

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

LINDA LAEL MILLER

"Miller tugs at
the heartstrings
as few
authors can."
—Publishers
Weekly

THE *Marriage* SEASON

THE BRIDES OF BLISS COUNTY

Linda Miller Lael
The Marriage Season

Серия «Brides of Bliss County», книга 3

Аннотация

Will the marriage pact be fulfilled? Return to Mustang Creek, Wyoming, with #1 New York Times bestselling author Linda Lael Miller for more Brides of Bliss County! Since Hadleigh, Melody and Bex—the best of best friends—entered into a marriage pact, two of them have found (and married) the men of their hearts. But Bex doesn't think she'll be as fortunate as the others. Her own first love died years ago in a faraway war, and Bex has lost hope for a happy marriage of her own. She concentrates on her business, a successful chain of fitness clubs, instead. Then, when single father Tate Calder comes to Mustang Creek with his two sons in tow, who befriend Bex's eight-year-old nephew, she and the handsome, aloof newcomer are constantly thrown together. But is the marriage season over? Or can a man with doubts about love be the right husband for a woman who wants it all?

Содержание

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[Praise for #1 New York Times bestselling author](#)

**LINDA LAEL
MILLER**

“Miller has found a perfect niche with charming western romances and cowboys who will set readers’ hearts aflutter. Funny and heartwarming, *The Marriage Pact* will intrigue readers by the first few pages. Unforgettable characters with endless spunk and desire make this a must-read.”

—RT Book Reviews

“Fans of Linda Lael Miller will fall in love with *The Marriage Pact* and without a doubt be waiting for the next installments... Her ranch-based westerns have always entertained and stayed with me long after reading them.”

—Idaho Statesman

“For readers who like their contemporary romances Western, slightly dangerous and graced with enlightened bad-boy heroes.”

—Library Journal on the Montana Creeds series

“An engrossing, contemporary western romance... Miller’s masterful ability to create living, breathing characters never flags; combined with a taut story line and vivid prose, Miller’s romance won’t disappoint.”

—Publishers Weekly on McKettrick’s *Pride*
(starred review)

“Miller’s name is synonymous with the finest in western romance. From the hard realities of life in an untamed land to the passionate people who bring the colorful history to life, she brings the best of the West to readers, never failing to deliver a

great read!”

—RT Book Reviews on McKettrick’s Choice
The Marriage Season
Linda Lael Miller



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[Dear Reader,](#)

Thank you for joining me in Bliss County once again! It's a great place to visit during the summer (well, at all times of year, but I think it's fair to say that Wyoming is uniquely beautiful right now). And of course June is the traditional wedding month, hence my title—The Marriage Season.

In this story Becca (Bex) Stuart, the third member of the girlfriend trio that also includes Melody Hogan and Hadleigh Galloway, gets her turn to find the man who's right for her—and that man is Tate Calder, widower and single dad. I love to write about kids—and animals—so this gives me a chance to do both!

You won't be surprised that the story focuses on some of my favorite themes: the importance of family, friends and community, as well as the possibility of second chances,

especially when it comes to love. And, as always, the setting is crucial to my storytelling, that setting being the American West. Places like this (Wyoming, with its stunning landscape, its mountains and rivers and ranches, its lovely small towns) really shape people and their lives. That's certainly true for Bex and her friends; in Tate's case, it reshapes his life, since he's a newcomer to Mustang Creek. And of course meeting Bex changes his life, too! And that of his sons...

I hope you enjoy *The Marriage Season* and that you'll visit Mustang Creek again this Christmas. Please visit my website, lindaelmiller.com, and share your thoughts about the story, the setting, my blogs or anything else you want to talk about. Check it out for news of my upcoming books and contests, too.

Wishing you, your family (and pets!) a lovely and restful summer—or an exciting one, if that's what you prefer...

With love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Linda El Miller". The signature is fluid and elegant, with long, sweeping loops for the first and last names.

For Kate, the lifesaver. Thank you!

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THE SEASON

Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

LEAVES FLOATED DOWN like rain and littered the path with bright color, red and aspen gold. The air had a crisp bite to it, clean and fresh, the scent of autumn. Above, the sky was cloudless, a pure Wyoming blue.

Perfect training weather.

Becca “Bex” Stuart flashed by another runner with a nod. The trail was busy on this Saturday morning. Mustang Creek had put in a series of municipal paths specifically for walking, biking and running, and the money had, in her opinion, been well spent. She sure took advantage of her tax dollars every chance she got.

Just a light run. That was her goal this fine morning. Luckily, Bex had access, thanks to her business, to the finest athletic equipment available, so she could get an accurate time. The upcoming marathon was the usual 26.2 miles, and her strategy was to gradually work up to that. And then she’d begin tapering down. By next Saturday she should be ready.

Her friends thought she was insane.

From experience, because this wasn’t her first endurance race, Bex knew they could be right. Mile nineteen was where you just

wanted to chuck it all and quit, but if you got past it...you were home free.

Her phone, clipped to her shorts, beeped.

A text.

She could read it as she ran; however, she couldn't answer, not without stopping, and she wasn't going to stop now.

It was from one of her best friends, Melody, recently married, so now Mrs. Spencer Hogan.

Meet us at the ranch for lunch? Hadleigh and I want to talk to you.

It was, according to her high-tech pedometer, a manageable time frame as long as they meant around noon. She was able to type K without breaking stride.

There was definitely a shower in her future before she sat down with other human beings to eat—as a favor to them. Despite the cool temperature, Bex was perspiring, as she should be, or she wasn't trying hard enough.

“Bex? Bex Stuart?”

Male voice. Familiar.

The sound jarred Bex out of her endorphin haze, brought the world around her back into focus.

