



A BABY AND A BETROTHAL

Michelle Major

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A Baby And A Betrothal

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Major M.

A Baby And A Betrothal / M. Major — «HarperCollins»,

WANTED: HUSBAND & DADDY Serious Candidates Only! Katie Garrity is proud of her work at her Life is Sweet bakery, but it's high time she showed the town of Crimson that she's more than just "The Cupcake Lady." She wants to be "Mrs." and "Mommy" so badly she can't stand it! But in the small mountain town, the pickings are slim...until the one who got away returns. As a forest ranger, Noah loves protecting the places and people he loves—he just can't commit to forever. Katie has been his best friend since high school, but when did she turn into such a lovely woman? And is that desire he feels? Still, Crimson holds too many memories, and Katie wants things Noah can't give. But after one explosive night, it just may be too late. Only nine months will tell...

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Kiss his best friend?

His whole body hummed with desire. Her eyes reflected the same heat. Had it always been there and he'd been too blind to notice it?

“Katie,” he whispered, “I want to kiss you.”

He expected her to walk away. To be the voice of reason.

Instead she leaned forward and kissed him. She nipped at the corner of his mouth then traced her tongue along the seam of his lips.

Where had homebody Katie Garrity learned to kiss like this? He pulled her against him, deepened the kiss and fell back against the couch, taking her with him.

His hands hiked up her sweater to the clasp of her bra. With one quick movement he unhooked it.

Katie giggled against his mouth. “Somehow I knew you'd be good at that. Loads of experience, I imagine.”

To his embarrassment, Katie didn't have to imagine. Noah made no secret of his no-commitment flings. What was he doing? This was his friend. “We shouldn't—”

“We should.” She pressed her hand over his mouth. “I want to know what else you're good at.”

* * *

Crimson, Colorado: Finding home—and forever—in the West

A Baby and a Betrothal

Michelle Major



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MICHELLE MAJOR grew up in Ohio but dreamed of living in the mountains. Soon after graduating with a degree in journalism, she pointed her car west and settled in Colorado. Her life and house are filled with one great husband, two beautiful kids, a few furry pets and several well-behaved reptiles. She's grateful to have found her passion writing stories with happy endings. Michelle loves to hear from her readers at www.michellemajor.com.

To the Special Edition readers.

You are the best ever, and I feel blessed
to be part of your world!

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[Chapter One](#)

It was pretty much a given that a first date was a disaster when getting ready for it had been the best part of the evening.

Katie Garrity picked at the pale pink polish on her fingernails as she tried to look interested in the man sitting across from her. Owning a bakery was tough on her hands, so she'd tried to make them look more feminine tonight. She'd blown out her hair, applied makeup and even worn a dress and heels. All to look datable, the kind of woman a man would want to marry and have babies with. Her stomach squeezed at the time and effort she'd wasted. Or maybe it was her ovaries clenching.

Her date tapped his fingers on the table and her gaze snapped to his. "I have a couple of friends who are on gluten-free diets," she said, hoping she was responding to the question he'd asked. "I've been working on some recipes that would appeal to them."

"I'm talking about more than gluten-free." Her date shook his head. "I mean a full overhaul to a raw-foods diet. You would not believe how fast your colon cleans out when—"

"Got it," Katie interrupted, looking over his shoulder for the waitress. The man, Mike, the project manager from nearby Aspen, had already given her too many details on what happened to his digestive system after a few bites of bread.

Why had she agreed to this date in the first place?

Because one of her customers had offered to set her up, and Katie wanted a date. A date that might lead to more, might give her the future she so desperately craved but couldn't seem to manage on her own.

She knew almost everyone in her hometown of Crimson, Colorado, but her popularity hadn't helped her love life in recent years. Men might be addicted to the pastries she created in her bakery, Life is Sweet, but that was where their interest in her ended.

"You should think about changing your shop to a raw-foods restaurant. The one in Aspen is doing quite well."

Katie focused on Mike, her eyes narrowing. "Are you suggesting I close my bakery? The one I inherited from my grandmother and has been in my family for three generations?" She had nothing against vegetables, but this was too much.

"Sugar could be considered a drug," Mike continued, oblivious to the fact that steam was about to start shooting from her ears. "It's like you're running a meth lab."

She felt her mouth drop open. "Okay, we're done here." She stood, pulled her wallet out of her purse and threw a few bills on the table. "Thank you for an enlightening evening. Have a safe drive back to Aspen."

Mike blinked, glanced at his watch then up at her. "Should I call you?"

"I'll be busy," she answered through gritted teeth. "Baking in my 'meth lab.'"

She turned for the bar. Although they'd met for dinner at the brewery that had opened in downtown Crimson a few months ago, Mike had insisted they both order water while droning on about the contaminants in microbrewed beer. She needed a good dose of contaminants right about now.

The doors to the brewery's patio were open, letting in fresh mountain air on this early-summer night. The days were warm in Crimson in June, but because of the altitude the temperatures dropped at night. Still, there was a crowd out front, and Katie was glad for it. Crimson was a quaint, historic town nestled at nine thousand feet deep in the Rocky Mountains, with streets lined with Victorian-era houses. Crimson attracted a fair number of visitors, and anything that brought more people into downtown was good for all the local businesses, including her bakery.

Turning back to the bar, her gaze snagged on a set of broad shoulders hunched over the polished wood. Katie felt her ovaries go on high alert. Down, girls, she admonished silently.

She walked closer, ordered a pale ale from the bartender and nudged the shoulder next to her. "Hey, Noah. When did you get to town?"

“Katie-bug.” Noah Crawford’s deep voice washed over her. Then he smiled, turning her insides to mush. Of course, she’d had this response to Noah since high school, so she was used to functioning as a glob of goo. “I got in a few days ago to see my mom. What are you doing out tonight?”

“I had a date,” she mumbled, taking a drink of the beer the bartender set in front of her.

“A date?” Noah’s cobalt blue eyes widened a fraction. He normally had a good six inches on her, but while sitting on the bar stool while she stood, they were the same height.

“Yes, Noah, a date.” She grabbed a handful of nuts from the bowl on the bar and popped a few in her mouth. “It’s when a man and a woman go out together in public. It usually involves more than alcohol and meaningless sex, so you might not be familiar with the term.”

“Ouch.” He shifted toward her, turning on the bar stool so his denim-clad knee grazed her hip. She felt the connection all the way up her body and gripped her beer glass harder, gulping down half the amber liquid.

“Did I do something to you, Bug? Because I thought we were friends. Hell, you’ve been one of my best friends since we were sixteen. Lately... I’m not the most observant guy, but it seems like you kind of hate me.”

She took a breath through her mouth, trying to ignore the way Noah’s scent—the smell of pine and spice—washed over her. “We’re still friends, Noah,” she whispered. “But stop calling me Bug. That was a nickname for a kid. I’m not a kid anymore.”

“I know that, Katie.” His tone was teasing and he poked her shoulder gently. “How was the date?”

“Stupid.” She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, not trusting herself to look straight at him and keep her emotions hidden. One beer and she was tipsy. She signaled the bartender for another.

Yes, she and Noah were friends, but she’d always wanted more. Noah had never acknowledged her silly infatuation. She wasn’t sure he’d even noticed.

“Stupid, huh?” She felt rather than saw him stiffen. “Do I need to kick his butt? Was he out of line?”

“Nothing like that. Just boring.”

“So why’d you go out with him in the first place?” The bartender brought refills for both of them. Katie watched Noah’s fingers grip the pint glass. His hands were big and callused from the work he did as a division chief for the United States Forest Service. He spent his days outside, and she knew he was in great shape. She did not sneak a glance at the muscles of his tanned forearm as he raised the glass to his mouth. Nope, that would get her nowhere except more frustrated than she already was.

“I’m going to have a baby.” She took a sip of beer as Noah choked and spit half of his beer across the bar. “I should say I want to have a baby.”

“Going to or want to?” Noah pulled on the sleeve of her lightweight sweater, spinning her to face him. “There’s a big difference.”

She rolled her eyes. “Want to. Would I be in a bar drinking if I was pregnant now?”

“Good point.” He lifted the hem of his olive green T-shirt to wipe his mouth just as she handed him a napkin. His lips quirked as he took it from her. His dark blond hair was longer than normal, curling a little at the nape of his neck. The top was messed as though he’d been running his hands through it. Which she knew he did when he was stressed. “Aren’t these things supposed to happen naturally?”

“Easy for you to say.” She took another drink, the beer making her stomach tingly and her tongue too loose. “You smile and panties all through the Rocky Mountains spontaneously combust.”

