

CHRISTINE RIMMER

Their Secret Summer Family

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True Love

The Bravos of Valentine Bay

Christine Rimmer

Their Secret Summer Family

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It’s just fun and games… Until someone falls in love.Dante Santangelo doesn’t ‘do’ relationships, but the busy single dad happily agrees to a secret summer fling with free-spirited Gracie Bravo. It’s the perfect arrangement. Until Gracie falls for Dante and his adorable twins. Either she can say goodbye… or risk everything to make this family happen.

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It's just fun and games…

Until someone falls in love.

Officer Dante Santangelo doesn't "do" relationships, but the busy single dad happily agrees to a secret summer fling with younger, free-spirited Gracie Bravo. It's the perfect arrangement. Until Gracie falls for Dante, his adorable twins and their ever-present fur baby. Gracie wants a life with Dante. Either she can say goodbye at the end of the summer…or risk everything to make this family happen.

New York Times **Bestselling Author Christine Rimmer**

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

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Their Secret Summer Family

Christine Rimmer

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THEIR SECRET SUMMER FAMILY

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For Gaye McGill, in honour of her golden retriever–German shepherd mix, Flip, who was the inspiration for the hero's dog, Owen, in this story. Gaye would like readers to know that Flip was the best of the best and Gaye misses her greatly.

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Chapter One

Grace Bravo was going too fast and she knew it.

But she really needed to cheer herself up. And it was a beautiful, sunny first day of June on the Oregon coast, the perfect kind of day to drive with the windows down, playing "Shut Up and Drive" really loud. The fir-scented air blew in and swirled around her, stirring her hair as she bopped right along with Rihanna. She was beating out rhythm on the steering wheel and swinging around curves with abandon.

Too bad she wasn't really feeling it—not the beauty of her home state, not the sunshiny day, not the warm summer air whipping her hair around her face, not even the hard-driving beat of the music turned all the way up.

And then the light bar started flashing behind her. A siren blared.

"No!" she cried. "This cannot be happening…"

But it was. Grace turned off the radio and took her foot off the gas. Easing her eight-year-old RAV4 to the side of the road, she put it in Park and switched off the engine. The white Valentine Bay police cruiser, lights still flashing, pulled in behind her, the nerve-shredding siren cutting off in midshriek.

A ticket was definitely in her future.

She shouldn't be the least surprised. It was all just more crap piled on top of an already craptastic day.

Thinking dark thoughts, she raked her wind-tangled hair back off her forehead and watched in her side mirror as the officer—tall, dark haired, broad shouldered, tanned and very fit, in Valentine Bay PD blues and black wrapback sunglasses—emerged from the cruiser.

It took her a second or two to realize who he was.

Dante Santangelo?

No way.

Grace had known Dante forever. His only sister was married to one of her brothers. Once or twice a week, he dropped by the Sea Breeze where she worked. They got along great, Grace and Dante. She'd always considered him a friend.

Until now, anyway.

"Are you kidding me?" she muttered sourly when he leaned in her window.

"Gracie, you were speeding," he chided—like he was really sorry, but being sorry wouldn't stop him from doing his job. He took off those black sunglasses and gave her a melty look as his plush mouth curved in a warm smile. "License and registration?"

"This is so wrong," she grumbled.

He just kept on leaning in the window, those velvety, coffee-brown eyes patient, like he could wait forever for her to stop being grumpy and pass him her papers.

"Fine." She leaned across the console, popped open the glove box, got out her registration, handed it over, then fished her wallet from her bag and gave him her license, too.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll be right back…"

"I was afraid you'd say that."

He turned for his cruiser. With a groan of frustration, she flopped her head against the seat and closed her eyes.

He was back in no time with a clipboard. "Here you go." He handed her documents through the window.

She took them. "Thanks," she sneered, and couldn't resist reminding him, "I give you the good beer. I don't even let you tip me." Actually, he always tipped her, anyway. But she always meant it when she told him not to.

Did he chuckle as he wrote on his clipboard? Sure sounded like it to her. One big shoulder lifted in an easy shrug. “And I’m giving you the good ticket.”

“That makes no sense. There is no good ticket.” And yeah, it was a stretch, but she might as well try her feminine wiles on him. Tossing her messy hair a little, gazing up at him with sad, wide eyes, she pleaded pitifully, “Do you *have* to?” He just kept writing out the ticket. “It’s been a bad day,” she whined. With feeling. “And now *this*.”

He passed the clipboard in the window and handed her his pen. “Initial here and here. And then sign here.”

“A hundred and sixty bucks? You can’t be serious.”

He said nothing, just continued to look at her with that thoroughly annoying expression of gentle patience on his handsome face.

She huffed out an exasperated sigh, took her sweet time reading the whole damn thing and did what he told her to do, giving back the clipboard and pen when she was done.

He passed her the ticket and launched into a little spiel about the deadline to respond and how to contest the citation. When he finally shut up about it, he leaned in the window again. “Okay, that’s out of the way. Now. Are you all right?” His expression had morphed from patience to real concern.

She glared at him, just to drill it home that she would be a lot better if he hadn’t pulled her over. “Not really.”

“You need someone to talk to?”

Share her problems with Dante? The idea never would have occurred to her. Yeah, she considered him a friend. But not a cry-on-your-shoulder sort of friend. She’d known him her whole life, practically. And she’d always considered him hot and all, with those smoldery good looks and that broad, hard body.

But he was nine years older, thirty-two to her twenty-three. He’d been married and divorced and he had twin daughters. The guy was a settled, responsible sort of man who would no doubt consider her flaky and immature if she griped about her fight with her bossy eldest brother and whined over her paltry bank balance, which was keeping her from getting her own place.

And about her miniscule bank balance? That was all on her. She’d inherited a little money back when she turned eighteen. If she hadn’t enjoyed spending it so much, she would have plenty of money to move.

She should thank Dante for offering to listen to her problems, insist that she was fine, say she would see him the next time he stopped by the bar—and then wave goodbye.

But the thing was, his offer kind of gave her the warm fuzzies. Dante was a tough guy. He didn’t let many people close. That he seemed to really want to be there for her made her feel better about herself, somehow.

“You’ll be sorry,” she warned and waited for him to back out.

But he didn’t back out. “I get off at five. I’ll see you at the Sea Breeze.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t cry on your shoulder at my place of work. That would be totally unprofessional—and besides, I’m off tonight.” She was pretty sure that would do it. He would tell her to drive carefully and turn for the cruiser.

Didn’t happen. “How about my place, then?”

Dante’s house. She hadn’t been there in years—not since she was sixteen and babysat his twins that one time when his then-wife, Marjorie, couldn’t get her regular sitter. “You don’t have to do this, you know?”

“Hey, come on. What’s a friend for?” He upped his offer. “I’ll open a bottle of wine.”

She waved the ticket at him. “After this, you owe me a nice bottle of tequila. I’ll bring the tacos.”

