlier before she kicked him out of the bar. Not that he'd planned on leaving, at least not until he was sure she believed him. Now he was glad he'd stuck around.

"Well, that's it. Thanks again for your help."

He noticed her cell phone was gone, back in her pocket he guessed or inside the leather purse that hung from her shoulder.

"You might want to put these away." He walked over to her, holding out the brooms.

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea." She took them from his grasp, not allowing their hands to touch this time. "You can—"

"Walk you to your car?" He cut her off, offering a wide smile for the offense. "Great idea. You parked out back?"

"What are you—Why are doing all this?"

"I'm a nice guy?"

"Or maybe you think I'm an easy—"

"I think you've had a long night." Dean cut her off again. "That includes being manhandled by a drunk and I just want to make sure you get to your car safely. That's all."

She nodded, and moments later, they were outside in the warm summer air. The parking lot was empty except for a couple of pickups and a car. Dean was glad to see the area was well lit. He glanced quickly at his watch. Almost two-thirty in the morning. He guessed there were many nights when Shelby left the bar this late.

She headed for the used four-door that looked as if its best days were long behind it, her keys already in her hand.

"You know, I was planning to come by earlier than I did," Dean said, falling into step beside her. "I worked until sunset at the elementary school and then fell asleep reading."

"All of the volunteers have been working so hard to help the town get back on its feet." Shelby reached the driver's-side door and quickly unlocked it. "Everyone appreciates all you've done."

He realized his time with her was ending fast. “Well, you know what they say about all work and no play. I was wondering if you’d like to go out with me sometime.”

She yanked the door open and hesitated for a moment before sliding in behind the wheel. “I don’t think so.”

The door closed before he could stop her. Defeated, Dean could do nothing but stand there as she jammed her keys into the ignition. A quick turn and the highlights came on, but nothing else did except for a rapid clicking noise.

He watched her mouth move in what he guessed were a few colorful word choices as she tried to start her car again with the same results. Twice.

Tapping on the window, he waited until she rolled it down to lean forward and peer in at her. “Pop the hood. I’ll take a look.”

“Dean, you’ve already done so much for me tonight.” She stared straight ahead out the windshield. “I can’t ask you—”

He liked the way his name sounded coming from her lips. “You didn’t ask. I offered. Now, pop it.”

She did as he asked and he walked around to the front of the car, lifting the hood. She’d parked beneath a light, which helped somewhat. He fiddled with the battery connections but they were tight.

“Here, this might help.”

He turned to find Shelby standing next to him with a flashlight. “Thanks.”

Ten minutes later, he shut off the light and closed the hood with a light bang. Shelby stood leaning against the driver’s-side door. “Sorry. I don’t see anything that’s a simple fix. It might just be your battery. More likely it’s the alternator or the starter.”

“It’s money I can’t afford to spend right now, that’s what it is.” She took the flashlight from him and tossed it back inside her car, locking the door behind her. “A perfect ending to a perfect night.”

Dean wasn’t happy this happened, but at least he was going to get to spend more time with her. “Come on, I’ll take you home. Can we walk from here?” Considering the size of Rust Creek Falls, a person was able to walk from one end of town to the other in a few hours.

Shelby was shaking her head before he finished talking. “I can’t ask that of you.”

“I’m not going to let you walk alone.” He remembered her cell phone. Damn, he hated to ask, but he had to. “Unless there’s someone you can call to come get you?”

Shelby tightened her grip on her purse, an array of emotions playing across her face before she turned away into the shadows. Silence filled the air and he wondered what she wasn’t telling him.

“No,” she finally said. “There’s no one. And I don’t live in town. I’m on the east side of the creek, over on the edge of the Traub ranch.”

Dean had met most of the Traub family when they’d held a barbecue out at their place last month inviting the whole town, including the volunteers.

“Are you related to the Traubs?” he asked.

She shook her head. “My daddy used to work at the ranch.”

“Well, my truck is parked at the trailer I’m staying in.” He motioned with one hand. “Let’s get you home, huh?”

They made the quick walk across the street and into the makeshift trailer park. Dean held open the passenger-side door for Shelby, ignoring her look of surprise. He got behind the wheel and headed down Sawmill Street, knowing it headed straight out of town.