She'd just reached the second loop around Pioneer Park, and the place was filled with small, noisy kids celebrating life in general. The male voice belonged to Tate Calder, she saw with dismay, his two young sons among the crowd of children crawling all over the playground equipment.

Tate looked, as usual, put together and handsome with his clean-cut features, wavy chestnut hair and dark eyes. He wore a leather jacket and nice jeans, while she was arrayed in the scruffiest outfit she owned—and, naturally, sweaty, as well.

Great.

“Hi,” she said. Not exactly brilliant, but polite at least. A little breathless, Bex ran in place, her body on autopilot. *Keep that heart rate up.*

Not that it was a problem. Just *looking* at this man seemed to have an aerobic effect on her.

She’d encountered Tate two or three times before, since he was a friend of Hadleigh’s husband, Tripp, both men having flown for the same company as charter pilots back in the day, before Tripp decided it was time to sell the firm and come home to Mustang Creek.

Tate’s dark eyes were amused, missing nothing. “How’ve you been?”

“Good.” Now *there* was a snappy answer. Yes, she was on a conversational roll, all right, a regular genius with words.

Tate grinned. “You seem to be in a hurry, so I won’t hold you up. Tripp tells me you’re training for a marathon.” A brief, measured pause. Meaning what? “Really?”

“Really,” Bex replied. She managed a small smile, friendly enough, but wobbly. “Nice to see you,” she said, trying to distance herself from him, still running. Still going nowhere fast. “What can I say? Guess I’m a glutton for punishment.” *Terrific.*

More snappy repartee. Annoyed with herself, she sprinted off, probably improving her time slightly, since she didn't particularly want him to remember her with a shiny face and a messy ponytail.

Of all the luck.

Make that *bad* luck.

Tate was tempting as hell, no denying that, but Bex got the nearly subliminal impression that he was as wary of involvement as she was. His wife had died, and she'd lost Will in Afghanistan—it wasn't hard to do the psychological math.

Thoughts in a muddle, Bex finished her run and headed for home. There, she took a hot shower, put on her favorite red sweater and black jeans and, perhaps as a nod to the cosmic forces that governed vanity, she spent a few extra minutes doing her hair and adding lip gloss.

Satisfied that she looked okay, Bex left the house, got into her sporty SUV and, after making a brief stop downtown, zipped off to meet Mel and Hadleigh.

Reaching the Galloway ranch minutes later, Bex felt a twinge, a bittersweet sensation somewhere in the back of her heart. Tucked among the looming mountains, crystalline streams and venerable trees, the house and barn and other outbuildings—even the fences and corrals—seemed to *belong* there, organic to the landscape itself.

Tripp had taken over the place after his stepfather, Jim, long a widower, had finally remarried and moved into town. The house itself wasn't fancy, but it was spacious and solid and homey, with

a welcoming air.

Secretly, Bex had always wanted to live in the country. She loved her work, felt she was making a genuine contribution to people's health and all-around well-being by furthering the cause of fitness through her ever-expanding business. And, if not actually country, Mustang Creek was certainly no clamoring metropolis. There was something...*nurturing* about being out here, with all this unspoiled nature.

Before she could even get out of the car, Mel and Hadleigh stepped onto the side porch, smiling and waving.

Both her friends were pregnant, and both of them were more beautiful than ever.

Bex felt a pang of affection, tinged, alas, with mild envy.

Hadleigh was farther along than Melody, her baby bump more pronounced. She'd married first, and she and Tripp had been eager to start their family.

All systems go.

Melody, running a close second, was just starting to show, a bit rounder than usual, her loose shirt disguising her pregnancy. If you didn't know her, you'd never guess, but they'd all been friends since they were six years old, so Bex was attuned to every change. She was living this with them, sharing the experience in a way, and she couldn't have been more pleased by their obvious happiness.

They really did glow.

They knew Bex felt slightly left out—there wasn't much

Melody and Hadleigh *didn't* know about her—and they not only understood, they were also convinced her turn at marital bliss and motherhood would come. Soon.

When Bex's own hopes flagged, these two never failed to notice and offer encouragement. She was so lucky to have them in her life.

That choked her up for a moment, brought the sting of tears to her eyes. Romantic flings, career highs, fun times—all those things came and went, but friendships like theirs were as permanent as bedrock.

She paused, took a breath and squared her shoulders.

"I brought dessert," she announced cheerfully. "Don't kill me, but it's those puff pastries from Madeline's. You guys can't drink wine or coffee, so you need *some* sort of vice." She paused, chuckling. Some fitness guru *she* was, she thought wryly. "One pastry won't hurt." This was true enough, in her opinion. One pastry *wouldn't* do any harm. The problem arose when the rate of consumption ratcheted up to three or four tasty treats—or ten. Feeling cocky, she added, "Considering that I just ran eighteen miles, I can afford a reasonable level of indulgence."

Motormouth, her inner moderator gibed.

"Give me that bag." Hadleigh grabbed for it as Bex came up the steps. "I'm having mine *before* lunch, so no lectures on nutrition, please. And if Tripp has the gall to say a word—he has the metabolism of a shark, the rat fink—I consider it your solemn duty as my friends to drop him in his tracks." Paper rustled as she

peered inside the bag. Sniffed appreciatively. “Oh, dear heaven,” she lamented happily, in a near moan, nudging Melody lightly with one elbow as she spoke, “it’s the ones with lemon whipped cream.”

“Yep,” Bex confirmed with a twinkle. Judging by the current reactions, if she hadn’t surrendered the bag willingly, one or both of these watermelon smugglers would have tackled her for it.

Melody, feigning greed, made a comical effort to snatch the fragrant sack from Hadleigh’s hands, and Hadleigh, in turn, pretended to dodge the move.

“Hey, share and share alike,” Melody said with a grin. “If you think you’re going to snarf up my share right along with your own, sister, think again.”