He didn’t even blink. “Six o’clock?”

For the first time since he'd pulled her over, she gave him a smile. "I'll be there."

* * *

Dante had a really nice house—a shingled, rambling, ranch-style place on an acre of wooded land overlooking the ocean. He'd bought it about a decade ago, in the midst of the last housing crisis, when a house like Dante's went for half what it was worth now.

Grace admired the pretty setting as she carried bags of take-out tacos up to his front door. On three sides, the house was surrounded by trees. In back, it overlooked the ocean.

Dante, in worn jeans and a gray crewneck T-shirt that showcased his muscular arms, pulled the door open before she rang the bell. "Right on time. And you brought the tacos, too—here." He took the bags from her. A friendly-looking dog bumped around him, tail wagging. Dante gently warned, "Owen, play nice." The dog had short floppy ears, a sweet face and a red-brown coat with a blaze of white at the throat. His paws were white, too.

She greeted him. "Hello, Owen." With an eager whine, the dog sat and gazed up at her hopefully. "Part golden retriever, right?" she asked Dante.

He nodded. "Golden and German shepherd."

"He's very handsome." She knelt to scratch his thick ruff, glancing up as she let Owen lick her face. "You get the good tequila?"

"Come on inside." He stepped back and ushered her in. "You can see for yourself." He led her to the kitchen area, which was open to the living space, with concrete tile counters and glass backsplashes.

"The counters are beautiful," she said.

"Thanks. I like to change stuff up now and then."

Back when she was sixteen and the pinch-hit babysitter, the counters were white tile—and right now, the bottle of tequila was waiting on the island. She picked it up. "Anejo." The word meant "smooth" or "restful." Tequila Anejo had to be aged in oak barrels that did not exceed six hundred liters for at least a year. "Thank you."

He gave her a nod and gestured at the limes in the wire basket nearby. "You want to shoot it?"

"Have you met me? I'm a purist."

"Perils of being a bartender, huh?"

"That's right. You develop definite opinions when it comes to enjoying good liquor." Actually, bartending was an interim job for her while she'd waited for a teaching job to open up locally.

She had a degree in history with a minor in education from Reed College and she'd recently snagged her dream job. This fall, she would be teaching history at Valentine Bay High. In the meantime, she was still working at the bar, sometimes days and sometimes nights. She liked the flexible schedule.

Dante took a couple of stemless wineglasses from a cupboard. "Will these do?"

"Perfect."

They decided to sit out on the deck and enjoy the view. She helped him carry everything outside, including a pitcher of ice water, which made her laugh. It was so Dante, to make sure they stayed hydrated while they were getting blasted.

It was gorgeous outside and wouldn't be dark for hours. The deck faced a stretch of wooded yard. Farther out, twisted, windblown evergreens framed the edge of the cliff and the top of a narrow trail leading down to a nice stretch of beach below. Off in the distance, the ocean gleamed, pearly blue to the horizon.

Grace sat in a cushioned deck chair at a cast iron table beneath the shade of a big white umbrella. At Dante's insistence, she drank a tall glass of water and ate two tacos before settling back to sip tequila. Owen had stretched out at her feet.

"Okay, I gotta admit." She tapped Dante's glass with hers. "*This* is the life—how are the girls?"

* * *

Dante took a slow sip. It went down smooth and hot.

It was nice, really, sitting out here with Gracie. He'd always liked her. She was fun and easy to be with.

And she'd grown up to be gorgeous, with all that silvery blond hair, those soft lips the rich pink color of the inside of a conch shell and those sapphire-blue eyes. Her skin was so pale. She looked like she might bruise from a touch—not that he'd ever make a move on her or anything. They had a way-too-complex history.

Her third-born brother, Connor, had been Dante's best friend all their growing-up years. But then Connor had broken the bro code. He'd fallen in love with Dante's sister, Aly, and married her. Dante had barely forgiven Connor for that, when Connor divorced Aly for reasons that really weren't reasons at all. Dante had sworn never to speak to the jackass again.

Then last year, Aly and Connor had gotten back together. They'd married each other for the second time last October and Aly had given birth to their daughter, Emelia, just last month. Dante and Connor were friends again now.

And really, Dante had always thought of Gracie Bravo as a kid.

Well, until lately, anyway. Today, she wore faded denim shorts and a cropped top. Following her out here from the kitchen, he couldn't help staring at her ass and her strong, pretty legs, at all that gorgeous, delicate skin…

"Dante. Helloooo." Laughing, she reached across the table and lightly batted his arm. "Nicole and Natalie? How are they doing?"

"Good. Real good." He ordered his dirty mind off Gracie's ass and back to the much safer subject of his twin daughters. They were eight now. They mostly lived with his ex-wife, Marjorie, in Portland, where they went to school. He had them every other weekend and for seven weeks in the summer.

Gracie asked, "When do they come for vacation?"

"A week from this coming Saturday."

"You're counting the days."

He tipped his glass at her. "I always do." He was a family man, through and through. His ex-wife was a good mother. Still, he just felt better when his girls were with him.

Gracie asked, "So how's it going with the new stepdad?"

At Easter, Marjorie had married Dr. Roger Hoffenhower. Roger was a family psychologist and a really nice guy with a big heart. "Terrific." He drank more tequila.

Gracie scoffed. "Smile when you say that."

"I like Roger." He set his glass on the table and turned it slowly. It was almost empty. Against his own better judgment, he added, "I also kind of hate Roger."

"Why?"

He put the glass to his lips again, sipped the last of the golden liquid inside and then slowly swallowed. "Roger is an open wound of feelings and sensitivity." In other words, pretty much everything Dante wasn't. "Plus, Nic and Nat like Roger. A lot. Can you blame me for hating the poor guy?"

She gave a husky little laugh that he found way too attractive. "I think anything I say right now will probably be wrong."

"Smart girl—and why are we talking about Roger, anyway?"

"Er, because you like him—but you hate him, which means you're conflicted about Roger and that's not only interesting, it's the kind of thing you need to talk about with a friend."

He stared at her, unblinking. "But we're not here to talk about Roger."

"You started it. Officer." Those sapphire eyes twinkled at him.

"You're the one who asked about Roger."

"But then you told me how you really feel about the guy. That's my cue to encourage you to tell me more."

"Wrong." He raised his glass to her. "We're risking liver damage for your sake, remember? You need to tell me all about what's bothering you so I can take a crack at saying all the helpful stuff that will make you feel better."

"Clearly, you are at least as sensitive as Roger."

He grunted. "Don't bet on it. But I'm here and willing to listen."

She picked up the bottle and poured them both more tequila. They sat back, just sipping, for a few peaceful minutes. It was nice, he thought. Companionable.