He tilted back his head and laughed then flashed her a wide grin. A glass shattered nearby, and Katie turned to see a young woman staring slack-jawed at Noah. “See what I mean?”

He winked at the woman then turned his attention back to Katie. “Are your panties combusting?” He leaned in closer, his mouth almost grazing her jaw.

Katie resisted the urge to fan herself. “My panties are immune to you.”

“That’s why we can be friends,” he said, straightening again.

Katie felt a different kind of clenching than she had earlier. This time it was her heart.

“Seriously, though, why would you agree to a date with a loser?”

“I didn’t know he was a loser when I agreed. I’m at the bakery by four every morning and in bed most nights by nine. My social life consists of pleasantries exchanged with customers and the occasional girls’ night out.”

“Have one of your girlfriends set you up.”

“I’ve asked. They’re looking.” She propped her elbows on the bar and dropped her head into her hands. “Everyone is looking. It’s a little embarrassing. People are coming out of the woodwork with men for me to date. I feel like a charity case.”

“It’s not that.” His hand curled around the back of her neck, massaging the tight muscles there. It shamed her how good even such an innocent touch felt. How it ignited the rest of her body. “Locals in Crimson love you, just like they loved your grandma when she ran the bakery. You help everyone, Bug. It’s time to let them return the favor.”

She started to correct his use of the nickname he’d given her so long ago when he added, “You deserve to be happy.”

Something in his tone made her head snap up. Through the haze of her slight buzz, she studied him. Fine lines bracketed his blue eyes, and although they were still brilliant, she realized now they also seemed tired. The shadow of stubble across his annoyingly chiseled jaw looked not careless but as if he’d been too busy or stressed to shave.

“What’s going on, Noah? Why are you in town?”

“I told you, to visit my mom.”

She’d seen that look in his eyes before. A decade ago, the year his father died of cancer. “Because...”

He crossed his arms over his chest, the soft cotton of his T-shirt stretching around his biceps. He was wound tight enough to break in half. “She has a brain tumor.” The words came out on a harsh breath, and she could tell how much it cost him to say them out loud. A muscle throbbed in his jaw.

“Oh, no. I’m sorry.” She closed her eyes for a moment then met his guarded gaze.

For all her mixed emotions toward Noah, she loved him. Not just romantically, but deep in her soul, and she hated to see him hurting. Katie knew better than most how difficult his dad’s illness had been, the toll it had taken on the entire Crawford family and Noah in particular. She reached out and wrapped her fingers around his wrists, tugging until she could take his hands in hers. Despite the beating her hands took in the bakery, they looked delicate holding his. “What can I do?”

“It’s okay.” He shook his head but didn’t pull away. “It’s called a meningioma. Based on the results of the MRI, it’s benign. Apparently she’d been having symptoms for a while and finally went to Denver for an MRI. She didn’t call Emily or me until she had the results so we wouldn’t worry.”

“That sounds like your mom.” Meg Crawford was one of the strongest women Katie had ever met. She’d seen her husband, Noah’s father, Jacob, through stage-four pancreatic cancer with grace and optimism. No matter how bad things got, Meg’s attitude had never wavered. “Is Emily back in town, too?” Noah’s younger sister lived on the East Coast with her attorney husband and young son.

“I picked up her and Davey in Denver earlier today.”

Katie had never met Emily’s four-year-old son. “How long will the two of you be here? What’s the treatment? Your mom’s prognosis?”

“Slow down there, Bug.” A hint of a smile crossed his face. “I mean Katie.”

“You get a free pass tonight. Call me whatever you want.” She squeezed his hand.

“I’ll take her to Denver early next week for a craniotomy. They’ll biopsy the tumor to confirm that it’s benign. She’ll have follow-up cognitive testing. The first couple of weeks are when she’ll need

the most help, but it'll be at least six until she's back to normal. If all goes well, it's just a matter of regular MRIs going forward.”

“She'll recover completely? No long-term side effects?”

“That's what her doctor is saying now, although there are a lot of variables. The brain is complex. But she's... We're hopeful.”

“She's going to be fine, Noah. Your mom is strong.”

“So was my dad.”

“Do you two want another round?” The bartender spoke before Katie could answer.

“Not for me.” She drew her hands away from Noah's, suddenly aware of how intimate they looked sitting together. She caught the jealous glare of the woman who'd dropped her drink earlier. That woman was Noah's type, big bust and small waist—a girl who looked as if she knew how to party. Opposite of Katie in every way.

Noah followed her gaze and the woman smiled.

“Your next conquest?” Katie couldn't help asking.

“Not tonight.” He stood and took his wallet from the back pocket of his faded jeans, tossing a few bills on the bar. “I'll walk you home.”

“You don't have to—”

“I want to.” He shrugged. “Sitting here drinking is doing me no good. I...I don't want to be alone right now, you know?”

She nodded. “Want to watch a movie?”

“Elf?” he asked, his expression boyishly hopeful.

“It's June, Noah,” she said with a laugh. The two of them shared a love for all things Will Ferrell.

“Never too early for some holiday cheer.”

“Elf it is, then.”

He flashed a grateful smile and chucked her on the shoulder. “What would I do without you, Bug?”

Katie ignored the butterflies that skittered across her stomach at his words. Noah was a friend, and no matter what her heart wanted, she knew he'd never be anything more.

[Chapter Two](#)

As they walked along the street that led away from downtown, Noah couldn't think of anyone he would have been happier to see tonight than Katie. His yellow Lab, Tater, clearly felt the same way. The dog stuck close to Katie, nudging her legs every few steps. He'd adopted Tater after some hikers found the tiny puppy sick and shivering near a trailhead outside of Boulder almost five years ago. Katie had been the one to name the dog when Noah had brought the pup to Crimson for Christmas that year, saying she looked like a golden tater tot. She was still his go-to dog sitter when he traveled to DC for meetings or conferences.

Now Katie laughed as Tater trotted in front of them, flipping the tennis ball she carried out of her mouth then rushing forward to catch it again. He was relieved the tension between them had disappeared. His work for the United States Forest Service kept him busy and normally he was in the Roosevelt National Forest, about two hours east of Crimson near Boulder. He tried to get back to his hometown on a regular basis to visit his mom, but Katie recently made excuses as to why she couldn't hang out like they used to in high school and college.

Although he wasn't in town often, he loved Crimson. Tonight the sky above the mountain was awash in shades of purple and pink, soft clouds drifting over the still-snowcapped peak. At least he'd be able to enjoy the view this summer. It had been too long since he'd spent any time in the forests in this part of the state, so he tried to focus on the only positive in this whole situation with his mom's illness.

As if reading his mind, she asked, “What are you doing about your job?”

“I’ve been transferred temporarily to White River. I’ll be running the division office out of Crimson for the summer.”

“Oh.” Her step faltered, and he glanced at her. “That will make your mom happy.”

“But not you?”

Her smile didn’t meet her eyes. “I’m swamped at the bakery right now and helping to coordinate the bake-off for the Founder’s Day Festival.”

“Plus you have to make time for dating all the men being offered up.” A horn honked and he waved to one of the guys he’d been friends with in high school as a big black truck drove by.

“No need to make it sound like they’re lambs being led to the slaughter.”

“Marriage and fatherhood...” He gave a mock shiver and was rewarded with a hard punch to his shoulder. “I’m joking. Any guy would be lucky to have you.”

She huffed out a breath and increased her pace, flipping her long dark hair behind her shoulder. Now it was Noah’s step that faltered. The thought of Katie Garrity belonging to another man made a sick pit open in his stomach. He wasn’t lying when he said any guy would be lucky. Katie was the kindest, most nurturing person he knew.

Now, as he watched her hips sway in her jeans, he realized she was also gorgeous. The pale yellow sweater she wore hugged her curves and its demure V-neck highlighted her creamy skin. For so long she’d been like a sister to him, but the way his body was reacting to her all of a sudden made his thoughts turn in a totally different direction. He shook his head, trying to put brakes on the lust that rocketed through him. This was Katie-bug.

She wanted more than he was willing to give.

Deserved more, and he’d do well to remember that.

“Are you staying at your mom’s farm?” She turned, her brows furrowing as she took in his expression.

He quickly schooled his features and took a few steps to catch up to her. “No. Tonight I’m using the garage apartment at Logan and Olivia’s place. I have to spend a few days out on the trail starting tomorrow to get caught up on things in this section of the forest. There will be no nights away for me once Mom has the surgery. When I get back from this survey trip, I’ll move out to the farm but...”