Hadleigh laughed, still employing diversion tactics, an awkward endeavor under the circumstances, and Bex wondered if the third pastry, intended to be hers, would survive this good-natured tussle.

Hadleigh correctly read Bex’s expression. Yes, she was fit and yes, she ran a fitness empire, but she loved Madeline’s lemon-cream dreams as much as anybody did. “*You* can drink wine,” Hadleigh continued, cheerfully accusatory. “*We* can’t. Coffee?” She waved one hand in a dismissive gesture while holding the pastry bag just out of Melody’s reach with the other. “Gone. A distant memory.”

Bex had to giggle at her friend’s histrionics.

Hadleigh took in her friend’s trim figure with a mock glower.

“Laugh if you want, Becca Jean Stuart, but one of these days, you’ll be pregnant and craving all kinds of things you can’t have, and we’ll be the ones rubbing it in.”

“Yeah,” Melody agreed staunchly, making another grab for the bag.

For all the joking around, a whisper of sadness brushed Bex’s soul.

If Will, Hadleigh’s older brother and the love of Bex’s life, had made it home from Afghanistan, everything would be so different.

She’d loved Will Stevens so much.

Maybe the phrase, “better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all,” was poignant, but it really didn’t offer much comfort in reflective moments like this one.

Tough up, woman, Bex told herself. Then, after a beat or two, when she could trust her voice again, she went on. “Once you two get a handle on dessert, what’s on the menu for lunch?” she teased. “I heard a rumor that we were going to eat an actual meal, and I could use some sustenance here.”

Hadleigh closed the bakery bag and rolled it shut with a little sigh of resignation. “I made spinach lasagna,” she answered. “Garlic bread, too. The guys will be here soon, so maybe we ought to fill our plates before they get back with the boys.”

“Boys?” Bex asked cautiously. *Guys* usually meant Tripp and Spence. *Boys* implied someone else.

“Tate and his sons,” Hadleigh explained airily.

It figured, Bex thought, unsurprised. She was going to have to deal with Tate Calder *twice* in one day? Just one more indication that God had a sense of humor.

*Cosmic complaints department? This is Bex Stuart and I—
Please hold for the next available operator. Your call is very
important to us...*

* * *

THERE SHE WAS.

Again.

Tate had spotted Becca right away, back at the park. With looks like hers, she would've been hard to miss. She was trim, compact, with the kind of curves that drew a man's eye, even beneath baggy sweatpants and a faded T-shirt. And then there was all that silky hair, trying to fight its way out of a crooked ponytail.

At the time, he'd hesitated to say anything because he was rusty, to say the least, when it came to the whole man-woman interaction thing. Out of practice.

This *particular* woman stirred him, deep down, in ways he couldn't quite explain, rational thinker that he was. She made him want to take chances again, live for himself as well as his children.

But what if he fell for Becca—Bex, as the others called her—and his young sons got their hopes up, let down their guard, started to believe they might have a mother again, only to see the whole thing crash and burn? Would there be survivors?

He had no choice but to be philosophical.

Like it or not—Tate both did and *didn't* like it—he and Bex were face-to-face again.

The boys had both scrambled out of the truck the minute he pulled to a stop. He was grateful that they enjoyed visiting the ranch so much, and were distracted, as always, by the dogs and horses and all that space to run wild in. It meant the kids probably hadn't noticed that their dad had been flash frozen before their very eyes.

Tate worked up a smile, acknowledging Tripp and Hadleigh and Melody and Spence's existence with a slight wave of one hand as he approached them. Odd, how, just a moment before, he'd been so focused on Bex that she might've been standing all alone on the ranch house porch.

In fact, she might have been the only other human being on the planet.

Still, he was nothing if not a left-brained realist, and his attention had slowly widened, after that first weird instant, to include the others.

The cognitive dials in his head began to click, registering further details. Construction had started on the new house, for one thing.

Tripp and Spence looked like what they were—happily married men. *Satisfied* men, maybe even a little smug.

Their wives, he noted, were downright radiant, the way women tended to be when they were not only cherished by their

husbands, but gloriously pregnant, too.

And all the time he was formulating these observations, his sons were tearing around the yard with the dogs, overjoyed, high on blue skies and green grass and every blessing in between.

Of course, part of this boyish exuberance was for his benefit, Ben and Adam had been actively engaged in a campaign for a furry friend of their own for quite a while now. Although Tate wasn't averse to the idea—he'd always loved animals himself—they lived in a rented house, and the landlord didn't allow pets. So for the time being, anyway, adopting a critter was out of the question.

In the meanwhile, Muggles and Ridley filled the canine-companion bill.

Tate shifted mental gears, centering himself in the now. It was a beautiful afternoon, Ben and Adam were healthy, balanced kids and they were having fun.

Plus, they had a decent meal to look forward to. Tate's version of Saturday lunch was usually something along the lines of canned tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. He had the feeling that they'd get something a little more appealing from Hadleigh Galloway.

Inevitably, since Tate was flesh and blood, reasonably young and completely normal, his gaze strayed back to Bex. Ms. Stuart had looked two notches above terrific in her jogging clothes. Now, in a pair of well-cut jeans and a red sweater that showed off her feminine figure, she was downright distracting.

Just a few yards from the casual gathering on the porch, Tate almost froze again—so much for getting centered—but an amused, all-too-knowing glance from Tripp kept him moving forward.

“Hello again,” he heard himself say, his voice suddenly husky.

Damned if the Galloways and Hogans hadn’t evaporated once more, leaving him and Bex alone on the planet. He gravitated toward her, like a passing asteroid yanked into the orbit of some strange new sun, and then—*then* he literally collided with the woman, for God’s sake, right there at the top of the porch steps.