“How long have you lived in Rust Creek Falls?” he asked to fill the silence as they left the center of town.

“All my life.” Shelby kept her gaze toward the window. “Born, raised and never been farther than Kalispell.”

Kalispell was the next closest town to Rust Creek Falls, about thirty minutes away and where Dean had hoped to take Shelby out for dinner and maybe a movie. She'd already turned him down once. Should he try again?

He followed her directions on the back roads once they left the town limits, noting they soon passed a house for sale, and the five acres it sat on, that had caught his eye last week. Uninhabited for a few years because of the elderly owner's death, it had survived the flood unscathed. Dean had checked out the place on a whim, his head already filled with ideas to fix it up.

If he went through with his idea of being more than just a temporary resident of Rust Creek Falls, he'd need a place to live.

Shelby pointed out the road that led to her driveway just a few miles away. Dean turned, noting how the gravel drive inclined as they drove. "Did you have much damage from the flooding last month?"

"No, my daddy built our place up on this rise. There was a lot of water around us, and the driveway was impassable for a day or two, but that was it."

Dean was happy to hear that. Lord knew there were a lot of homes that had suffered damage ranging from flooded basements to entire homes being condemned. The biggest loss to the town, in terms of buildings at least, had been the total destruction of the elementary school.

He had to admit it'd been hard on his heart to be part of the team that gutted the entire place from the ceiling downward, tossing out tons of debris that included everything from books to pencils before a structural inspection could take place.

"Your father's a smart man."

"Was. Was a smart man. He died three years ago."

Damn, that sucked. Shelby must have been a teenager when that happened. Dean, too, knew what it was like to lose a parent at that age. His mother had died suddenly the summer after he graduated from high school.

"You can turn in here."

He did as Shelby instructed. The headlights of his truck passed over a simple, one-story ranch-style house with a front porch.

And a pickup truck parked in front of a two-car garage.

He thought back to the text message she'd received, not liking how his gut twisted at the sight of the extra vehicle in the drive. Pulling into the empty space near a side entry door, he saw an outside light shone bright in the dark night. A soft glow also came from inside the house. The kitchen, he guessed, wondering again if Shelby had someone waiting up for her.

He put the truck into Park and shut off the twin beams of light from the headlights that bounced off the garage, putting the cab's interior into a shadowy darkness.

"Well, it's pretty late." She reached for the door handle. "Thanks for the lift."

"Shelby, wait." He rested his arm across the back of the truck seat, his fingers inches from her shoulder. "You must have figured out that I came back to the bar to see you."

That got her attention.

She turned to look at him, the soft cotton of her T-shirt brushing against his fingertips. With her back to the outside light, it was hard to see her face, but he could see when her tongue darted out to swipe across her lips.

Yeah, there went his body's involuntary reactions again.

"Do you believe what I told you earlier about me and Jazzy just being friends?" he pressed.

She nodded but remained silent.

Having no idea if that was a good thing or not, Dean decided he was going to try this again. But first things first. "You know, I'd really like to take you out, but I guess I should find out if you're involved with someone."

“Dean, I...” Her voice trailed off as she looked out the windshield, her fingers tunneling through the shoulder-length strands of her hair. “I’m not involved. Most of my nights are spent working at the bar. I don’t have time to date.”

He was glad to hear she was single and she hadn’t turned down his offer quite yet. “Look, I was planning to take a picnic lunch up around the falls Sunday afternoon. I found this great spot, an open area with marked paths, right next to an outcropping of rocks where there’s the remains of—”

“—of a bridge.” She turned back and finished his sentence with him. “Wait, did you say the *remains* of a bridge?”

Dean nodded. “As far as I can tell, yeah, there used to be a bridge of some kind over the creek. I guess the flooding took it out. Do you know the place?”

“Yes, I know it.”

He waited, wondering if she was going to say more. When she didn’t, he plowed ahead. “So, how about joining me? I make a pretty mean fried chicken.”

She smiled at that. “You cook?”

“It’s an old family recipe that earned my mother a blue ribbon at the Gallatin County Fair three years running.” Dean grinned at the memory. “I’ll even throw in macaroni salad and freshly sliced watermelon.”