“You haven’t stayed a night at the farm since your father died.”

There were good and bad things about someone knowing you so well.

“Every time I’m there it reminds me of how much I failed him when he was sick.”

“You didn’t—”

“Don’t make excuses. I couldn’t handle watching him die. I spent as much time away from home as possible our senior year.”

“You were a kid.” They turned down the tree-lined street where Katie lived. Noah had been to the house only once since she’d inherited it from her grandmother. That spoke poorly of him, he knew. He’d been a lousy son and was quickly realizing he was also a lousy friend.

“Bull. Emily had just turned sixteen when he was diagnosed. She was there, helping Mom with his care every step of the way.”

“You’re here now.” Katie turned down the front walk of a cute wood-shingled bungalow and Noah stopped. He barely recognized her grandmother’s old house.

Katie glanced back at him over her shoulder and seemed pleased by his surprise. “I made some changes so it would feel more like mine.”

The house was painted a soft gray, with dark red shutters and a new covered front porch that held a grouping of Adirondack chairs and a porch swing painted to match the maroon trim. “I like it. It fits you.”

A blush rose on her cheeks. “Thanks. I hope Gram would approve.”

“In her eyes you could do no wrong.” He followed her up the steps and waited as she unlocked the front door.

“I miss her,” she said on a sigh then crossed the threshold into the house. She pointed toward the cozy family room off the front hall. “The DVDs are in the TV cabinet. Will you set it up while I get snacks together?”

Noah felt his remaining tension melt away. There was something about this house and this woman that put him at ease. Always had.

She made hot chocolate to go with the Christmas theme of the movie and brought in a plate of the bakery’s famous chocolate-chip cookies. They watched the movie in companionable silence. It was nice to forget about his life for a couple of hours. “I can’t even count the number of your grandma’s cookies I ate that last year of high school.” On the screen, Will Ferrell as Buddy the Elf was working his magic in the movie’s department-store Santa display.

Katie gave a small laugh. “Every time you and Tori had a fight, you’d end up here or at the bakery.”

Noah flinched at the name of his high school girlfriend. The girl he’d expected to spend the rest of his life with until she broke his heart the weekend before graduation. “It made her even madder. Since the two of you were such good friends, she felt like you belonged to her.”

“I’d get in trouble for taking your side. Tori and I lost touch after she left for college.” Katie used her finger to dunk a marshmallow in her mug of hot chocolate. “I’ve heard her interior-design business is successful. Someone said she was working on a project in Aspen this summer.”

“Huh.” That was all Noah could think to answer. He’d purposely put his ex-girlfriend as far out of his mind as possible for the past decade. Now, watching Katie lick the tip of her finger, he could barely even remember his own name. He concentrated on the television, where Santa’s sleigh was flying over the rooftops of New York City.

When the movie ended, Katie flipped off the television. His whole body was humming with desire, inappropriately directed at the woman next to him, but he couldn’t seem to stop it. He didn’t move, continued to watch the dark screen that hung on the wall above the antique pine cabinet where the DVD player sat. Clearly misunderstanding his stillness—maybe believing it had something to do with memories of Tori or thoughts of his mother—Katie scooted closer and placed her fingers on his arm. That simple touch set him on fire.

“If there’s anything you need, Noah,” she said into the quiet, “I’m here for you.”

He turned, studying her face as though he was seeing her for the first time. The smooth skin, pert nose and big melted-chocolate eyes. Her bottom lip was fuller than the top, and there was a faint, faded scar at one edge from where she’d fallen out of bed as a girl. That was what she’d told him when he’d asked about it years ago, but now he wanted to know more. He wanted to explore every inch of her body and discover each mark that made her unique.

As if sensing his thoughts, she inhaled sharply. His gaze crashed into hers, and her eyes reflected the same flame of desire he felt. Had it always been there and he’d been too blind to notice it? Now he couldn’t see anything else.

But this was Katie, and her friendship meant something to him. More than any of his casual flings. She mattered, and despite his raging need for her, Noah didn’t want to mess this up. Which was how it worked with him—as soon as a woman wanted more than he was capable of giving, he bailed.

He couldn’t do that with Katie, but would he be able to offer her anything more?

He lifted his hand, tracing his thumb across her bottom lip. “Katie,” he whispered, “I want to kiss you right now.”

Her eyes widened a fraction and he expected her to jump up or slap away his hand. To be the voice of reason when he couldn’t.

Instead she leaned forward, her eyes drifting shut as he moved his hand over her face then wound his fingers through her mass of thick hair. His own eyes closed, anticipating the softness of her lips on his. They flew open again when she nipped at the corner of his mouth then traced her tongue along the seam of his lips.

Although he didn't think it was possible, his need for her skyrocketed even more. Where the hell had Katie Garrity, who claimed not to have time for a social life, learned to kiss like this? He pulled her against him, deepened the kiss further and fell back against the couch, taking her with him.

His hands ran down her sweater before hiking up the hem so he could touch her skin. He smoothed his callused palms up her back until he felt the clasp of her bra strap under his fingers. With one quick movement, he unhooked the clasp.

He felt Katie giggle against his mouth. His hands stilled as she lifted herself on her elbows, amusement mingling with the desire in her eyes. "Somehow, I knew you'd be good at that."

"At unhooking a bra?"

She nodded, her tone teasing. "Loads of experience, I imagine."

To his embarrassment, Katie didn't have to imagine. Noah made no secret of the fact that he loved women. He'd had more than his share of no-commitment flings and one-night stands, many of which Katie had witnessed, at least from a distance. Now he felt a niggling sense of shame that he traded quantity for quality in his relationships with the opposite sex. Once again, the thought that Katie deserved better than him filled his mind.

He shifted and she sat up, straddling his hips in a way that made it hard to do the right thing. "Maybe we shouldn't—"

She pressed her hand over his mouth. "I want to know what else you're good at, Noah." Her voice caught on his name, and the fingertips touching his lips trembled.

Before he had time to form another halfhearted protest, Katie yanked up her sweater and whipped it over her head, taking her unfastened bra along with it. She held her arms over her breasts.

"You are beautiful," he said softly, amazed that he hadn't noticed it before. "Drop your hands, Katie."

She did as he asked, revealing herself to him. He covered her with his hands, running his thumbs across her nipples and hearing her sharp intake of breath as he did.

He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to her puckered skin as she pulled off his T-shirt. He shucked it off and drew her to him once again, flipping her onto her back then easing his weight onto her. "The bedroom," he managed on a ragged breath.

"Here, Noah," she said against his mouth. "Now."

* * *

Katie watched as Noah dropped to his knees next to the couch and tugged on the waistband of her jeans, undoing the button and pulling the fabric, along with her underpants, down her hips. She wasn't sure where she'd got her courage in the past several minutes. Stripping off her sweater as Noah watched? That was totally unlike her.

But when Noah had said he wanted to kiss her, something in Katie's world shifted. It was all she could ever remember wanting, and there was no way she was going to let this moment pass her by, no matter how out of her element she felt. She knew if she revealed her doubts and insecurities, Noah would stop. The women she'd watched him choose throughout the years were experienced and worldly, able to keep up with him and his desires. Katie found that what she lacked in experience, she made up for in the magnitude of wanting him. It made her bold, and she wasn't about to let this night end now.

She bit down on her bottom lip as his jeans and boxers dropped to the floor. She hadn't seen his bare chest since the summer after college and Noah had filled out every bit of the promise his younger body had held. He was solid muscle, broad shoulders tapering to a lean waist and strong legs. She tried to avoid looking too closely at certain parts of him—big parts of him—afraid she'd lose her nerve after all.

A tiny voice inside her head warned her this was a mistake. Noah had been drinking and he was an emotional wreck between worry over his mother and memories of his father. The thought

that she might be taking advantage of him slid through her mind and she fervently pushed it away. If anyone was destined to be hurt in this situation, it was Katie. Yet she couldn't stop.

He pulled a wallet from the back pocket of his jeans and took out a condom before tossing the wallet onto her coffee table. He sheathed himself as he bent toward her again. "You're going to hurt that lip biting it so hard," he said, drawing her attention back to his face.

"Give me something better to do with my mouth," she told him, amazed at her own brazenness.

His answering smile was wicked and he kissed her again, his hand sliding along her hip then across her thighs. She loved his hands on her, warm and rough. He seemed to know exactly how much pressure she wanted, how to make her body respond as though she'd been made for him. His fingers brushed her core and she squirmed then let herself sink into the sensation he evoked. She moaned, gasped then shifted, arching off the sofa as his rhythm increased.