She was staring off toward the ocean when she said, "I had a fight with Daniel this morning." Daniel Bravo was the eldest of the Bravo siblings and something of a father figure to all of them. When their parents died years ago on a trip overseas, Daniel had gotten custody of them and raised them to adulthood in the house where they grew up. "It was a stupid fight and we both apologized after. Daniel and I used to get into it all the time, but it's been better lately. Truly. We get along really well now, as a rule. But I'm sick of living in the house I grew up in and frankly, my big brother is sick of having me there, though he would never admit it…"

They both continued sipping the excellent tequila as Gracie rambled on, looking way too cute and kind of sad, too, explaining about the small trust fund she and her siblings had each inherited from their lost parents. She went on to explain about her trips to Europe in the summers while she was in college, about the writer she lived with one summer. And the sculptor the next and the inventor the year after that.

"That was in Italy, the inventor," she said. "His name was Paolo and he invented things that had a tendency to explode."

Mostly, she explained, she supported these guys with her inheritance while she was with them. "You have to understand, Dante. They were brilliant and interesting. It was England and Ireland and Italy. Best of all, Daniel wasn't there to call me foolish and wasteful and taken advantage of by irresponsible guys. I had the time of my life."

"But…?"

She rolled those big blue eyes. "But Niall and Keegan and Paolo were expensive. And that means that by the end of that third summer, I was kinda, sorta broke."

"How broke?"

She plunked her glass down and poured herself another. He probably should have suggested they put the brakes on the drinking. But he was enjoying himself. That was the thing about Gracie. He'd discovered in the nights he'd hung out at the Sea Breeze with her that she was not only easy on the eyes, she was funny and smart—with a lot of heart.

Gracie Bravo was the whole package, really. He felt better about life in general somehow, when he was hanging around her. He held out his glass and she gave him more, too.

"There's good news, though," she said, after she'd put the bottle down and sipped again from her glass.

"Tell me."

She raised her glass high, as though saluting the trees and the cliff and the whole damn Pacific Ocean. "My perfect job has finally opened up at Valentine Bay High. I'll be teaching world history in the fall."

"Congratulations. That's terrific." He tapped her glass with his.

"Thank you. Also, I've been budgeting responsibly for the last two years, saving what money I can. By Christmas, I'll have enough to get my own place."

So what was the problem? "Okay, then. You had a fight with Daniel, but you already patched that up."

"Yeah."

"And you've got your money situation under control."

"I do. It's true."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

Her forehead got scrunchy as she considered what he'd said. "You don't get it. Dante, I need my own space *now*, I really do. Daniel and Keely are good to me." Keely was Daniel's second wife. His first wife had died shortly after giving birth to twins—a boy and a girl—almost four years ago. "And the house is really big, I know. But still, they've got the twins and now Marie." Marie was Daniel and Keely's daughter—and about a year and a half old now, if Dante remembered right.

Gracie drank more tequila. Dante did, too.

"Keely and Daniel have a right to their own house," Gracie said. "And I want a life without my big brother breathing down my neck. I want that life now. My BFFs Carrie and Erin are already roomies—with no room for me. I could move in with Harper and Hailey." They were two of her sisters. "They've got that rambling old cottage Aislinn owns." Her sister Aislinn had married recently and moved to a ranch owned by her new husband. "But Harper and Hailey are like a team, you know? I always feel like a fifth wheel around them. So anyway, I thought I had an interim solution to the problem, a room in the house of a nice older woman named Sonja Kozlov down on Cherry Street. But then, early this afternoon, Sonja gives me a call. Her son has moved home unexpectedly and my interim space is no longer available. She gave me back my first, last and deposit and that's that. I'm still living in my brother's house. Probably till Christmas."

The good news was, he actually had a solution to her problem. "You want the cabin? It's yours."

"What cabin?" Squinting, she craned across the table toward him. "Are you drunk?"

He gestured toward the thick copse of trees behind her, on the south end of his property. "I have a guest cabin, I guess you could call it. Over there. See the trail going into the trees?"

She turned and stared where he pointed. "Wait. I see it. A log cabin, green tin roof?"

"That's it. It's one room—and a bathroom. Nothing fancy, but it has everything you need. Power, basic appliances. Running hot and cold water. A woodstove for heat if you need it. I even had Wi-Fi hooked up in there last year when one of the station house dispatchers needed a place to stay for a few months."

"How come you don't just rent it out on a regular basis?"

He shook his head. "I don't want some stranger living a hundred feet from my back deck. Luckily, you're no stranger. You can have it for as long as you want it, free of charge."

She sat back in her chair. "That's not right."

"Sure, it is."

"I can pay you what I would've paid Sonja, at least."

He put up a hand. "Stop. Let me do this for you. Like you said, you need a place of your own and the cabin is just sitting there empty."

She slapped the tabletop. "Wait."

"What?"

"We should discuss this tomorrow when we're both sober."

"Oh, come on, Gracie. I solve your problem for you and you can't just say thanks, I would love to stay in your log cabin for free?"

"Nope. Not tonight. Tonight is for tequila and commiseration." She let out a heavy sigh. "Right now, we need to get on to a more interesting topic. Let's commiserate about love."

"That does it."

"Huh?"

He grabbed the bottle and moved it to his side of the table. "No more tequila for you."

"You're such a hard-ass, Dante—but I still intend to talk about love."

He helped himself to another glass. After all, the bottle was in his control now. Might as well take full advantage. “Go right ahead.”

She’d slipped off her pink sneakers and was giving a very happy Owen a tummy massage with her toes. “I love your dog.”

Owen knew she was talking about him. With a gleeful little whine, he rolled over and got up.

“Come on, sweetheart,” she coaxed.

With a sigh of pure contentment, Owen put his head across those amazing white thighs of hers. She petted him, stroking down his back, scratching him behind the ears. Owen shut his eyes and basked in the attention.

She asked, “Does he just stay home alone when you’re working?”

He explained about the nice lady named Adele who lived on the next property over. “Adele runs a sort of doggy daycare, but it’s casual. She’s there all the time. I can drop Owen off and pick him up pretty much anytime that suits me. When I work nights, he stays here, but I can always manage to get home sometime midshift to check on him, give him a little attention and a short walk outside.”

She made a humming sound low in her throat and petted the dog some more. Dante began to hope that maybe they’d left the subject of love behind.

But then she sat back in the chair and stared up at the sky. “Where were we? Right. Love. I can’t say for sure that I’ve ever really been in love.” A long sigh escaped her. “But I have been infatuated, like head over heels, you know? Sadly, I always go for the brilliant ones, the ones nobody understands, the emotional fixer-uppers, I suppose you could say.” She slanted him a quick glance. “You know about fixer-uppers, don’t you?”

He did like watching those pink lips move. “Explain it to me.”

“Fixer-uppers are expensive. I’ve blown my wad on fixer-uppers.” She let out a giggle, and then got serious again. “So right now, I can’t afford another relationship—and could you maybe not look so completely disapproving?”

He blinked. “I’m not.” Was he?

“Yeah, you are. You’re reminding me a little of Daniel. Talk about a buzzkill.” She pushed her glass across the table and gave him the evil eye until he poured her some more.