Shelby studied him for a long moment, and Dean held his breath. He hadn’t worked this hard for a date in a long time. A couple of the female volunteers on his construction crew had made it clear from the first day they were willing and able to spend time with him. He hadn’t been interested and not just because mixing work and pleasure could be a formula for disaster either.

But this? This he wanted with every ounce of his being.

“Well, how can a girl say no to freshly sliced watermelon?”

Shelby stepped inside her house and closed the kitchen door with a soft click, pausing to lean up against the cool wood for a moment. She couldn’t believe she’d done the exact opposite of what her head had told her to do.

She’d said yes.

For an evening that had gone from bad to worse in a matter of minutes just an hour ago, it had ended with Shelby agreeing to go on a picnic with a total stranger.

A stranger who’d already earned Rosey’s stamp of approval, saved her from a drunken cowboy, helped her clean up the bar and insisted on seeing her safely home after her car died.

A regular knight in shining armor.

Too bad Shelby no longer believed in fairy tales or happily-ever-afters, despite the princess mug.

“Are you okay, honey?”

Shelby turned at the voice, wondering how many times she’d been asked that question in her lifetime. “I’m fine, Mama.”

“When you replied to my text you said you’d be home any minute. What happened? And where’s your car?” Vivian Jenkins shuffled into her kitchen, tying the sash of her cotton bathroom tightly around her waist. “And who brought you home?”

“My car died.” She flipped the lock on the door, deciding to go with the short version of the night’s events. “That was Dean Pritchett. He was at the bar and nice enough to bring me home.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you are hooking up with another one of those cowboys.” Her mother’s tone switched from concerned to protective. “I don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

“Dean isn’t a cowboy. I think. I’m not really sure what he does for a living, but he’s part of the volunteer crew that came from Thunder Canyon to help with the repairs of the town.”

Her mother’s demeanor changed in an instant. For a woman who had fallen in love and married a cowboy within weeks of meeting him twenty-five years ago, she sure held a disdain for the species nowadays. “Oh. Well, that was very nice of him.”

“Yes, Dean Pritchett is a nice guy.” Shelby walked past her mother and out of the kitchen, waiting until she was in the hallway before dropping the next bomb. “Which is why I agreed to go out on a date with him.”

“Shelby Marie!”

“Shh!” Turning around, Shelby put her finger to her lips despite the partially closed door to her left. “I don’t want you to wake her.”

Her mother dismissed the request with the wave of her hand. “Oh, please. That child sleeps through a Montana thunderstorm. You know her.”

Yes, she did.

Shelby pushed open the door, the night-light bathing her daughter’s bedroom in a warm light. The entire room was decorated in princesses, from the bedding to the toys, but the most important princess of all lay asleep, a stuffed yellow bear held tight in her grasp.

Crossing the room, Shelby automatically picked up the stuffed toys that hadn’t been selected as bedtime companions and her daughter’s clothing, tossing each in their respective baskets. She perched gently on the edge of the twin-size mattress, marveling at how small Caitlin looked curled up in a ball in the center of the bed.

Brushing back the blond strands that matched her own, Shelby gazed at the little girl who changed her life five years ago. Caitlin was born on Shelby’s seventeenth birthday, a present ten days early.

And two weeks after the end of Shelby’s junior year in high school.

Two weeks after Caitlin’s father, football star Zach Shute, had graduated, still proclaiming the baby wasn’t his.

Shaking off the memories, Shelby leaned in and placed a kiss on her daughter’s forehead, taking a moment to breathe in that simple fragrance of bubblegum-scented shampoo and talcum powder.

“Did she give you any trouble with her bath tonight?” Shelby whispered, knowing her mother stood behind her.

“Are you kidding me?” Vivian laid a hand on Shelby’s shoulder. “She loved it. As long as I sang ‘Under the Sea’ over and over again. And then we had to read the book connected with that movie at least four times before she would settle down.”

Shelby smiled. Her daughter did love to read. A trait she’d picked up from both her grandparents. She didn’t have any idea where she or Caitlin would be today if it wasn’t for the love and support of her parents.