"Not enough room," she said on a gasp, flinging her hand toward the edge of the sofa.

"You're so ready, Katie." Noah kicked at the coffee table with one leg, shoving it out of the way then rolling off the couch, pulling her with him onto the soft wool rug as he went. They fell in a tangle of limbs and he eased her onto her back once more, cradling her face in his big hands as he whispered her name. "I want you so much."

"Yes, Noah. Now." She grabbed on tight to his back, loving the feel of his smooth skin and muscles under her hands. He slid into her and for a moment it was uncomfortable. It had been an embarrassingly long time since she'd been with a man. Then it felt good and right. Perfect like nothing she could have ever imagined. Noah groaned, kissed her again then took her nipple between his fingers. It was enough to send her over the edge. She broke apart, crying out his name as he shuddered and buried his face into the crook of her neck.

A long time later, when their breathing had slowed and she could feel the sweat between them cooling, he placed a gentle kiss against her pulse point then lifted his head.

Katie was suddenly—nakedly—aware of what they'd done, what she'd instigated. How this could change their friendship. How this changed everything.

"I guess practice does make perfect," she said softly, trying to show with humor that she was casual and cool.

"You make it perfect," Noah answered, smoothing her hair away from her face.

Her eyes filled with tears before she blinked them away. How was she supposed to keep cool when he said things like that? When he looked at her with something more than desire, deeper than friendship in his gaze? He might as well just open up the journal she'd kept for years and read all her secret thoughts.

He reached up and grabbed the light throw that hung over the back of the couch. He wrapped it around them both, turning on his side and pulling her in close. "But the floor? I should be ashamed of myself taking you like this. You should be worshipped—"

"I feel pretty worshipped right now," she said, running her mouth across his collarbone. "I like being with you on the floor."

"Then you'll love being with me in bed," he answered. He stood, lifting her into his arms as he did, and carried her down the hall to her bedroom.

[Chapter Three](#)

Katie blinked awake, turning her head to look at the clock on her nightstand. 3:30 a.m. She woke up every morning at the same time, even on her day off. Her internal clock was so used to the extreme hours of a baker, they had become natural to her.

But today something was different. She wasn't alone in bed, she thought, shifting toward where Noah slept beside her. Except he wasn't there. The empty pillow was cool to the touch. It had been only a couple of hours since he'd made love to her a second time, then tucked her into his chest, where she'd fallen asleep.

She sat up and thumped her hand against her forehead. That was exactly the kind of thinking that would get her into trouble. Noah hadn't made love to her. They'd had sex. An important distinction and one she needed to remember. She knew how he operated, had heard enough gossip around town and witnessed a few tearful outbursts by women he'd loved then left behind.

Still, she hadn't thought he would be quite so insensitive when it came to her. Love 'em and leave 'em was one thing, but they were supposed to be friends. She climbed out of bed, pulling on a robe as she padded across the hardwood floor. Her limbs felt heavy and a little sore. She found herself holding her breath as she made her way through the dark, quiet house. Maybe Noah hadn't been able to sleep and had come out to the kitchen. Maybe he hadn't rushed from her bed the moment he could make an easy escape.

The rest of her house was as empty as her bedroom. He'd put the coffee table back and straightened the cushions on the couch. Without the aches from her body and the lingering scent of him on her, Katie wouldn't quite have believed this night had happened. She'd imagined being in his arms so many times, but nothing had prepared her for the real thing or the pit of disappointment lodged deep in her gut at how the morning after dawned.

She glanced at the glowing display on the microwave clock and turned back for her bedroom. There was no time for prolonged sadness or a free fall into self-pity. It was Friday morning and she had the ingredients for her cherry streusel coffee cake waiting at the bakery.

She had a life to live, and if Noah didn't want to be a part of it, she had to believe it was his loss. She only wished that knowledge could make her heart hurt a little less.

* * *

When Noah climbed out of his Jeep four days later, he was hot, sore and needed a shower.

It was a perfect early-summer day in Colorado, clear blue skies and a soft breeze. The weather had been great on the trail, too, and normally Noah would have relished the time in the forest. As he'd climbed the ranks of the United States Forest Service, more of his time was spent in meetings and conference rooms than outside. Since he'd be town-bound once his mom had her surgery and started treatment, he'd taken the opportunity to check out a trail restoration project on the far side of Crimson Pass. He didn't want to think about the other reasons he might have disappeared into the woods for a few days—like worry over his mom's health or what had happened between him and Katie the night before he'd left.

Because if he'd wanted to escape his thoughts, he should have known better than to try to do it with the silence of the pristine forest surrounding him. It was as if the rustling of the breeze through the tall fir trees amplified every thought and feeling he had. Most of them had been about Katie. The tilt of her head as she smiled at him, the way her lips parted when he was buried inside her, the soft sounds she'd made. He'd been consumed by visions of her, catching the sweet smell of vanilla beneath the pine-scented air around his tent.

He knew he should have talked to her before he left. Hell, he had the start of two different notes wadded up in the glove compartment of the Jeep. But he hadn't got more than a few words past Dear Katie either time. She was worth more than pat lines and unconvincing excuses as to why he couldn't stay. As much as he wanted her, he should have never given in to his desire. Katie wanted more than he would ever be able to give her.

Maybe he'd left like a coward because he wanted to prove to both of them that, despite his best intentions, he couldn't change who he was. She wasn't a one-night stand, although that was how he'd treated her. Regret had been his faithful companion during his time on the mountain. Katie had always seen more in him than most people, and the worry of ruining their friendship weighed heavily. He owed her an explanation, and that was the first thing on his agenda this morning. After getting cleaned up.

"Do you smell as bad as you look?" a voice called from behind him.

He turned to see his friend Logan Travers coming down the back steps of the house he shared with his wife, Olivia. It was midmorning, and Logan held a stainless-steel coffee mug and a roll of paper—no doubt construction plans for one of his current renovation projects.

“Probably.” Noah hefted his backpack from the Jeep’s cargo area. Tater jumped out and trotted over to Logan, rolling onto her back so that Logan could access her soft belly.

Shifting the plans under his arm, Logan bent and scratched. “You made someone very happy taking off like that.”

Noah’s gaze snapped to Logan before realizing that his friend was talking about the dog. “She loves being out on the trail.”

“A perfect match for you.”

Noah didn’t like the idea that the only female he could make happy was of the canine variety. “Thanks for letting me use the garage apartment.” He took the rest of his supplies from the backseat and set them near the Jeep’s rear tire. He’d need to air everything out once he got to his mom’s house. “I’m going to pack up later and head out to the farm. Emily will want to skin me alive for showing up at the last minute.”

Logan straightened, ignoring the thump of Tater’s tail against his ankle. “The surgery is tomorrow.”

Noah gave a curt nod in response.

“I’ve cleared my schedule so if you need company in the waiting room I can be there.”

“No need.” Noah tried to make his tone light, to ignore the emotions that roared through him when he thought of his mother’s scheduled five-hour surgery. “There won’t be much to do except...”

“Wait?” Logan offered.

“Right.” He slung the backpack onto one shoulder. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m sure you have better things to do than hang out at the hospital all day.”

“We’re friends, Noah. Josh and Jake feel the same way,” he said, including his two brothers. “Not just when it’s time to watch the game or grab a beer. If you need anything, we’re here for you.”

“Got it.” Noah turned away, then back again. It was difficult enough to think about being there, let alone with his friends, who knew him as the laid-back, fun-loving forest ranger, an identity he’d cultivated to keep people in his life at a safe distance. A place where they couldn’t hurt him and he wouldn’t disappoint anyone. But he was quickly realizing that being alone wasn’t all it was cracked up to be when life got complicated. “I’ll call tomorrow and update you on her condition. If you want to swing by at some point, that would be great.”

Logan reached out and squeezed his shoulder. “Will do, man.”

He waited for his friend to offer some platitude about how everything would be okay, the clichéd phrases of support he’d grown to resent during his dad’s illness. But Logan only bent to pet Tater behind her ears before turning for his big truck parked in the garage.

Noah headed for the steps leading up to the garage apartment, letting out a shaky breath as he did. He’d like to run back to the forest, to hide out and avoid everything that was coming. But his mom needed him. He owed it to her, and he’d made a promise to his father over ten years ago to take care of the family. He hadn’t been called on to do much more than change an occasional lightbulb or fix a faucet drain until now. This summer would change that, and during his few days away he’d realized who he wanted by his side as he managed through all of it.