He set the bottle down again and decided that he might as well be honest with her. “Okay, the way I see it, Gracie, romantic love? It’s a crock.”

She whipped out a hand and slapped him lightly on the arm for the second time that evening. “Take that back.”

“Can’t. Sorry. What you call love is just an excuse to misbehave.”

“Not true. So wrong.”

“Take my parents.”

“Dante. Slow down. You’re telling me that romantic love’s a crock and your parents are your example of why that’s so?”

“Exactly.”

“But your parents have been married forever and they’re *happy*. Aren’t they?”

“Blissfully so,” he replied in disgust.

“Dante. You’re making no sense. I mean, if they’re happy, well, isn’t that the point?”

“The point is, my mom was seventeen and pregnant with me when she married dad.”

“So what? They’re happy. They’ve been married for more than thirty years. Give it a rest.”

“They’re crazy.”

“No.”

“Yeah. Crazy in love after all these years. And they always have been. Do you know how many times I walked in on my folks having sex when I was a kid? It was traumatic. No surface was sacred. Apparently, it’s still that way.” Which was proven out by the fact that a year ago, at the age of forty-eight, his mom had given birth to his littlest brother, Mac. “And look at my sister. Loved your brother

since she was barely in her teens. Chased him shamelessly until she finally caught him. Married him. Got wrongly divorced by him. Seven years later, she gets hit in the head and comes running back for more."

Gracie put both her hands out to the side, palms up. "And they're making it work now. They're very happy together, Connor and Aly."

"Romantic love is just another name for insanity." Dante finished off what was left in his glass. "I love my girls. That's a love that matters, a love with dignity and purpose."

She bent down and kissed the top of Owen's hairy head, which was still in her lap. The dog had his eyes closed and a blissed-out expression on his face. "You just haven't met the right woman yet. It will happen."

"No, it won't. The truth is, I'm bad at relationships and I'm just fine with that."

She stuck out that plump lower lip of hers. "That is too sad."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is. And I'm sorry it didn't work out with Marjorie. Don't feel bad, Dante."

"Did I say I *feel* bad? I didn't say that. I said I *am* bad at relationships."

"Everyone fails at love."

"Not my parents."

"Okay, *except* for your parents—and my parents, now that I think about it. They were totally in love till the end. And Daniel and Keely. And your brothers, Pascal and Tony, they're happily married, too, right? And let's not forget my sister Aislinn and—"

"Stop." He set his empty glass down harder than necessary. "All these happy couples. I can't take it anymore."

"My point is, you just have to be patient. It will happen. I've been in five failed relationships —if you count Joseph and Randy in high school. And after Paolo, well, I've been going through a bit of a dry spell if you know what I mean, avoiding sex and relationships and all that—but that doesn't mean I'm giving up, you know? I'm just having a break, that's all. I could have a wild fling any day now. And one of these days, I'll find the kind of love your mom and dad have. *I'm* not discouraged."

"Meaning *I* am? I've already said twice that I'm not."

"But you are." She gave Owen another scratch behind the ear. The dog nuzzled her hand and then flopped back down at her feet, rolling to his back in a shameless invitation to another toe massage. Gracie obliged.

Dante watched her pretty, turquoise-painted toes rubbing Owen's belly and laid it out for her *again*. "You're not getting it, Gracie. I'm fine with things just as they are. More than fine."

"But…you never have sex with other people anymore?"

"I didn't say that."

"Ohhh," she said slowly, eyes going wide. "Just flings and hookups, then, is what you're saying?"

"What I'm saying is I like my life. I've got a job that matters, one that interests me, with good potential for advancement." He gestured widely at the trees, the deck, the cliff and the ocean below. "I've got a great house in a beautiful spot, a good dog and most important, two smart, beautiful daughters."

The sun had sunk below the water. It was almost dark. The light by the slider, set on a timer, came on.

Gracie put her hands to her throat and made choking noises.

"Whatever that's supposed to mean," he said flatly, "I don't get it. You need to use words."

"Fine. A life without the prospect of someone special to love just makes me want to strangle myself."

"How many different ways can I say that I'm perfectly happy with how things are?"

"No. Uh-uh. I refuse to believe that you have no interest in finding love again. Dante, you're a great guy. And hot." She peered at him more closely, that pillowy, pink mouth softly parted. "Seriously. You're really hot…" She stood.

Before he could figure out what she was up to, she'd stepped over Owen and plopped down in his lap. With a happy giggle, she wrapped her arms around his neck and stuck her tongue in his ear.

He knew what to do—take her gently but firmly by the arms and hold her away enough that he could look in those big blue eyes and say in a soothing tone, *Gracie. No. Bad idea.*

But there was a problem.

Her tongue in his ear? It felt really good. Almost as good as her pretty, curvy body pressing against him. She smelled fresh and clean and sweet, too. And he liked the way she felt. He liked it a lot. The evidence of how much he liked it was growing beneath his fly. She knew it, too. He could tell by the way she gasped and whispered his name.

Tell her this can't happen, he said to himself.

And he opened his mouth to do that.

But then, her tongue left his ear and her soft lips were right there, meeting his. He sank into that kiss like a drowning man, going down and down, looking up at the sky through the water, realizing that drowning was a good thing—as long as it was Gracie he was drowning in.

Because Gracie, well, she tasted of tequila and summer and the promise of something so perfect and right.

Of course, it didn't exist, that promise.

He knew that—or rather, the fulfilment of that promise, *that* didn't exist. The promise itself? That was the problem. The promise was so tempting. The promise made the world seem like a much more beautiful place.

And right now, on his back deck, as night came on, just the taste of her mouth and the soft weight of her pretty body and the scent of her skin, it was all magic to him. She practiced the best kind of sorcery, equal parts innocence and heat.

She pulled back a little, but only to slide that mouth of hers along the ridge of his jaw. She gave his chin a little bite.

And then her lips met his again. He went down a second time, plunging below the surface of all his own objections.

Dragging her tightly to him, he speared his tongue into her beautiful mouth. He was drunk, but not *that* drunk. He knew that he shouldn't, that they were friends and this was how friendships ended, that he was violating the very rule he'd once beaten the crap out of Connor for breaking. Because Gracie was Connor's little sister and a guy didn't make moves on his best friend's little sister.

No. Uh-uh. He shouldn't, couldn't, wouldn't…

But she tasted so good, like excellent tequila and the best bad decisions. All the shouldn'ts in the world could not hold out against the flavor of her, the feel of her, so soft and wild, in his arms.

She pulled back violently and blinked at him. "We're both kind of drunk. Maybe this shouldn't be happening. I'm kind of taking advantage of you in a weakened state, aren't I?"

"What the…? Of course not."

"I'm not?"

Wait. He should probably just agree with her, shouldn't he? Put an end to this incredible craziness.

She kissed him again. His brain got all scrambled in the best possible way.