What the hell? he thought, but what he *said* was, “Sorry. I was thinking about the boys.”

Fool.

Flustered, Tate looked back over one shoulder, trying to lend some credence to his fib, and saw no sign of the kids *or* the dogs.

Bex pointed in the direction of the barn and said, “They went thataway.”

He gave a muffled laugh, realized he’d gripped Bex’s shoulders at some point, and that he was still holding her, as though he’d expected her to fall. He let go. “Thanks.”

After that brief expansion, the universe zoomed in again, with a swiftness that left Tate’s head spinning.

She smiled, which only increased the sensation, and her voice seemed far away. “Good luck catching up with them, though. All parties were moving fast. They could be in Canada by now.”

Tate struggled to regain his equilibrium. “That’s a definite

possibility,” he agreed. “They’re both a little hyper.”

This was a routine, even mundane, conversation. So why did everything seem so awkward?

Bex appeared to be at ease, but that could’ve been an act, he supposed. The air around them practically pulsed with electricity, and if Tate knew one thing, it was that the invisible charge was flowing both ways. “Don’t worry about the kids,” she said lightly. “Mel and Hadleigh are both in mama-tiger mode, which means nothing bad would *dare* happen—not on their watch.”

Mel and Hadleigh? Oh. Yeah. He remembered who they were now. Two of the other people populating the earth, in addition to him and Bex and, somewhere in the immediate vicinity, his children.

Get a grip, Calder.

But a light breeze lifted Bex’s hair just then, and she had beautiful hair. It seemed to curl naturally as it fell past her shoulders, emphasizing her graceful neck.

She was right, of course. The boys were okay. The ranch was as safe as anyplace else, safer than many, and besides, the dogs would raise hell if they sensed danger.

“So, how was the run?” he asked.

He’d meant to sound simply polite, asking a casual question that didn’t reveal *too* much interest. The truth was, he wanted to know everything there was to know about Bex Stuart—which movies she liked, what kinds of books she read, the shape of her dreams, both waking and sleeping.

As she answered, something along the lines of, “Oh, it was fine,” he found himself wondering about her favorite colors, songs, scents, memories.

Was she a morning person or a night owl?

Did she talk in her sleep?

Despite all that, another part of Tate warned him to keep his distance, circumvent whatever emotional minefield might be lying in wait.

He was not, never had been, the impulsive type.

And yet...

And yet.

He sighed. Shook his head, hoping to break whatever spell he was under.

Trying to act like a grown man instead of a teenager on hormone overload.

How's that workin' for ya? he chided himself.

Not worth a damn, that was how.

Okay, yes, he reasoned doggedly, Bex was beyond hot, and it had been a while since—well, it had been a while. Still, the world was full of attractive, available females, and Mustang Creek, small as it was, had more than its share of them. He got lonely sometimes, and he'd planned on remarrying at some point, but he'd been in no particular rush.

After all, he was busy, raising two kids on his own, starting a business, not to mention building a house. In other words, life was already complicated enough without throwing a relationship into

the mix. And he knew instinctively that, with Bex, there would be no half measures, no holding back, no taking things slowly.

And then there was the color of her eyes. Hard to describe, even if he'd had his wits about him, which he clearly didn't.

Before now he would've said they were green, but in the slanting sunlight of early afternoon, they looked more gold. He noticed threads of gold in her hair, too, maybe artificial highlights, although he didn't think so. There was a natural quality about her, a lack of artifice in both her manner and her appearance.

She was one of the only women he'd ever met that he would describe as *striking*. Hadleigh was very pretty, it went without saying, and Melody Hogan was truly beautiful. But Becca Stuart was *more* than pretty, more than beautiful.

He'd heard her story, or some of it, anyway. Tripp had told him about his best friend, Hadleigh's older brother, Will. Bex had loved Will from the time she was young, and when he was killed in Afghanistan, she'd been understandably devastated. As far as Tripp knew, she'd been guarding her heart ever since.

Tate knew the feeling.

The best thing he could do now, he figured, was keep his mouth shut. Trouble was, he couldn't seem to do that. "Rumor has it we're going to have real food today," he said, just to end the silence. "The boys won't know how to act."

"Yep. Hadleigh makes the world's best spinach lasagna." Bex's lips turned up at the corners, as if she'd seen through his effort to

lighten things up. He resisted the urge to kiss those lips—but just barely. She drew in a breath, blew it out audibly. “*However*,” she added, “you might be better off if you don’t mention the word *spinach*. I’m no parent, but kids are kids. If I were in your place, I’d just hand them a plate and stand back. Once they taste the stuff, they’ll dive in.”

Tate relaxed a little. “Good advice.”

His head was beginning to clear, but it wasn’t happening fast enough to suit him.

He was still bewitched, still awkward. If the two of them had been in kindergarten, he’d probably be shoving her off the playground swing or pulling her ponytail.

Moreover, he could see that she hadn’t been fooled by his effort at casual conversation; she knew he was off his game. But maybe she was off her own, just a little. Faint color had come into her face, and it wasn’t just because of the cool fall breeze.

Finally, Tate stepped aside. “I’d better round up the kids,” he said.

“I’m going back to town for more pastries,” she told him, dangling her keys.

That announcement startled him for some reason, and it must have shown in his face.

Bex laughed again, but at least the awkward moment dissolved as she explained. “I brought pastry and I’m sure the pregnant ladies are going to need more. Plus, your boys probably wouldn’t mind a few chocolate chip cookies for dessert.”

The decision seemed sudden. Was she trying to escape?

He couldn't bring himself to ask. "You'll be idolized. Elevated to instant goddess status."

"I've always wanted to be a goddess." She breezed past him.

He shouldn't have looked back but he couldn't resist watching Bex as she headed for her car. She had a very nice posterior and a graceful way of moving...