Telling them she was pregnant at the tender age of sixteen was the hardest thing she’d ever faced, but both her mom and her dad had been by her side from the very beginning.

Rising, Shelby motioned her mother from the room. She was suddenly very tired and she had to be up with Caitlin in the morning as her mother worked at the local beauty salon on Saturdays. Thank goodness her daughter tended to sleep in, but even an 8:00 a.m. wake-up was going to be tough to handle at this point.

“Good night, Mama.” Shelby gave her mother a quick kiss on the cheek after they left Caitlin’s room. “I’m heading to bed.”

“So when is this date of yours?”

Shelby sighed. She should have known. “We’re going for a picnic Sunday afternoon. Is that okay? Are you and Caitlin still going to the movies in Kalispell?”

Her mother nodded. She’d insisted on special afternoons with her granddaughter even though she stepped in as babysitter while Shelby worked at the bar. “And we’re going out for junk food afterward.”

“Mama—”

“I know, but it’s my right as a grandmother. Healthy stuff here in the house, junk food during nana-and-me dates.”

She was too tired to argue about it now. “Okay.”

“Does this man you’re going out with know about Caitlin?”

No, he didn’t.

She’d thought about telling him she was a single mom to a five-year-old. Just to see how quickly he would backpedal from his invite, much like the last two guys did after finding out about Caitlin.

But the idea of spending a few hours up by the falls with another adult of the opposite sex, especially one as goodlooking and well, nice, as Dean Pritchett, was too tempting to pass up.

Besides, she wasn’t looking for anything serious. Goodness knows she had enough seriousness in her life, especially now. Her plans to move away from Rust Creek Falls had implanted even more fully in her head after the school board’s rejection of her job application.

“Well, does he?” her mother asked.

“No. At least not yet.” Shelby had a feeling he would have mentioned Caitlin if someone else had already told him. “Don’t worry, Mama, Sunday afternoon is nothing more than a one-time thing.”

She closed her eyes to the seed of hope that was already rooting inside of her. The one that said maybe this was more than that.

Much more.

Chapter Four

Sunday was another glorious summer day.

Bright sunshine and an afternoon temperature that reached almost eighty degrees, even though it was a bit cooler up on the mountain. The day was a carbon copy of the weather they'd been blessed with for the past few weeks that allowed the steady rebuilding of the town.

Still, a chill raced through Shelby. Glad that she'd pulled on her jeans and boots while getting dressed for her date with Dean, she second-guessed the short sleeves of her T-shirt that left her arms bare and susceptible to a ridge of goose bumps that rose on her skin.

She stared at the spot where a simple wooden bridge used to cross this section of the creek.

The majestic upper falls were still two-thirds of the way to the summit of Falls Mountain, but here in these twin open fields, popular with so many of the townspeople for parties and picnics, the lower falls were a more gentle cascade of water over an outcropping of boulders and rocks.

A month ago the flowing water must have been anything but gentle.

"I can't believe it's gone." She rubbed her arms to chase away the tingling. "The bridge had been here a long time."

Dean dropped to one knee, closely examining the broken sections of timber embedded into the ground, the only parts of the structure still there. "From what I heard, the rising water was more than enough to wash it clean away. How sturdy was the bridge?"

"Very. My daddy and his friends built it back when he and my mom were dating." Unable to look at the empty space any longer, Shelby backed away. "He told me their crowd used to come here a lot when they were teenagers. Back when no one else used to. At the time there'd been just a big old log across the divide until the guys from the high school wood shop decided to make it easier to cross."

Dean rose, gathering the backpack that carried their lunch, a small cooler and a well-loved quilt in his hands. He joined her again on the trail they'd been following for the past twenty minutes or so. "I wonder if it's on the town's master list of structures that need to be rebuilt or replaced."

"Doubtful." Shelby shrugged, working to add indifference to her tone as they walked. "With all the destruction down in the valley, I bet no one has even thought about the bridge."

The truth was she didn't want to care about the bridge anymore. It'd be one more thing that would make leaving harder when the time came.

Right up there with her mother.

As much as she'd tried to convince her mama that moving away from Rust Creek Falls was the best thing for her and Caitlin, the older woman refused to even think about going with them.