* * *

He walked into Life is Sweet forty-five minutes later and inhaled the rich scent of pastries and coffee. The morning crowd was gone, but the café tables arranged on one side of the bakery were still half-full with couples and families.

Crimson was the quirky, down-home cousin to nearby Aspen and benefited from its proximity to the glitzy resort town when it came to tourism. That and the fact that the town was nestled in one

of the most picturesque valleys in the state. He knew the bakery was popular not only with locals, but also with people visiting the area thanks to great reviews on Yelp.

His gaze snagged on Katie, bent over a display of individually wrapped cookies and brownies near the front counter. Today she wore a denim skirt that just grazed her knees, turquoise clogs that gave her an extra inch of height and a soft white cotton T-shirt with a floral apron tied around her waist. He wanted nothing more than to run his hand up the soft skin of her thighs but didn't think she'd appreciate that in the middle of her shop or after how he'd left her.

Her hair was tied back in a messy knot, a few loose tendrils escaping. The scent of her shampoo reached him as he approached, making him want her all the more.

"Hey, gorgeous," he whispered, trailing one finger down her neck.

"What the—" She whipped around and grabbed his finger, pinning it back at an angle that made him wince.

"It's me, Bug," he said through a grimace.

"I know who it is," she said, lessening the pressure on his hand only slightly. "Your free pass is over, Noah. Don't call me Bug. Or gorgeous." She leaned closer. "I'm not interested in your bogus lines. What you did was lousy. We were friends and now..." Her voice broke on the last word and she dropped his hand, turning back to the cookies. "Lelia's taking orders today." She nodded her head toward the young woman at the register. "If you want something, talk to her."

"What I want is to talk to you." He reached out, but she moved away, stepping behind the counter, her arms now crossed over her chest. He knew he'd messed up leaving the way he had but didn't think Katie would be this angry. There was nothing of the sweetness he usually saw in her. The woman in front of him was all temper, and 100 percent of it was directed at him. "Let me explain."

"I know you, Noah. Better than anyone. You don't have to explain anything to me. I should have seen it coming." She waved a hand in front of her face, bright spots of color flaming her cheeks. "Lesson learned."

"It wasn't like that." He moved closer, crowding her, ignoring the stares of the two other women working behind the counter and the sidelong glances from familiar customers. "Being with you—"

"Stop," she said on a hiss of breath. "I'm not doing this here."

"I'm not leaving until you talk to me."

* * *

Katie huffed out a breath but grabbed his arm and pulled him, none too gently, through the swinging door that led to the bakery's industrial kitchen. She'd prepared herself for this conversation for the past four days. Actually, she'd wondered if Noah would even try to talk to her or if he'd just pretend nothing had happened between them. Maybe that would have been better because prepared in theory was one thing, but having him in front of her was another.

Her heart and pride might be bruised by the way he'd walked away, but her body tingled all over, sparks zinging across her stomach at the way he'd touched her—at least until she'd almost broken his finger. She had to keep this short, or else she'd be back to melting on the floor in front of him.

Once the door swung shut again, she released him and moved to the far side of the stainless-steel work counter that dominated the center of the room.

Suddenly Noah looked nervous. Which didn't seem possible because he was never nervous, especially not with women. "I'm sorry," he said simply, as if that was all he had to offer her.

"Okay," she answered and began to rearrange mixing bowls and serving utensils around on the counter, needing to keep her hands busy.

"Okay?"

"Fine, Noah. You're sorry and you don't want me to be mad at you." An oversize pair of tongs clattered to the floor. She bent to retrieve them then pointed the tongs in his direction. "You've apologized. I've accepted. You can go now."

"What if I don't want to go?"

“You sure weren’t in a hurry to stick around the other night.” She tossed the tongs into the sink across from the island. “How long after I fell asleep did you sneak out? Ten minutes?”

Her eyes narrowed when he didn’t answer. “Five?” she said, her voice an angry squeak.

“I didn’t sneak out,” he insisted. “You have to get up early and I didn’t want to wake you.” He leaned forward, pressing his palms on the counter’s surface, his dark T-shirt pulling tight over his chest as he did. “You knew I was heading out on the trail for a few days.”

Her mouth went dry, and she cursed her stupid reaction to Noah Crawford. His hair was still damp at the nape of his neck and she could smell the mix of soap and spice from his recent shower. He’d got more sun while in the woods, his skin a perfect bronze, and there was a small cut along one of his cheeks, like a branch had scraped him. Despite her anger, she wanted to reach out and touch him, to soothe the tension she could see in his shoulders. She had to get him out of her bakery before her resolve crumbled like one of her flaky piccrusts.

“I get it. But I was disappointed in you...” He flinched when she said the word disappointed, but she continued. “Mainly, I’m furious with myself.” She lowered her arms to her sides, forced herself to meet his blue eyes. “I know who you are, how you treat women. I shouldn’t have expected it would be any different with me.”

He shook his head. “You are different—”

“Don’t.” She held up one hand. “We’ve been friends too long for you to lie to me. It was one night and it was good.”

One of his brows shot up.

“Great,” she amended. “It was great and probably just what I needed to bolster my confidence.”

“Your confidence?”

“My confidence,” she repeated, suddenly seeing how to smooth over what had happened between them without admitting her true feelings. “It had been...a while since I’d been with a man. Truthfully, I was kind of nervous about how things would go...in the bedroom.” She forced a bright smile. “But now I feel much better.”

“Are you saying I was a rehearsal?”

“For the real thing.” She nodded. “Exactly.”

“That didn’t seem real to you?” His gaze had gone steely, but Katie didn’t let that stop her.

“What’s real to me is wanting a husband and a family.” She bit down on her lip. “Great sex isn’t enough.”

“And that’s all I’m good for?”

“You don’t want anything else.” She fisted her hands, digging her fingernails into the fleshy part of her palms. “Right?”

He didn’t answer, just continued to stare. So many emotions flashed through his gaze.

“This is a difficult time for you. I went to see your mom yesterday.”

“I talked to her on the way here,” he answered on a tired breath. His shoulders slumped as if he carried a huge weight on them. “She told me.”

“She’s worried about you and Emily. About the toll this will take on both of you.”

Noah scrubbed one hand over his face. “Did you meet Emily’s son?”

“Davey?” Katie nodded. “I did.”

“Then you know Em’s got her hands full.”

“You both will after tomorrow.”

“We’ll get through it. I’m sorry, Katie,” he said again. “Disappointing the people I care about is something I can’t seem to help.”

“I’m fine. Really.” She stepped around the counter. “I need to get back out front. There will be enough talk as it is.”

“Mom’s cooking lasagna tonight. She insisted on a family dinner before her surgery.” He lifted his hand as if to touch her then dropped it again. “Would you join us? She thinks of you as part of the family.”

“I can’t.” She offered a small smile. “I have a date tonight.”

She saw him stiffen, but he returned her smile. “You really do deserve a good guy.” He shut his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again his mask was firmly back in place. This was the Noah he showed to the outside world, the guy Katie didn’t particularly like—all backslapping and fake laughter.

As if on cue, he gently chucked her shoulder. “If this one gives you any trouble, he’ll have to deal with me.” He turned and walked out to the front of her shop, leaving her alone in the kitchen that had been her second home since she was a girl.

Katie stood there for several minutes, trying to regain her composure. She was too old for girlish fantasies. She’d held tight to her secret crush on Noah for years, and it had got her nowhere except alone. She did deserve a good man, and no matter how much she wanted to believe Noah could be that man, he clearly wasn’t interested.

It was time she moved on with her life.

Chapter Four

“Do you want another glass of milk?” Noah’s mother was halfway out of her chair before she’d finished the question. “More salad?”

“Mom, sit down.” Noah leaned back in his chair, trying to tamp down the restlessness that had been clawing at him since he’d moved his duffel bag into his old room at the top of the stairs. “You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble, especially the night before your surgery. You need to rest.”

His mother waved away his concerns. “I’ll have plenty of time to rest during my recovery. I want to take care of the two of you...” His mom’s voice broke off as she swiped at her eyes. “To thank you for putting your lives on hold for me. I’m so sorry to put this burden on either of you.”

A roaring pain filled Noah’s chest. His mother, Meg Crawford, was the strongest person he knew. She’d been the foundation of his family for Noah’s whole life. Her love and devotion to Noah’s late father, Jacob, was the stuff of legend around town. She’d been at her husband’s side through the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and for the next year as they’d tried every available treatment until the disease finally claimed him. She’d been the best example of how to care for someone Noah could have asked for. As difficult as it was to be back in this house, he owed his mother so much more than he could ever repay in one summer.