"Tate." The use of his name was like a verbal poke in the ribs.

"Huh?" He turned to face Tripp, who descended the porch steps and slapped him on the shoulder. Hadleigh looked on, smiling, from the kitchen doorway.

"How about pulling your eyeballs back into their sockets and rolling up your tongue?" Tripp joked. "If you don't, some of us might get the impression that you're finally ready to stop acting like a monk and get on with your life."

"About time," Spence put in gruffly. Tate hadn't noticed him, or Melody, who stood beside her husband, one arm around his waist.

"Leave the man alone," she said. "It isn't as if *you* were in any big hurry to get with the program."

Spence's mouth opened, closed again.

Both Tate and Tripp laughed at his bewilderment.

Then, as if by tacit agreement, Hadleigh and Melody disappeared into the house.

"Hey, Tripp, let's have a look at that stallion you just bought," Tate suggested, anxious to shift his attention to something—

anything—other than the mysteries of women.

Half an hour later, when Bex had returned with a stack of bakery boxes in her arms, and the men and boys had washed up, lunch was served.

Bex's earlier advice concerning any mention of spinach was proven right. Although his youngest, Adam, was infamous for his disdain of vegetables in general and eyed the green in the tomato sauce with suspicion, with a glance from Tate he took a bite—and quickly became enthusiastic about the lasagna, even taking seconds. Tate had to agree that the food was delicious, never mind that it was vegetarian and he was more of a meat-and-potatoes man.

After the meal, Bex got up from her chair, crossed to the counter and returned with the boxes from Madeline's.

The boys, both of whom had hollow legs, cheered.

"It's nice to be loved for something," Bex said, opening the boxes with a flourish. "Peanut-butter cookies and other variations with chocolate thrown in have arrived, plus more puff pastries. Those of you not running a marathon next Saturday may help yourselves."

Tate, who'd been trying to ground himself again ever since Bex had left for town, drew a breath, sat back in his chair and looked around at the spacious kitchen.

It was a well-appointed room, designed to be both functional and welcoming. The space was rustic, and he appreciated the simplicity of it. An island with a flat stove and a ceramic top

had been added, an ideal fit with the hand-hewn cabinets Jim had built himself, years before. Even when Tripp had remodeled the place after he'd sold the charter jet service and moved back to Mustang Creek, he'd left the best parts unchanged, so the other appliances, however sleek and modern, actually enhanced the relax-and-stay-awhile effect. A natural rock fireplace filled one wall, and a quilted runner—Hadleigh's own handiwork—brightened the long plank table, with its sturdy pine chairs. The overall effect was warm and inviting.

Tate wanted that sense of hominess for his own place, for his boys. Tricky, in an all-male household.

Just the same, he maintained certain standards. Although he let a lot of house rules slide, one thing he insisted on was the supper ritual. Both Ben and Adam would happily eat in front of a TV or a laptop, but he insisted they all sit down together—every single night.

That particular dictate meant he wasn't always popular.

Just then, someone's phone rang, interrupting Tate's thoughts. Bex was the lucky winner.

Or maybe not so lucky, judging by the worried frown that appeared on her face.

She answered her cell with a murmured, "Tara?" and got up, moving away from the table, phone pressed to her ear. Hadleigh and Melody, meanwhile, exchanged glances, looking concerned.

"This isn't good," Hadleigh said in an undertone.

Melody nodded in irritated agreement.

CHAPTER TWO

“SLOW DOWN. I can’t understand you.” Bex was several years younger, but decades calmer, than her volatile sibling, Tara. “What’s going on?”

“I left him.”

“Greg?”

“Who else would I leave?”

Bex could have done without the petulance in her tone.

Her sister had a point—it was a dumb question—but Bex was trying to process the situation, and the hysteria on the other end wasn’t exactly conducive to rational thought. “Okay, where are you?”

“Your house.”

Good choice. So much for an enjoyable, relaxing lunch. She wasn’t going to rush home, because Tara and Greg had split before, but it sure ruined her day to have to worry about it. There was the usual blowup, and then they both changed their minds...

“I’ll be home soon so we can talk,” Bex told her after a few minutes.

There was an empty chair at the kitchen table and she took it. Melody looked at her inquiringly and Bex said, “The usual nothing.”

Hadleigh rolled her eyes. “Let me guess, she left Greg again.”

It was more than a little embarrassing to admit it in front of Tate. “They had a dustup, it seems. I got no details. So I have no idea what’s really going on. She and Joshua are at my house.” Bex

sighed; she couldn't help it. "I'll deal with this later. Every single time I rush to the rescue, Tara and Greg immediately make up. What I want to do now is eat something decadent."

Hadleigh pushed the box toward her. "The carbs will help."

It wasn't until the men took the boys back outside that Bex revealed the latest. "He's been cheating on her."

No one said anything.

She reiterated. "Greg's been *cheating* on Tara."

Still no comment.

She glanced from one expression to the other. "You both *knew*?"

Melody took another cookie and nodded. "Bex, here's a heads-up. This is Mustang Creek, remember? Where you live? Come on. Besides, he's cheated on her before and she always goes back. Like you said, you rush to the rescue, and it does no good. I'd love to help but Tara constantly makes bad choices."

It was so true.

If she could step up and defend her sister she would. Greg was bad choice number...what? She wasn't sure where he fell in the lineup. Tara's friends in high school hadn't exactly been on the high-achieving end; she'd dated some real losers before she'd settled on Greg, who definitely was not a prince. She'd also eschewed college in favor of the basic secretarial job she was offered at the local hardware store, keeping their books and answering the phone. But she'd done one thing very, very right, and Bex pointed it out. "Josh is great."

“Josh,” Hadleigh said stoutly, “is adorable.”