This time, when she put her hands on his shoulders and pulled her mouth from his, she said, "Then again, since we're both hosed, nobody's taking advantage of anybody. It's mutually consensual. Wouldn't you say?" His head started nodding of its own volition. And she gave him her beautiful, glowing smile. "That settles it. We should go inside where the condoms are. You do have condoms, right?"

It was yet another opportunity to tell her they weren't doing this—or even to lie and say he had no condoms. Whatever it took to discourage this completely unacceptable behavior.

This was so wrong. He couldn't have sex with Gracie for any number of reasons, none of which were all that clear to him right at this moment.

And her mouth…

Her mouth was so tempting, all swollen from kissing him. Her skin was flushed a hot, dewy pink and her eyes were the deepest, purest blue.

He scooped her hard against his chest and got up.

"Whoa!" she cried happily, tightening her arms around his neck, kicking her feet a little like she just couldn't contain her glee.

He carried her to the slider. She reached out an arm and pushed it open. Owen went through ahead of them.

Inside, the lights were still on from earlier. Dante turned toward the door again to shut it. Gracie did it for him. Without a word, she pushed it shut and latched it.

His better judgment tried to surface, to put a stop to this insanity. He opened his mouth to gently put the brakes on.

And she kissed him. Her scent was all around him and her skin was so soft, her naughty little tongue all wet and delicious.

His objections flew away. There was nothing in his head now but lust and longing. She felt too perfect in his arms and she tasted like heaven and the scent of her was driving him out of his mind.

Hoisting her higher, he made for the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

Chapter Two

Grace woke to morning light.

She opened her eyes and saw Dante, sound asleep on the other pillow, his eyelashes so thick and black against his tanned cheeks. He looked really peaceful.

And that made her smile.

How much tequila had they drunk? A lot. She deserved to have a hangover—a headache, at least.

But she didn't.

Gently, so as not to wake him, she rolled to her back and shut her eyes. Her smile got wider.

Seriously, what a night.

And with Dante. Who knew? Yeah, she'd always considered him hot. But way too controlled. He wasn't a happy man, really—a good man, but not happy. She'd always assumed he was the kind of guy who would have trouble getting loose in bed.

Wrong.

She sighed in pure bliss as X-rated scenes from the night before played out on the dark screen of her eyelids.

After the first go-round, which had been nothing short of spectacular, they'd raided his freezer and gobbled Tillamook Mudslide straight from the carton, each with a spoon, passing the chunky chocolate deliciousness back and forth. He'd then ordered her to drink more water to prevent a hangover later. She'd laughed and called him a control freak, but she did drink the water.

Gracie frowned. About then, he'd started acting kind of distant, hadn't he? She'd had a really bad feeling he was going to start backing off, start saying that maybe it hadn't been such a smart idea for them to fall into bed together.

But she'd known how to shut him up about that.

She'd kissed him. Worked like a charm. He scooped her right up and carried her back down the hall to his bed, where the good times rolled some more.

Sometime after midnight, they'd fallen asleep. She'd closed her eyes for a minute—and slept straight through until morning.

What a night.

She could not wait to do it all again.

Carefully, so as not to wake him, she eased her legs over the side of the bed and slid out from under the covers. Her clothes were right there on the bedside chair. She put them on swiftly and tiptoed to the door.

Sweet Owen was waiting on the other side. Pulling the bedroom door silently shut behind her, she asked in a whisper, "Need to go out, boy?"

He let out a low whine and turned to lead the way.

Outside, she found her pink Chuck Taylors right there on the deck by her chair, where she'd left them. Her purse was there, too, still hanging on the back of her chair. She put on the Chucks, hooked the purse over her shoulder and walked Owen into the trees to do his business. As she trailed along behind him, she got out her phone to check messages.

There were two texts from Daniel asking if she was all right.

Oops. They had an agreement that if she wasn't coming home, she would let him know she was okay—and he would refrain from asking questions about what she'd been doing and with whom.

She answered, Sorry. A little too much tequila at Dante Santangelo's place. Stayed here to be safe. (And to have the best sex ever in the history of sex. But her big brother didn't need that kind of TMI.) I'm fine. Home in a while.

He responded right away. Okay, then. Thanks for letting me know.

Was he pissed at her? Probably. Daniel hated it when she didn't keep her agreements. But she was going to call this a win. She'd messed up and he'd been civil about it when she apologized.

It could've been so much worse.

On the way back inside, she grabbed the remains of their dinner, the glasses and the nearly empty bottle from last night.

In the kitchen, Owen went straight to his food bowl. He sniffed at it and then looked up at her with those sad doggy eyes. She took the hint and found him a can of dog stew in the pantry closet. After dishing the food into his bowl, she freshened up his water.

"Good, huh?" She stood over him as he wolfed down his meal. "And now I need coffee."

Dante had one of those pod machines. She loaded up some Peet's French Roast.

Five minutes later, she was standing at the counter savoring that first cup when Dante, in jeans and a fresh T-shirt, emerged from the back of the house.

She watched him come toward her, her heart lifting just at the sight of him.

God, he was gorgeous. All that thick, wavy almost-black hair, those smoldering eyes. The eight-pack, the V-lines, the ebony treasure trail leading to fun and fulfilment—and no, she couldn't see all that amazingness right now. But she *had* seen it and thoroughly enjoyed it last night. It was all burned into her brain in the best sort of way.

And then she met his dark eyes. Instantly, she *knew*. It was so painfully clear to her before he even opened his mouth.

Mr. Control was back with a vengeance.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

He knelt to give his dog a good-morning scratch down his back and a pat on the head. "You found the coffee all right?"

As if that even required an answer. She raised her mug to him as he rose. Sliding to the side a little, she made room for him at the coffee maker.

The silence had weight as he loaded the machine and put his cup under the spout. He pushed the button and turned around to lean against the counter as it brewed.

For a good thirty seconds, they stood there, side by side, the coffee maker gurgling and hissing behind him. She drank her coffee and waited. It seemed only fair to give him a chance to *not* disappoint her.

"Gracie, I…" The sentence wandered off unfinished.

Okay, yeah. Message received. He regretted last night and was about to tell her all about how it could never happen again.

Well, okay then. He would say what he had to say. As for Gracie, she refused to help him in any way, shape or form. She enjoyed her coffee and waited for the rest.

"Gracie, will you look at me?"

Stifling a sigh, she turned her head to face him. Those melty brown eyes were full of self-recrimination and regret.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I never should have touched you. I'm too old for you and I'm not any kind of relationship material, anyway. I don't know what got into me, but I swear to you it's never going to happen again."

Hmm. How to respond?

Too bad there wasn't a large blunt object nearby. The guy deserved a hard bop on head. What was *wrong* with him? No wonder it hadn't worked out with Marjorie. The man didn't have a clue.

But never mind. Gracie held it together as he apologized some more. She watched that beautiful mouth move and pondered the mystery of how such a great guy could have his head so far up his own ass.