He glanced at his sister, whose gaze remained fixed on the young boy sitting quietly next to her at the table. Something had been going on with Emily since she’d returned to Crimson with her son. Normally she would have rushed in to assure their mother that everything was going to be fine. That was Em’s role. She was the upbeat, positive Crawford, but there was a change in her that Noah didn’t understand.

He cleared his throat. “We want to be here, Mom. It’s no trouble. You are no trouble.” That sounded lame but it was the best he could do without breaking down and crying like a baby. The surgeon had reassured them of the outcome of tomorrow’s surgery, but so many things could go wrong. “It’s all going to be fine,” he said, forcing a smile as he spoke the words. “Right, Em?”

Emily started as if he’d pinched her under the table, a trick he’d perfected at family dinners and during Sunday church services when they were growing up. She focused her gaze, her eyes the same blue color their father’s had been, first on Noah then on her mother. “Of course. You’re going to get through this, Mom. We’re all going to get through it together. And we’re happy to spend a summer in Colorado. Henry’s family will be in Nantucket by now. The beach is great, except for all that sand. Right, Davey?” She ruffled her son’s hair then drew back quickly as he pulled away.

“Can I play now, Mommy?” Davey, Emily’s four-year-old son, stared at his plate. He looked like his father, Noah thought. He’d only met his brother-in-law, Henry Whitaker, the weekend of

Emily's wedding in Boston four years ago, but he knew Davey got his thick dark hair from his father. The boy's eyes, however, were just like Emily's. And his smile... Come to think of it, Noah hadn't seen Davey smile once since they'd arrived in Colorado.

Emily's own smile was brittle as she answered, "You've barely touched your meatballs, sweetie. Grandma made them from scratch."

"Don't like meatballs," Davey mumbled, his dark eyes shifting to Noah's mom then back to his plate. He sucked the collar of his T-shirt into his mouth before Emily tugged it down again.

"Not everyone likes meatballs," Meg told him gently. Noah couldn't think of one person who didn't like his mother's homemade meatballs and sauce but didn't bother mentioning that. "I think it would be fine if you went to play, Davey. If you're hungry later, I'll make you a bowl of cereal or a cheese sandwich."

Before Emily could object, the boy scrambled off his chair and out of the room.

"He can't live on only cereal, cheese and bread," Emily said with a weary sigh. She picked up the uneaten spaghetti and passed it to Noah. "No sense in this going to waste."

Noah wasn't going to argue.

"When you were a girl, there was a month where you ate nothing but chicken nuggets and grapes. Kids go through stages, Emily."

"It's not a stage, Mom, and you know it. You know—"

Noah paused, the fork almost to his mouth, as Emily looked at him then clamped shut her mouth. "What does she know?" He put the fork on the plate and pushed away the food. "What the hell am I missing here? Is Davey homesick?"

Emily gave a choked laugh. "No."

"Then what gives?" Noah shook his head. "I haven't seen you since last summer but he's changed. At least from what I remember. Is everything okay with you and Henry?"

"Nothing is okay, Noah."

Emily's face was like glass, placid and expressionless. Dread uncurled in Noah's gut. His sister was always animated. Whatever had caused her to adopt this artificial serenity must be bad.

"Davey started having developmental delays in the past year—sensory difficulties, trouble socializing and some verbal issues." Meg reached out for Emily's hand but she shook off their mother's touch, much like her son had done to her minutes earlier. "I wanted to get him into a doctor, figure out exactly what's going on and start helping him. Early intervention is essential if we're dealing with...well, with whatever it is. But Henry forbade it."

Noah took a deep breath and asked, "Why?" He was pretty sure he wouldn't like the answer.

Emily folded the napkin Davey had left on his seat. "He said Davey was acting out on purpose. He started punishing him, yelling at him constantly and trying to force him to be...like other kids." She shook her head. "But he's not, Noah. You can see that, right?" Her tone became desperate, as if it was essential that he understand her son.

"I can see that you love Davey, Em. You're a great mother. But where does that leave your marriage? You also loved Henry, didn't you?"

"I don't know how I feel," Emily said. "You have no idea what would have happened if I'd stayed. Henry is going to run for Congress next year. The Whitakers are like the Kennedys without the sex scandals. They're perfect and they expect perfection from everyone around them. Davey was... Henry couldn't handle the changes in him. I had to get him away from there. To protect him. Our divorce was finalized a month ago."

"Why haven't you come home before now?" Noah looked at his mother. "Did you know?"

Meg shook her head. "Not until a few weeks ago."

"And neither one of you had the inclination to tell me?"

The two women he cared about most in the world shared a guilty look. "We knew you had a lot going on, that it was going to be difficult for you to stay here for the summer," his mom answered

after a moment. “Neither of us wanted to add any more stress to your life. We were trying to protect you, Noah.”

He shot up from the table at those words and paced to the kitchen counter, gripping the cool granite until his fingertips went numb. “I’m supposed to protect you,” he said quietly. He turned and looked first at his mom then his little sister. “Dad told me to take care of you both.”

“Noah.” His mother’s tone was so tender it just about brought him to his knees. “Your father didn’t mean—”

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. “Don’t tell me what he meant. He said the words to me.” It was the last conversation he’d had with his father and he remembered everything about it in vivid detail. Hospice workers were helping to care for his dad in the house and a hospital bed had been set up in the main-floor office. His memories of those last days were the reason he’d spent so little time in his parents’ house since then. Everything about this place, the smells, a shaft of light shining through the kitchen window, reminded him of his dad’s death. He thought he’d hid his aversion to home with valid excuses—his work, travel, visiting friends. But it was clear now that Katie hadn’t been the only one to understand his cowardice.

“I’m here,” he told them both. “Now and for the long haul. Don’t hide anything from me. Don’t try to protect me. I don’t need it. If we’re going to get through this it has to be together.”

His mom stood and walked toward him, her eyes never wavering from his. The urge to bolt was strong but he remained where he was, took her in his arms when she was close enough and held her tight. “Together,” she whispered.

He looked at his sister across the room. “Come on over,” he said, crooking a finger at her. “You know you want to.”

With a sound between a laugh and a sob, Emily ran across the room and Noah opened up his embrace to include her, too. He’d made a lot of mistakes in his life, but he was at least smart enough to try to learn from them. His first lesson was sticking when things got tough. Nothing like starting with the hard stuff.

“I want you to tell me more about Davey,” he said against Emily’s honey-colored hair. “What he needs, how to help him.”

He felt her nod, and then her shoulders began to shake with unshed tears. His mother’s crying was softer, but he heard that, too.

Noah tightened his hug on the two of them. “We can get through anything together,” he said, lifting his gaze to the ceiling and hoping that was true.

* * *

“I had a good time tonight.”

Katie glanced at the man sitting in the driver’s seat next to her and smiled. “I did, too. Thank you for dinner.”

“It was smart to choose a restaurant outside of town. We got a little privacy that way. Everyone seems to know you around here.” Matt Davis, the assistant principal and swim-team coach at the local high school, returned her smile as he opened the SUV’s door. “I’ll walk you to your door.”

“You don’t have to—” she began, but he was already out of the Explorer.

He was a nice guy, she thought, and their date had been fun—easy conversation and a few laughs. Matt was relatively new to Crimson. He was a California transplant and a rock-climbing buddy of her friend Olivia’s husband, Logan Travers. It was Olivia who’d given Matt her number. He was cute in a boy-next-door kind of way, medium height and build with light brown hair and vivid green eyes. He’d been a semiprofessional athlete in his early twenties and had trained briefly at her father’s facility near San Diego. Now he seemed safe and dependable, although he’d made a few jokes during dinner that made her think he didn’t take life too seriously.

She liked him, a lot more than her carb-police date from Aspen last week. And if her stomach didn’t swoop and dip the way it did when she looked at Noah, it was probably for the best. Katie didn’t

want head-over-heels passion. She was looking for a man she could build a life with, and although this was only a first date, Matt Davis had definite potential.

He opened her door and she stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of her house. Bonus points for being a gentleman. She'd left on the front porch light and stopped when they came to the bottom of the steps, just outside the golden glow cast by the Craftsman-inspired fixture. She could hear the sounds of her neighborhood, a dog barking in the distance and music playing from the rental house at the end of the block.

For a moment she debated inviting Matt in for a drink, not that she had any intention of taking this date too far, but it had been nice. He had been nice. Something stopped her, though, and she didn't dwell too long on the thought that Noah had been the last man in her house or why she might not want to let go of her memories of that night.