Even after Shelby had finally shared how she'd been turned down for a teaching position early this morning while Caitlin slept.

"I'll check tomorrow at the weekly meeting."

She stopped, Dean's words cutting into her thoughts, and looked at him. "Why?"

"Because it's important." Dean stopped, too, his gaze serious. "Not as much compared to someone's home or business, but that bridge is part of the town's history. It'll probably take a while. Heck, the calendar is so jammed it might not be until next spring, but that bridge should be—will be—rebuilt."

The conviction in his voice warmed her deep inside, chasing away the chill from the sight of the splintered ruins.

Dean Pritchett continued to surprise her.

Like when she'd called Tyrone at the garage about her car yesterday morning only to find out Dean had already made arrangements to have the vehicle towed there. And again later that same night when she'd expected him to show up at the Ace, and she'd eyed the front door every time someone walked in.

Only he never did, even after she'd dawdled at closing time until Rosey hurried her along, agreeing to give Shelby a ride home.

Then today, he'd shown up looking impossibly gorgeous in jeans and a simple white T-shirt beneath an open plaid shirt in shades of green that matched his eyes.

He'd practically shoved a bouquet of daisies into her hand as if they were burning his fingers. He said he'd gotten them at Daisy's Donuts. The owner always had bunches of her namesake flowers for sale, and when he'd stopped by to get dessert he thought she might like them.

She did. She loved them.

No one, other than her parents, had ever given her flowers before. She'd been so touched by the gesture that she'd almost invited Dean inside while she put them in a vase full of water. Thankfully, he'd already stepped off the back stairs, saying he'd wait in his truck for her.

"Shelby? Did you hear me?"

Realizing she'd missed what Dean had asked, she focused her attention and found he'd moved off the path to a shady area a few feet away at the base of a group of birch trees. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked if this was an okay place to lay out the blanket." He pointed to the grass. "Or did you want to keep walking?"

She had planned to move farther up the winding path after stopping to see what was left of the bridge. Just in case anyone else in town had the same idea to come to the park for a picnic.

Not that she was ashamed to be seen with him. Just the opposite. The last thing she wanted was to run into someone like Darlene. There were others in town who felt the same way the cheerleader did about her. They might not be as straightforward nasty as her former teammate, but the insults and hurtful barbs did manage to hit their intended target every once in a while.

Then again, despite the beautiful day, there hadn't been any cars in the lower parking lot and no one else was in sight now. Maybe she should be worried, not about someone ruining their date, but about being out here in an isolated area with a man she barely knew.

"Shelby?"

Realizing she'd once again drifted off, she forced a quick laugh from her suddenly tight throat. "There I go, spacing out on you. I'm so sorry. Yes, this spot is perfect."

"Rough night at the bar?" Dean set the backpack and cooler at his feet and unfurled the quilt. "You do look a bit tired."

"Don't you know it's impolite to tell a woman she looks anything but perfect?" Shelby knelt at the edge of the patchwork quilt and smoothed the material with her hands.

Dean mirrored her action, then reached across the blanket to take her hand. Surprised, she looked up and found concern in his gaze.

"I just meant if you want to cut this afternoon short—" he gave her fingers a gentle squeeze "—I'd understand."

Refusing to allow anything, including her fears, to mess up this afternoon, Shelby knew at that moment there was no place else she'd rather be. She might not know much about Dean, but she was certain of one thing.

He was a good man.

And that scared her in every way possible.

She eased from his touch, using that same hand to tuck her hair behind one ear. "No, I don't want to go home. Everything was fine last night at work. Like most nights."

"I was planning to stop in, but I had to drive to Missoula to pick up supplies. I ended up running into a friend from high school, so I stayed overnight, crashing at his place."

"Well, you didn't miss much. What happened Friday night was...unusual."

"Meaning Rosey doesn't always play oldies music as a way to get customers to leave at closing time?" Dean sat, placing the backpack and the cooler between them.

Smiling, Shelby joined him but made sure to stay on her side of the blanket. “No, *that* she always does. Sometimes she even hurries their exit along by singing.”

“Not much of a voice?”

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