Maybe if she yanked him close and kissed him, he'd get over himself and admit that last night had been amazing, the two of them had off-the-charts chemistry and he didn't want to walk away from all that goodness, after all.

Yeah, kissing him might shut him up and get him back on track for more hot, sexy times. It had worked more than once already.

But come on. She couldn't go jumping on him and smashing her mouth on his every time he started beating himself up for having a good time with her.

No. A girl had to have a little pride.

He thought last night was a mistake?

Fair enough. She'd actually let herself believe for a minute or two there that they had something good going on, that her long dry spell man-wise might be over.

But never mind about that. Let him have it his way. She would agree with him.

And then she would show him exactly what he was missing. And *then*, when he couldn't take it anymore and begged her for another chance, she would say that they *couldn't*, that he was too *old* for her and it wouldn't be *right*.

Not that she was vindictive or anything…

"You're right, Dante," she said with exaggerated sincerity. "It was a big mistake. One that can never happen again—and about the cabin? I'll take it. You are a lifesaver. Thank you so much."

For a fraction of a second, he looked kind of stunned. But then he gave a solemn nod. "Well, all right then."

"Is there furniture out there already or will I need to bring my own?" She could use her bedroom suite from Daniel's. Plus, Daniel and Keely had a lot of random pieces stored in the attic and basement of the Bravo house. Getting the cabin furnished wouldn't be a problem.

"There's a bed, a table, a chest of drawers, some chairs and some kitchen stuff." He moved down the counter, took something from a drawer and came back to her. "Here you go." He handed her a key, which she stuck in a pocket of her cutoffs. "Anything that's in there you don't need, no problem. I've got space to store it."

"That'll work. I'm off from the Sea Breeze again today, so I was thinking I would just go ahead and move in."

He frowned. She was sure he would start backpedaling, saying maybe they ought to rethink this, that now they'd shared a night of fabulous sex, it wasn't such a good idea for her to live on his property.

But in the end, he said only, "All right. I've got today and tomorrow off. I'll help."

"Thanks, but I can handle it." She would need to scare up a truck and get one of her brothers to take on the heavy lifting. If none of them were available, she had friends. Someone would come to her rescue.

Dante scowled. "I said I would help. We can use my pickup."

She gave a him big smile. Really, he was a terrific man—well, aside from that stick up his butt. "I hate to keep taking *advantage* of you."

"You're not. Come on, let me help."

"Then thank you. Again."

He still looked way too serious. "Gracie, is this going to wreck our friendship?"

She had such a deep longing to make him squirm. It took serious effort to not put on an innocent voice and probe a little, ask him what, exactly, he meant by *this*?

But no. If she did that, he might just tell her. "No, it's not going to wreck anything. Not for me, anyway." She met his eyes straight on. Was he going to insist they talk about it? Really, the last thing she needed right now was Dante getting down in the weeds with all the reasons last night couldn't, shouldn't, wouldn't be happening again. "Your coffee's ready."

"Right." He gave a slow nod and took his full mug from under the spout. For a moment, they just stood there, sipping and staring at anything but each other.

Finally, he offered, “How ’bout some breakfast?”

“I would love some.”

* * *

After they ate, Dante showed Gracie the cabin.

She walked in the door, took a slow look around and said, “I love it,” which made him feel pretty damn terrific in spite of his doubts about having her living so close after last night. “There’s room for a sitting area *and* my bed, not to mention it has an actual kitchen.”

The kitchen consisted of a small range and a compact fridge with a counter and cabinets between them, a sink in the middle. “It’s pretty basic,” he said.

“Don’t you disrespect my new kitchen,” she commanded, looking way too adorable in those damn sexy Daisy Dukes and that T-shirt that exposed her flat stomach and clung to those fine breasts he wouldn’t be fondling again. “Everything’s so clean, too.”

“I got a Groupon for cleaning services a couple of weeks ago. I had them go through the house and then went ahead and paid extra for them to clean this place, too—never hurts to get rid of the cobwebs now and then.”

“There’s even a window above the sink.” She leaned over the sink to peer outside, causing her right butt cheek to peek out from under the tattered hem of those cutoffs that really ought to be illegal. He gritted his teeth and ordered himself to forget about last night and simply appreciate the spectacular view of her shapely behind. “Perfect,” she said with a happy little sigh.

Next, she went through the cabinets and got all enthusiastic about pots and pans, dishes, mismatched glassware and the drawer of utensils and flatware. He watched her bending to look in the lower cupboards and stretching to peer in the high ones. Her butt cheek reappeared more than once and that damn T-shirt kept drawing tight across those breasts he needed to stop staring at.

“I’ll keep the sofa,” she said, “and the drop-leaf kitchen table and chairs.” She wanted to bring her own bedroom furniture. “You said you have somewhere you can put this bed and bureau?”

“No problem. There’s a shed behind the garage. Plenty of room in there.”

She babbled on, all sunny enthusiasm, about planting rhododendrons by the front door and a rag rug she thought might be stored in the attic at the Bravo house. “That rug would so tie the room together.”

He agreed to all of it. Whatever she wanted. Because she was a friend and a guy helped his friends. Even if, after last night, he was never going to be able to look at her and not see her naked inside his head.

She looked incredible without any clothes on, all that pale, firm skin. Her whole body flushed the prettiest shade of pink when she was turned on.

But he wasn’t going to think of that. From this moment on, he was wiping thoughts of Gracie Bravo naked right out of his brain.

He plugged in the fridge. Together, they moved the chest of drawers and the bed to the shed. Then he followed her in his pickup to the Bravo house up on Rhinehart Hill. Daniel wasn’t there. Keely was, though, along with the kids and Ingrid Ostergard, who was Keely’s mother and also the owner of the Sea Breeze bar where Gracie worked.

Keely took Gracie’s arm. “We need to talk.”

“You’re right,” Gracie agreed.

The two women vanished into Gracie’s room off the kitchen, leaving Dante with Ingrid, the twins, Frannie and Jake, and the toddler, Marie. The twins were busy making what looked like a village of Duplo blocks over by the breakfast nook, the family basset hound stretched out nearby. Marie toddled Dante’s way and kind of landed against his leg. She was a cute little thing, with wispy strawberry curls.

She beamed up at him, causing a tightness in his chest as he thought of his daughters. It seemed just yesterday they'd been Marie's age. "Up." So he swung her up in his arms and she patted his face and babbled out nonsense syllables. "You don't say?" he asked. She babbled some more and he nodded. "No kidding…"

Ingrid, who had green hair this week and wore a purple tank top, sat over at the breakfast nook table. She'd been the lead singer and guitarist for a one-hit wonder rock band back in the eighties. Now she lived with her widowed sister, Gretchen Snow. "Gracie tell you I'm losing her come September?"

"She did. She seems excited to start teaching." He caught Marie's fat little hand before she could poke him in the eye.

"I hate to see her go. But you can't keep the good ones forever, you know?"