"Thank you again," she said, holding out her hand. That was appropriate, right? Didn't want to give him the wrong impression of the kind of girl she was.

He shook it, amusement lighting his eyes. He really did have nice eyes. There was that word again. Nice. "I hope we can do it again sometime," he said, still holding her hand.

A dog whined from nearby. A whine Katie recognized, and she went stiff, glancing over her shoulder toward the darkness that enveloped her house.

Misunderstanding her body language, Matt pulled away. "If you're not—"

"I'd love to," she said on a rush of air. "See you again, that is."

He brightened at her words, placed his hands gently on her shoulders. "I'll call you, then." He leaned closer and Katie's eyes shut automatically then popped open again when the crash of a garbage can reverberated from her side yard.

Matt jumped back, releasing her once more.

"Probably just a bear," she said, her eyes narrowing at the darkness. "They can be annoying sometimes." Her voice pitched louder on the word annoying.

"Do you want me to take a look?" Matt asked at the same time he stepped back. It took a while to get used to the wildlife that meandered into mountain towns, especially for those who'd moved to Colorado from the city. Besides, Katie had no intention of allowing him to discover exactly what—or who—was lurking in her side yard.

"It's fine." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I keep the regular can in the garage. There's nothing he can mess with over there. I'd better go in, though. Early morning at the bakery."

Matt kept his wary gaze on the side of her house. "I had a great time, Katie. I'll call you soon. You should get in the house." He flashed a smile but waited for her to climb the steps before turning to his Explorer.

Katie waved as he drove away. She stood there a minute longer until his taillights disappeared around the corner. Blowing out a frustrated breath, she tapped one foot against the wood planks of the porch. "You can come out now," she called into the darkness. A few seconds later, Tater trotted onto the porch, tail wagging. Katie bent and scratched the dog's ears. Tater immediately flipped onto her back.

"Slut," Katie whispered as she ran her fingers through the Lab's soft fur. She didn't want to think about how much she had in common with Tater, since Katie's instinct was to beg for loving every time she thought about Noah. Even at her angriest she wanted him, which made her more pathetic than she was willing to admit.

She commanded herself to woman up as Noah hopped onto her porch and leaned against the wood rail.

"Are you afraid to come any closer?" she asked, straightening. Tater flipped to her feet and headed into the box spruce bushes that ran along the front of the house.

"Should I be?" His voice was low and her body—stupid, traitorous body—immediately reacted. The darkness of the night lent a sort of intimacy to their exchange that Katie tried her best to ignore.

She forced herself not to look at him standing in the shadows. She was stronger than she had been a week ago, committed to moving on from her silly girlhood crush. The fact that the object of that crush had just crashed a very promising first date was irrelevant. “What are you doing here, Noah?”

“Protecting you.”

She huffed out a laugh. “From a really nice guy who might actually be interested in me?” She turned for the house, opening the screen door. “Excuse me if I forget to thank you.”

Her fingers had just touched the door handle when Noah was beside her, reaching out to grab her wrist. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, releasing her when she tugged away from his grasp. “I did want to make sure you were okay.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know.” He raked his fingers through his blond hair, leaving the ends sticking out all over. It should have made him look silly, but to Katie it was a reminder of running her own hands through his hair when he’d held her. “I’ve been a lousy friend, and this isn’t my place. I’ve told you I can’t give you what you want. We both know that. But...you’re alone here, Katie.”

Her lungs shut down for a second as sharp pain lanced through her at his words. Then she gasped and his gaze met hers, a mix of tenderness and sympathy that had her blinking back sudden tears. He knew, she realized. Her biggest fear, the one nobody recognized because she kept it so hidden. As busy as she was, as much as everyone in this community needed her, at the end of the day Katie was alone. Alone and afraid that if she didn’t make herself useful, they’d toss her aside. It was irrational, she knew, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself from believing it. Without the bakery and her volunteering and offers to help wherever it was needed, where would she be? Who would want her—who would love her—if she didn’t have something to give them?

Could Noah possibly understand? And if he did, how could she ever look at him again?

He paced to the edge of the porch and back. “When was the last time you saw your parents?”

Her mouth dropped open and she clapped it shut again. “Two summers ago. They had a layover in Denver. Dad had just finished an Ironman in Europe.”

“They didn’t come to Crimson?”

She shook her head. “He wanted to get back to his business. His coaching business has exploded in the past few years. He still races but spends more time training other elite athletes.” He continued to watch her, so she added, “Mom and Dad haven’t been here since my grandma’s funeral.”

“So no one in your family has seen the changes you’ve made to the bakery? How successful you’ve made it.”

“It was successful when Gram ran it.”

“Not to the level it is now. Do your parents have any idea?”

“They wanted me to sell the shop and the house after Gram died. Mom never liked me working at the bakery. You know that.” She smoothed a hand across her stomach. “She didn’t think it was good for me to be near all that sugary temptation. She was afraid I’d get fat again.”

“You weren’t fat.”

She almost smiled, but the memory of so many years of being ashamed about her weight and having every mouthful of food analyzed by her mother drained any wistful humor she felt about the past. “You don’t remember when I first moved to Crimson. By the time you started dating Tori in high school, I was halfway to the goal weight my parents set for me.”

“I remember you just fine.” Noah shrugged. “I just never saw you like that.”

Katie suppressed a sigh. Was it any wonder she’d fallen in love with him back then? She bit down on her lip, forcing herself to keep the walls so newly erected around her heart in place. “You never saw me at all.”

* * *

As if he needed that reminder, Noah thought, as Katie's words hung in the air between them. He should walk away right now. It had been a stupid, impulsive idea to show up at her house when he knew she had a date. He had no business intruding on her life.

"I'm a jackass, Katie-bug," he said with a laugh then cringed when she didn't correct him. "But I wasn't lying when I said I wanted you to be happy. I came here because... I guess it doesn't matter why. I want to be a better friend if you'll let me." He shut his eyes for a moment, clenched his fists then focused on her. "Even if that means vetting your dates for you."

She arched one eyebrow, a look so out of place and yet so perfect on her he had to fight not to reach for her again.

"Matt Davis is a good guy."

Her eyes narrowed. "How do you know my date's name?"

"I asked around." He shrugged. "I'm sorry if I cut your night short. I'm sorry I keep doing things that make me have to apologize to you." He flashed a smile. "Good night, Katie."

He stepped around her onto the porch steps.

"Noah?"

He turned. His name on her tongue was soft. The same tenderness that had annoyed him earlier from his mother now made him want to melt against Katie. To beg her not to give up on him.

"I'll be praying for your mom tomorrow." She wrapped her arms tight around herself as if she was also trying to hold herself back. "And you."

He gave a quick jerk of his head in response then took off into the night. He couldn't stand there and let her watch his eyes fill with tears. Her kindness slayed him, made him want and wish for things that weren't going to be. Even now, as he moved down the quiet street, Tater's breathing soft at his side, he wanted to run. The feelings that had bubbled to the surface at his mom's house earlier were still churning inside of him. It was part of what had driven him to Katie tonight.

After his mom and Emily had gone to bed, the farmhouse had been so quiet that Noah's mind had gone into overdrive. Thinking and remembering. Two pastimes he'd tried like hell to avoid the past decade. His job kept him moving and he surrounded himself with friends—and women—during his downtime. Noah was always up for a good time as long as there were no strings attached. It was what had affected his friendship with Katie. Like his mom, she wanted more from him. She knew the serious stuff, the demons that haunted him, and it had been easier to keep her at arm's length than to see himself fail at living up to her expectations.

But he couldn't run any longer. He was tethered to this town and to the women in his life by an unbreakable, invisible thread. He wasn't sure whether he had it in him to become what each of them needed, but it was past time he tried.

Chapter Five

The next morning dawned far too early. Noah moved on autopilot as he drove his mother along with Emily and Davey toward Denver. His mom tuned the radio to her favorite station, all of them silent as music filled the SUV. He expected Emily to initiate some sort of conversation, but when he glanced at her in the rearview mirror, all her attention was focused on Davey watching a movie on his iPad. Normally the winding drive down into the city calmed Noah, but he hardly noticed the scenery. His mom worked quietly on her knitting until they arrived at the hospital.

She'd already had her pre-op visit and filled out most of the paperwork, so it was only a short wait at registration before she was admitted. They stayed with her until she was moved to the OR, emotion lodging in Noah's throat as she kissed his cheek.