No question there. Despite his parents’ acrimony, Josh was such a nice kid. Bex folded her hands on the table, her attitude one of surrender. “I am uninterested in this mess. I didn’t want my sister to marry Greg, but she did it, anyway. I didn’t want her to have a baby with him because they had problems before they ever walked into that church, but she did *that*, too. I’d love to know what I’m supposed to do now.”

“It isn’t your rodeo.” Melody said it with quiet resolve, and Hadleigh nodded. “I wish this was your choice, but it’s not. Tara needs to figure it out on her own.”

“Josh has to be so afraid and freaked out.”

“Well, let’s go get him.” Both Hadleigh and Melody were on their feet. “We have dogs, horses, food, acres of land and other boys his age. You brought these fabulous cookies. If that doesn’t make him feel better, I’m not sure what would.”

“My sister—”

“Tara isn’t six years old, Bex. Josh is. He’s six. We’ll rescue him, not her.” Hadleigh said it pleasantly enough, but her tone was unrelenting. “Let’s go. Tara can do what she wants—stay at your place or come with us. Up to her. The important thing is Josh. We need to bring him here, give him a chance to relax, play with Tate’s boys, hang out with the dogs. You’re just going to sit and worry about him, anyway.”

They had a point, and it was true. Her house didn’t offer much entertainment for a young boy, while the ranch was a virtual

playground of endless child fun. As they walked to the car, both of Tate's sons ran past, the dogs in hot pursuit, and there was definitely a cowboy theme going on with whatever game they were playing. Tripp and Tate followed at a more sedate pace, talking companionably, and when Tripp saw them getting in the car, he said, "I can guess where you're headed."

"I don't think Josh's shoulder should be the one Tara cries on," Bex said, remembering her sister's hysteria. "It can't be good for him to see her so upset. We're taking two cars. She can do her ranting and raving to me, while Mel and Hadleigh bring him back here."

And there went a lovely afternoon. Greg was a piece of dirt, but Tara was a bona fide drama queen with a capital *D*. Her sister wasn't blameless in all this.

She added quietly, because she was unaccountably embarrassed over something that wasn't her fault, "I especially don't want him there if Greg shows up with his usual apologies, which always involve a great deal of arguing. Besides, I can't prove he's ever gotten physical with Tara, but I've wondered. This time she seems serious about divorcing him. He might not take it well."

Tripp took out his phone. "I'll see if Spence can meet you at the house or at least send a deputy. That'll keep things calm. Otherwise, the three of you aren't going anywhere without me." Spencer Hogan, Melody's husband, happened to be the chief of police...

"I agree with that," Tate said, his chestnut hair ruffled by the breeze, his expression serious. "I haven't met the guy, but from what I've heard he's not exactly sainthood material. You shouldn't be there alone with your sister. Bring her back and then if he wants to talk to her, he'll have to go through Tripp and me."

If nothing else, she certainly had a wonderful support group.

If Tara stuck with her divorce plans, and Bex had her doubts, it was going to get interesting. For one thing, her sister didn't have a job any longer—when she got pregnant she'd quit the hardware store—or the skills to obtain a new one. Greg worked as a mechanic, but they constantly borrowed money from her parents as it was. Lawyers would have to be paid, there'd be child support and Bex was pretty sure their finances were already in bad shape.

With an inner sigh, she knew she could give Tara a job at the fitness center she owned in town, but she didn't trust her to make an effort if she did. The story of their lives. Tara was stunning, and Bex had always thought she was smart, until the day she married Greg. *Well, let's not forget those high school loser boyfriends...*

Downhill slide. A mess. A low-down, convoluted mess.

Spence said he could take care of it, no problem, and their little caravan took off. Mustang Creek was hardly a rockin' and rollin' kind of place, but on a bright fall Saturday it was busy, and Bad Billie's, a favorite local hangout, was packed. To her dismay, she recognized Greg's restored orange Corvette in the lot.

So he was drinking. Not surprising, considering his rift with his wife, but not good, either.

When they pulled into her driveway, she got out and went over to Melody's car to say, "Hey, can you ask Spence to call Junie? Have her get Billie to water down my soon-to-be-ex-brother-in-law's drinks?"

Junie McFarlane was a dispatcher for the police department, and Spence had been as good as his word; there was a deputy's SUV parked across the street.

Mel was right on it. "Junie and I are tight. I'll call her myself. Good idea. I know Billie would do it for me, but for Junie, Billie would flap his arms and fly to the moon."

Billie was a little older than Junie, who was in her late thirties, but everyone knew he had a serious crush on her. It was cute, coming from a rough-and-tumble guy like him, but she didn't seem to mind. Junie was a regular at Bad Billie's, and she flirted with him shamelessly.

So that was taken care of, anyway. Greg would soon be drinking a lot of water. Yep. It was healthy to be well hydrated. Bex had just done him an enormous favor, not that he deserved it.

Tara was sitting in the living room on the couch, her face splotchy, tissue in hand, and Joshua was intently watching a cartoon until he saw Bex walk in. His face lit up, and he scrambled to his feet.

"Hiya, cowboy." Bex went over and bent to kiss his cheek. "Isn't it a beautiful day outside? Muggles, Ridley and Harley told

me to point that out. Is there any chance you want to go to the ranch for a while and see them? They sure are missing you. Tripp has some new horses, and Ben and Adam are there. Interested?"

"Yeah!"

The child was always too solemn in her opinion, so the enthusiasm was welcome.

"Ask your mom if it's okay for you to go with Aunt Mel and Aunt Hadleigh."

Tara waved an apathetic hand.

Bex walked him out to the car, saw him settled and buckled in, then mouthed to her two best friends, *Thank you*.

He was in good hands.