Unfortunately, he'd had Gracie for only one night—way short of forever. And maybe "had" was the wrong word. Too objectifying. Or something.

"Dante?" Ingrid seemed to be hiding a grin. "You with me?"

"Uh. Yeah—and you're right. Good things never last forever." *Some of them last only one damn night.*

"Gwamma Ingwid," said Frannie, with a Duplo in each hand. "Come help."

Ingrid, who was slim and fit and maybe in her fifties, got up and joined the twins on the floor.

Gracie emerged from the short hall next to the pantry, Keely right behind her. "I'll head up to Warrenton, tell him in person," Gracie said. Dante knew she meant Daniel. Her eldest brother ran Valentine Logging. The family company had its offices on the Columbia at the Warrenton docks. "Just as soon as we get all my things into the cabin at Dante's."

"That'll work," agreed Keely.

Gracie shifted her glance to Dante. He felt the force of her gaze all through him. Did he have it bad for her? He decided it was better not to think about that.

She asked, "Ready to haul some heavy furniture out to your truck?"

"I'm ready." He put Marie down and she toddled over to join the Duplo builders on the floor. "Let's get after it."

She led him back to her room and they got to work taking the bed apart.

A few hours later, they had her bedroom furniture and all of Gracie's clothes and random other stuff loaded into the two vehicles. They caravanned back to his place and transferred everything into the cabin. Dante had had a graveled side driveway added a few years ago. It branched off to the cabin from the main driveway, so they were able to drive right up to the cabin door.

By a little after three, they had everything out of the vehicles and stacked up in the cabin, ready to be put away. He helped her reassemble the bed.

Once that was done, she fell back across the mattress with a groan that made him start thinking about last night again—not that he'd ever really stopped. "Thank you so much, Dante. You're a lifesaver on so many levels. Now, I'm going to see if I can find a towel and a bar of soap in one of those boxes somewhere. I'll take a quick shower and then go tell my big brother that a miracle has happened and I've found somewhere other than the room off his kitchen to live."

He realized he was starving. They hadn't eaten since the eggs and sausage they'd had at breakfast. "Come on over to the house first. I've got plenty of stuff for sandwiches. You should eat."

She remained sprawled across the bed, looking way too inviting, with her arms thrown out wide, her pink Chucks dangling an inch from the floor. "Can't."

Owen, who had followed them around as they brought in her things, trotted over to her, dropped to his haunches and whined at her hopefully.

She sat up and gave him a pat on the head. With her free hand, she pulled the elastic free of her high ponytail. The silvery mass spilled over shoulders and down her back. He wanted to grab her arm, yank her up off the bed, wrap her hair around his fist and pull her head back so he could bite her smooth, pale neck.

"I need to get going," she said. "I want to catch Daniel before he heads for home."

"It's been hours since breakfast." He should shut up. He sounded like some fussy old mother hen. But then he just kept on talking. "You've got to be hungry and you really should eat."

She laughed. The happy sound kind of reached down inside him, making him yearn for something he was never going to have. Between completely unacceptable bouts of pure lust for her, he kept thinking that maybe they should talk about what had happened last night, kind of clear the air a little, get their friendship back on track. But then, what were they going to say?

No. It was probably better to just leave it alone.

"I'll grab a burger on the way," she said. "Promise. Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

If she wanted to starve herself, how was he going to stop her? He let it go.

She thanked him again. He clicked his tongue at Owen and the dog followed him back to the main house.

* * *

At the Warrenton docks, Gracie went straight to the barnlike building where Valentine Logging had its offices. Daniel was still there. The office manager told her to go on in.

A big man, broad shouldered and square jawed, with hair a little darker than her own, Daniel sat at his desk punching keys on his laptop. He glanced up at her when she entered. "Scotch?"

"No, thanks." Daniel always brought out the good Scotch during important discussions, to mark life transitions and for big occasions. Apparently, he already knew why she was here. "Keely told you, huh?"

He rose, went to the liquor cart in the corner and poured himself a small one. "She said you'd be dropping by. I asked what was going on. She said you would explain everything."

"You don't know what I'm here for and you offered the good Scotch anyway?"

He saluted her with his glass. "Just in case I'm going to need it."

She laughed. "Yeah. I get that. You never know what kind of crap I might pull next."

He had on his wary face. "I didn't say that."

"But maybe you thought it?" She held up her thumb and forefinger with a sliver of space between them. "Just a little…"

He went to the sofa and chairs across from his desk and gestured for her to join him as he sat. She took one of the chairs and Daniel said, "So what's going on?"

"Dante Santangelo offered me this little cabin he has on his property. I took it. Moved all my stuff in there today."

He asked, very carefully, "So, you and Dante…?"

She almost gave him a dirty look, but somehow managed to stop herself in time. "We're friends." *Yeah, okay. With benefits—for last night only and never again.* But all that was TMI as far as her big brother was concerned. "We got to know each other at the bar. He likes to stop in there for a beer a couple of times a week."

Daniel now looked thoughtful, like maybe he was pondering the mysteries of the universe. "Dante's a good man."

She realized then that this conversation was actually going well. Her overbearing eldest brother was treating her like an adult. And that was the second time he'd seemed to imply that maybe she and Dante had a thing. And they kind of did. A very short thing that Daniel never needed to know about. "Like I said, Dante's a friend."

Daniel studied her for several seconds, long enough that she almost started to worry about what he might say next. But then he only reminded her gently, "Your room is there for you. Come home to stay anytime you need to."

Her throat clutched. Just a little. “I’m going to try really hard not to. You should use my room for a guest room. It’s downstairs, private, with its own bath. I already took all my furniture and stuff, so you don’t even need to clear it out.”

“It’s not going to be the same without you there.” His voice was kind of gruff. Like he might be just a little choked up, too.

Strange. It seemed like she and Daniel had been at odds since she turned ten or so. But right now, all she felt was affection for him—and gratitude that he’d kept them all together, kept them a family, when their parents died.

“I’m sorry that we haven’t always gotten along. I think my moving out on my own will be good, you know?”

“Yeah.”

It was the right time, she realized, to tell him what she really thought of him. “You are amazing and strong and we all count on you far too much. I love you a lot, Daniel.”

He gave her a slow nod. “And I love you. I’m proud of you, too, Gracie. You do things your own way and I’m slowly learning to accept that you’re all grown up, not my little baby sister anymore.”

When she got up to leave, he held out his arms. She stepped into them and they shared a hug.

“You need help with the move?” he asked.

“Thanks, but no. It’s handled.”

“Whatever I can do, you just let me know.”

“That works both ways.” She smiled up at him, feeling really good about everything right at that moment.

* * *

Grace stopped for a burger and then to get groceries before heading back to the cabin. It was a little after seven and she’d almost finished putting the food away when someone tapped on the door.

She figured it would be Dante.

And it was.