"I love you, Mom," he called as they wheeled her through the double doors.

She waved, her smile cheery as she disappeared.

He felt Emily sag against him and wrapped one arm around her shoulders. "She's going to be fine."

His sister's response was to punch him lightly in the stomach. "I know you're as scared as I am. Don't act like you aren't."

He sighed and closed his eyes, allowing his fear to wash through him for just a moment, testing how it felt, how much of it he could handle. When the feelings rose up and threatened to choke him, he forced them down again. "I'm acting like I believe she's going to make it through this, Em. I can't stomach the alternative right now."

"That's fair," she answered softly. "We will get through this."

"I need to go potty," Davey announced. The boy stood just a foot away from them, his arms straight at his sides, his gaze fixed on the linoleum squares of the hospital's tiled floor.

"Let's go, then, little man." She glanced at Noah with a halfhearted smile.

"I'll be in the waiting room." He watched his sister guide Davey around the corner toward the restrooms, and then he turned and made his way down the hall to the surgical waiting area.

A man stood as he approached. "What are you doing here?" Noah asked.

Jason Crenshaw shrugged. "Where else would I be?" He stepped forward and gave Noah a quick hug. "Meg is the closest thing to a mom I had. You're like a brother to me. Of course I'm here."

Jase had been Noah's best friend since they started second grade, assigned to sit next to each other alphabetically. Noah hated to admit how many tests he'd passed by looking over his friend's shoulder. Jase had been smart, motivated and intent on doing the right thing all the time—a perfect teacher's pet and the exact opposite of Noah. But the two had forged an unlikely bond that had seen them through both good times and bad.

Like Katie, Jase saw past his good-old-boy act. Unlike Katie, most of the time he let Noah get away with it. Although Jase hadn't been athletic as a kid, he'd grown into his body and now stood an inch taller than Noah's own six foot two. Whenever Noah was in town, he and Jase would find time for some type of extreme outdoor activity—rock climbing in the summer and fall or backcountry snowboarding in the winter. With Jase's dark hair and glasses covering his hazel eyes, they didn't look like family, but Jase had always felt like a brother to Noah.

But he'd purposely kept his communication with Jase to texts and voice mails this trip. Jase had been raised by an alcoholic single father and had spent many afternoons, most weekends and even one extended stay with Noah's family when his dad had finally ended up doing jail time after too many DUIs. Noah knew their close relationship should have made him reach out to Jase, but instead the idea of sharing his pain with his friend had been too much.

Now he realized he'd probably hurt Jase by not including him—another fence to mend during his time in Crimson.

"I'm sorry I haven't—"

"No apologies," Jase interrupted. "You get to deal with this however works for you. But I'm going to be here one way or another."

Noah bit the inside of his cheek and nodded. "I'm glad."

"How's your mom holding up?" Jase asked as Noah sat in the chair next to him. The waiting room was almost empty at this early hour, only an older man in a far corner reading the newspaper. That should be his father, Noah thought with a sense of bitterness. His dad should be here now, and the old loss tugged at him again.

"She's a trouper, like always. She's happy to have Emily and me under her roof again, even if it's for such an awful reason."

"Emily's here, too?"

Noah glanced up at his friend's sharp tone. "She came in last week with her son."

"What about her husband? The politician, right?"

"I hear you're the local politician now." Both men looked at Emily, who walked up to where they sat, Davey following close at her heels but still not touching her.

Jase scrambled to his feet. “Hey, Em.” He shoved his hand forward and ended up poking Emily in the stomach as she leaned in to hug him.

Noah hid a smile as his sister grunted, rubbed at her belly and stepped back.

“Sorry about that,” Jase mumbled, reaching one of his long arms to pat her awkwardly on the shoulder. “It’s good to see you, but I’m sorry this is the reason for your visit.” He continued to thump her shoulder until Emily finally pulled his arm away.

Noah cringed for his buddy. Jase’s crush on Emily was well-known to everyone but Noah’s sister. She’d never seen him as anything but one of Noah’s annoying friends.

He thought about Katie and how feelings could change in an instant. Still, he couldn’t imagine his lively, sophisticated sister with a hometown boy like Jase. Emily had always wanted more than Crimson could offer, even more so after their father died. But life didn’t always pan out the way a person expected. The gauzy circles under his sister’s eyes were a testament to that.

“It’s nice of you to be here, Jason,” Emily said in a tone Noah imagined her using at fancy society dinners where she’d lived with Henry in Boston. “And congratulations on your success in Crimson. I’m sure you’ll make a great mayor.”

Color rose to Jase’s neck. “The campaign’s just started, but I’m cautiously optimistic.”

Emily glanced at Noah. “We know that feeling.”

“Is this your son?” Jase crouched down to eye level with Davey. Noah saw Emily’s eyes widen and wondered what he’d missed. “What’s your name, buddy?”

“Davey, say hello to Mr. Crenshaw.” Her voice was wooden as she threw Noah a helpless look. Davey continued to hide behind her legs.

“Hey, Jase,” Noah said quickly. “Tell me more about your plans for the campaign. Maybe I can help while I’m home.”

Jase glanced up at Noah then straightened. Emily took the opportunity to duck away, leading Davey over to the far side of the waiting area and taking out a LEGO box from the shopping bag slung over her shoulder.

“She really doesn’t like me,” Jase muttered. “Something about me literally repels her. Always has.”

“It’s not like that.” Noah placed a hand on his friend’s back. “She’s dealing with a lot right now.”

Jase’s gaze turned immediately concerned. “Like what? Is she okay? Is that East Coast prick treating her right?”

Noah squeezed shut his eyes for a moment. This was the last conversation he wanted to have right now, and he couldn’t share Emily’s story with Jase anyway. It wasn’t his to tell.

He looked at Jase again, ready to offer an excuse and change the subject, when something made him glance down the hospital’s hall. Katie walked toward him, balancing a large picnic basket in her arms. She wore a pale blue sundress and a yellow cardigan sweater over it. A well-worn pair of ankle-high boots covered her feet, and the few inches of pale skin between the top of the leather and the hem of her dress were the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. Her hair was swept up, tiny wisps framing her face. He caught her eye and she gave him a sweet, almost apologetic smile.

He stepped forward, heart racing, to greet her.

“Sorry I wasn’t here earlier,” she said, lifting the basket. “I wanted to bring—”

Before she could finish, he grabbed the picnic basket from her hands, set it on the ground and wrapped his arms tight around her. He buried his face in her hair, smelling the sugar-and-vanilla scent that was uniquely hers. With Katie in his arms, a sense of peace flooded through him. Suddenly he had hope—for his mom and for himself. Everything else melted away, from his sister’s hollowed eyes to Jase’s unwanted concern. He’d deal with everything. But all that seemed to matter at the moment was that Katie hadn’t given up on him.

* * *

Katie tried to keep her heart guarded as the warmth of Noah's big body seeped through her thin sweater and dress. She hadn't even been sure she should come to the hospital today after how their last conversation had ended.

But she'd known his family forever and she wasn't the type of person to desert a friend in need, even if it took a toll on her emotions. Who was she kidding? She couldn't possibly have stayed away. People in need were Katie's specialty. She'd gone extra early to the bakery this morning to make fresh scones and sandwiches for later. Food was love in her world, and she was always ready to offer her heart on a plate—or in a picnic basket.

But Noah dropped the food to the floor as if it didn't matter. Right now, he was holding on to her as though she was his rock in the middle of a stormy sea. Funny that for years she'd wanted to be that person for Noah, but he'd been unwilling to look at life as anything but a continual party. Now that she'd decided to give up on her unrequited love for him, he wanted her for something more.

For how long? she couldn't help but wonder. Even as his breath against her neck made her stomach dip and dive, she could already see the ending. His mom would make it through the surgery—there was no question in Katie's mind about that. And as soon as Meg recovered fully, Noah would go back to his party-boy ways and leave Katie and Crimson behind once again.

She knew he was friends with many of the women he'd dated over the years. In his heart, he loved women—all women—he just couldn't commit to one. When things got serious, he'd move on. Yet Katie'd always been amazed at the warmth between him and most of his former flames. It was impossible to remain angry with Noah for long. He couldn't help who he was. But Katie had to keep the truth about him fresh in her mind so she wouldn't make what was happening between them into something more than it was.

When she caught both Jase and Emily staring at them, she pulled away, quickly picking up the picnic basket and holding it in front of her like a shield. "Is everything okay?" she asked, thinking maybe there was a reason for his uncharacteristic display of affection toward her. "Have you heard something?"

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