When they pulled away, she braced herself and went back inside. Her sister had definitely looked better. Runny mascara, foundation just a memory, and her entire face was puffy. Never mind her hair, which was a tangled mess. Bex said, "I'll go make us some tea. Then you can tell me exactly what's going on."

"That double-crossing son of a bitch is on his own now," Tara said a few minutes later, holding her steaming cup in shaky hands. "I've put up with him for ten years and he can't seem to get the concept that marriage includes fidelity. I'm done."

Bex had chosen an antique rocking chair that was her favorite whenever she wanted to reflect. "Do you mean it?"

Tara gave a jerky nod in response. "I know he's sweet-talked me back before, but it isn't going to happen again. I know you've heard this a dozen times, but I mean it. I really mean it."

At least Bex could say that, as of this moment, she was officially *not* an I-told-you-so kind of person. “You and Josh are welcome to stay here as long as you need.”

“I already knew that.” Tara sniffled and attempted a wan smile. “It’s the first place I came. Thanks.”

“The only trouble is that this is also the first place Greg will look if he wants to *sweet-talk* you, as you put it.” Bex pointed at the front window. “See that deputy sitting out in his car? He’s there courtesy of Spence Hogan and the Mustang Creek Police Department. Let’s go out to Tripp and Hadleigh’s ranch now, and you can take a nap. You look worn out. Then if Josh needs you, you’ll be right there.”

“That sounds good.”

* * *

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE not to recognize—and understand—the shell-shocked look on the face of Bex’s nephew. Tate had seen it with his own sons the day he’d explained that their mother wasn’t coming back. That she’d gone someplace peaceful and that from then on, she’d live in their hearts forever—as she would in his... Luckily, three dogs, acres and acres to run and two enthusiastic playmates made up for a lot.

Little Joshua was fortunate enough to have his aunt, who seemed to be handling the situation in a very efficient manner.

He was impressed, but the last thing he needed was another reason to like Becca Stuart.

The boys were whooping it up. They knew each other from

school, Adam and Josh being in the same class, and he was glad to see them running around like a pack of small wild animals. The dogs loved it. Tripp said, "There's something about hearing kids laugh... I can't wait."

"Let's talk diapers." Tate said it drily.

Tripp burst out laughing. "Okay, got me there. I can wait for that part, but I'll man up."

"What if you have a girl?"

"Could happen." Tripp pointed at the boys running around. "But I understand those guys. I *was* one of those guys. Girls are a different story."

It might be irrational on Tate's part, but he'd always wanted a daughter. He leaned on the railing of the corral. "I'd like a girl. Someday. A different experience, I'm sure. Walking her down that aisle and giving her away, as they call it, to some other guy would sure be a leap of faith. Even the idea of that first date is daunting. So, if you don't mind, what's up with Bex's sister?"

"My personal opinion is that her husband isn't a bad guy—or a good guy. He's not perfect, but I know him. We went to school together. Greg was the direction Tara chose, for whatever reason. Bex is just too good at picking up the pieces, so this isn't the first time she's been stuck with the Tara-and-Greg mess, not to mention poor little Josh. Like I said, you're getting my personal opinion here. Without Bex to turn to, Tara would simply put up with Greg. But Bex has loyalty nailed down and Tara knows it. He fools around, Tara leaves him, he apologizes and she goes back,

and Bex is the only one, as far as I can tell, who even worries about what it's doing to their kid."

There was a plume of dust in the driveway. Tate asked, "You expecting company or could that be him now?"

Tripp exhaled loudly. "Orange Corvette... That's him. Might be best if the kids aren't around for a bit. I know he has rights as a dad, but if they've really split, I'm going to let Josh stay here until I see a court order—unless his mother decides differently." As he moved off, he added, "You might have to lasso Bex if her sister changes her mind. At any rate, the kids don't have to hear this conversation."

Tate had taken his wedding vows seriously, so he was hardly going to balk at stepping in, either, and he could easily see Bex getting in her brother-in-law's face. He said laconically, "I'll bring the kids inside and be right back in case there's trouble."

He whistled for the dogs and called out to his sons and Josh. "Time out. Come on in the house. Everybody."

Ben looked really put out. "Dad!"

"For a few minutes."

"But Dad, I—"

"Now. Don't argue."

At least his son understood when an order was an order. Nothing ambiguous about it. Ben sighed as he motioned to the dogs. "Come on, boys."

They followed, lumbering along at his heels, with the two younger boys close behind. It was telling that even when Josh

glanced over his shoulder and saw his dad's car, he still went in.

To Tate, that said a lot. It touched his heart, but not in a good way. Once the kids and dogs had filed inside, he hurried over to Hadleigh. "Greg is here, so keep them inside, okay?"

She nodded. "No problem."

He went back out, joining Tripp in the drive. "Just how 'not bad' is this guy?"

They'd both dealt with difficult situations, back when they were pilots. As the authority figure on the plane, they usually had to deal with passengers who got out of hand. "On a scale of one to ten?" Tate added. He wasn't worried, just curious.

"He's maybe a six," Tripp informed him, hands in pockets as they walked up to the car. "Plenty of bluster, but there's no real juice behind it. We know each other—so that should help."

"Galloway." The man in question slammed his door and walked toward them. A big guy, Tate noted, but soft, with a shock of dark hair and a five o'clock shadow. He must've been at work because he still wore his shirt with his name embroidered on the pocket. "My wife here?"

"Yep."

"I figured my sister-in-law would drag her out here or to Hogan's place. Can I talk to her?"

"Nope."

Anger flared on his face. "You heard the *wife* part, right?"

"Doesn't matter. This is my land. So these are my rules." Tripp didn't budge. "Tara's not receiving company at the moment."

Seems to me she needs a little peace and quiet.”

“Then I want my son.”