Sweet Lord, he looked good. All dark and broody. He must have showered. His tanned cheeks were clean-shaven, he smelled of some yummy aftershave and he’d changed to black jeans and a faded plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal those sculpted forearms of his.

“Just the man I wanted to see,” she said. “I have something for you.”

His dark eyebrows drew together in a worried frown. “What?”

“So suspicious,” she chided, and ushered him in. Owen was right behind him. “Here you go.” She had a check already made out to him, but when she took it from her pocket, he put up both hands like she’d pulled a gun on him.

“Gracie. Come on. I said that’s not necessary.”

“It’s the five hundred I was going to pay Sonja.”

“Keep it.”

“No.”

“Gracie…”

“Listen. I know it’s hardly what a homey little cabin in the woods with a nearby trail leading down to a gorgeous stretch of beach would bring you if you actually rented it out, but at least it’ll cover utilities.”

“I said no. Forget it.”

“Five hundred a month,” she repeated, her chin high. “If you don’t take it, that’s a deal breaker. You’ll be forcing me to load all this stuff into my Toyota and move back to Daniel’s. And you know that will be bad for the Bravo family dynamic. I love my big brother and he loves me, but it’s definitely time for me *not* to be living in his house.” Dante had lowered his hands by then. She grabbed one and slapped the check in it.

He looked down at the scrap of paper and then back up at her. Owen, who'd dropped to his haunches at their feet, whined up at them.

"It's okay, boy," she said to the dog. "Your human is stubborn, but we're working it out."

Annoyance flashed in Dante's eyes and his gorgeous high cheekbones suddenly looked like they might poke right through his skin. "You're not going to give the hell up on this are you?"

"Nope. And you need to cash that in the next few days. Unless you'd really rather I didn't stay here. If you don't cash it, I'll know you want me gone and I'll make that happen."

"See how you did that? You turned it all around on me. If I don't take your money, I want you gone?"

"So, then. You *don't* want me gone?"

"Of course not." He really seemed to mean it.

And she felt considerable relief. She had kind of worried that after last night, he would prefer that she lived elsewhere. "Good, then," she answered softly. "Five hundred a month."

He threw up both hands again. "Have it your way."

"Thank you. It's a steal and we both know it. So much better than a room in someone's house." She went back to the kitchen counter to finish emptying the last grocery bag.

He was silent. A quick glance over her shoulder confirmed that he was just standing there in the middle of the room, surrounded by plastic bags and a few boxes and more than one suitcase full of her stuff.

"What can I do to help?" he asked.

She stuck a giant box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch in the cupboard and turned to him. "You helped me all day. Go home. Take a break. Head on over to the Sea Breeze for a beer."

He didn't budge, just stood there frowning at the piles of stuff she'd yet to put away. "You eat something?"

"Yes, *Mother*, I did."

"You must be exhausted."

She wasn't, not really. She'd always had a lot of energy. And she was excited to have her own space at last. It was beautiful here. Maybe, before bed, she would take the trail down to the beach, enjoy a stroll along the shore. "I think I'm getting my second wind. And hey, the bed's made." It had stacks of towels and two suitcases on it, though. "When I get tired, I can just shove everything off it and climb in."

Now he was staring down at the rag rug, which they'd left rolled up near the sofa when they brought it in from his truck. "Let's roll the rug out, why don't we?"

She braced her hands on her hips. "You just can't stop helping, can you?"

He flashed her a mouthful of straight white teeth and she swooned a little inside. "Please. You know you need a hand moving the furniture out of the way."

She really could use some help with the rug. "Well, since you asked so nicely…"

They set to work, shoving the bed, the nightstand, the coffee table and all her stuff against the walls, rolling the rug out, positioning it just so, and then putting the furniture in place on top of it.

"It looks so good," she said, standing back by the window to admire the effect. "My great-great-grandmother Cora Valentine made this rug as part of her trousseau." The braided rug was a treasure, with a rainbow of colors woven into it. "So cozy and homey."

Dante had already moved on to the next job. The two suitcases were still on the bed. He grabbed one and pulled it to the edge of the mattress. "We should clear off the bed, figure out where you want all this stuff to go."

She knew what was in that suitcase and almost stopped him. But then she remembered the little promise she'd made to herself.

Really, she shouldn't.

He'd gone way above and beyond to help her out when she needed a hand, not only providing a place for her, but pitching right in to help her make it habitable. The guy was a true friend.

Even if he had given her a speeding ticket.

It wasn't right for her to hold a grudge just because he said he wouldn't have sex with her again.

But, well, some grudges were too much fun to give up.

And besides, Dante Santangelo was wound way too tight. He needed to loosen the heck up.

Grace was only too happy to help him with that. She crossed the space between them and stood at his side.

He unzipped the suitcase and tossed the lid back, revealing stacks of pretty bras, sexy panties and a froth of different nighties she hardly ever wore. For a moment, he stared down at all those goodies—not embarrassed, exactly.

More like not sure where to take it from there.

"I confess," she said wryly. "I've got this thing for lingerie. I've controlled my fancy-panty addiction the past year or so in my ongoing effort to get the budget under control, but I still have more undies than will fit in my drawers—if you know what I mean." She snatched up a fuchsia-pink satin thong and another pair of panties that was mostly lace. "What do you think—a thong?" She dangled the bit of satin by her index finger. "Or cheekies?" She waved the black lace.

He gave her a look of great patience, with just maybe a touch of sexy smolder there in his eyes. "All your drawers are full, you said?"

"Yup." She popped the *p* and pressed both pairs of panties to her breasts. "What shall I *do*?"

Dante was all business. "I say we bring back that bureau from the shed." He pointed to a bare corner next to the window on the other side of the bed. "It should fit there."

She gave him a blinding smile. "Brilliant."

And really now, exactly how far should she take this? He didn't seem to have noticed yet, but tucked in with all that lace and silk and satin was a personal pleasure toy—or five. Because a girl who's steering clear of romantic complications for a while definitely needs a little stimulation now and then.

She was just about to grab her favorite magic wand and wave it at him with gleeful enthusiasm when he said, "Let's go get it, then." And turned for the door.

They brought the bureau back.

Again, she tried to tell him he'd done enough.

But he refused to stop there. He helped her empty the big black plastic bags, the other suitcase and the boxes. Somehow, they found a place for everything. As for her lingerie and personal pleasure devices, he steered clear of them, so she put them away herself without brandishing a single one.

He didn't go back to the main house until after nine.

She stood at the door as he left. "I can't believe I'm pretty much moved in already. Thank you. Again."

"Anytime. Come on, Owen." His dog at his heels, Dante headed off through the trees.

She watched him stride along the footpath until he reached the cleared area that surrounded his house. No, she hadn't given up on her plan to drive him mad with unsatisfied lust.

But that was going to take time. He was a tough nut to crack. Luckily, she lived here now and would have all sorts of opportunities to work on bringing him to his knees, sexually speaking.

Operation Make Dante Beg for It was going to be a whole lot of fun.

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