Tate was truly not one to butt into anyone’s business, but he’d seen the look on the poor kid’s face. “He’s inside playing with two other children. Why would you make this harder on him? Get in your car and go, and when you and your wife choose to have a sensible conversation—with lawyers involved or not—he doesn’t need to be part of that, either. Like I say, it’s time for you to leave. That isn’t negotiable.”

“Who the hell are *you*?”

“A father. The boy’s not a pawn, so don’t even try getting to him. ’Cause that’s not going to happen.”

At least Greg had enough sense to realize that neither he nor Tripp was planning to back down, so, muttering under his breath, he stomped to his car and drove off in a sputter of gravel.

When Tate turned around, he saw Bex standing there.

She gave Tripp a quick hug. “Thanks. Both of you were great.”

When she came over to him, the kiss was more on the corner of his mouth than his cheek, Tate noticed—and appreciated. Not quite the real deal but...

A very nice start.

CHAPTER THREE

BEX TOOK THE CALL absently, at the desk in her office, assuming it was her accountant calling to schedule their monthly meeting. “This is Bex Stuart.”

“Bex, this is Alma. Joshua gave me your cell number. I don’t

like to bother you, but I don't know what else to do."

Alma was the school secretary. A shudder of dismay went through her. "Is he sick? I'll be right there."

"No, he isn't. Don't worry about that. But I would appreciate it if you'd come in. We have a problem. Tara's not answering my calls—they're going directly to voice mail—and Josh's father, quite frankly, told me in no uncertain language that he wants nothing to do with it. He was downright rude."

Why did *that* not surprise her? After nearly a week of constant harassment in his quest to talk to Tara, who was still at Bex's place, Greg had finally barged in to the club. He'd brushed past the receptionist and marched into Bex's office, where he'd planted both hands on her desk, looking her in the eye. "If this is how you want it, they're your problem now."

She wasn't about to yield to his bullying. "Considering the way you've treated my sister, that's *exactly* how I want it." Tara wasn't without some responsibility in this whole mess, but Bex had no intention of discussing that with Greg.

"You got it, Bex." He'd swung around and left, leaving a hint of motor-oil aroma in the air.

She grabbed her purse and told Alma, "I'm on my way."

"I'll tell Josh and send him back to class. He's very anxious over this matter. That's my main concern." She paused. "I'll explain later, when you get here."

What matter? she wondered as she unlocked her car and slid in. There was no disputing Tara was a wreck, watching television

half the night and sleeping most of the day. She really needed to get herself sorted out, but Bex didn't know how to advise her. She'd never been married, much less through a divorce, so how could she relate?

The school was a low-slung, modern brick building, only a few years old. Their beloved former school had finally reached the stage that the town had determined that a new building would make more sense than doing endless repairs, and while she'd mourned the loss, there was no doubt this facility was to-heck-and-gone better. The playground equipment alone made her inner child envious.

She parked the SUV in the parent lot and walked through the double glass doors. The office was right inside, and every visitor had to check in and sign a log, so she dutifully did that, and was directed to Alma's desk right down the hall.

Alma Wainwright was an institution in Mustang Creek. She'd been there when Bex was in elementary school, and she didn't look a whole lot different now. She still wore her hair in exactly the same bob, with a pair of spectacles constantly perched on the end of her nose. She glanced up and pointed to a chair. Bex sat. Old habits were hard to forget.

Alma picked up a piece of paper and handed it to her, across the desk. "Here's the problem. No one's paid for Josh's school lunches this year. With the new program it can be done online. Or his parents could apply for the free lunch program sponsored by Bliss County and the state of Wyoming if they qualify, but

they won't respond. He's very self-conscious about not having a lunch card, and even though he's only six, he understands that no arrangements have been made. We would never allow a child to go hungry, so of course he gets a tray like everyone else, but we do have to account for every meal, so could you *please* ask your sister to address this?"

Bex couldn't restrain a deep inner sigh. Poor Josh. Such a simple thing. Why would Tara let this slide? "I'll pay it right now. I'd appreciate if you'd give Josh a lunch card immediately. He's not having an easy time at the moment, and I don't want this to be harder on him than it already is. Why didn't he just tell me?"

"He's a child. He's embarrassed." Alma adjusted her glasses and peered closely at her. "That, my dear, is why I called *you*. This is Mustang Creek. I know his parents have separated—again. Joshua's a very nice little boy and frankly, deserves better. The school system can take the loss on his meals, but I'm afraid he can't take the blow to his self-esteem."

Maybe Alma should've been a child psychologist instead of a school secretary; maybe in some ways it was the same job. Bex wrote the check on the spot, making it for the entire semester. After that she decided that with the marathon tomorrow, she could use a run. A light one, because it wasn't a good idea to push herself too hard the day before a race. The other benefit was that when she ran, there was nothing to do but think, and she needed to get a grip on the current situation.

Of course, as she exited the building, she bumped into Tate.

Or rather *slammed* into him, her head down since she was searching for her keys and not paying attention. He caught her by the arms. "In a hurry?" he asked with a low laugh.

"Kind of." She flushed. "This is getting to be a habit."

"Seems to be." He let her go. "Ben forgot his math homework. I thought I'd do him a favor and drop it off, although he'd better remember the next time or take a zero. I'm trying to teach him about responsibility but he *is* only eight, and he did do the assignment without having to be reminded. So he gets one free pass. What are you doing here?"

Bex steadied herself and fabricated a smile, which she usually never did. However, Tate Calder shook her normal composure. "Josh forgot his lunch card."

He frowned. "They keep it here at the school."

She gave it up. "Fine. That's true. His parents *forgot* to pay for his lunch card. I ran over to take care of it, but I'm new to this experience. I'm going to go home, ask my sister why *she* isn't on top of it and then go for a run. I have a marathon tomorrow morning."

"Want someone to run with?"

He meant himself? "You're a runner?"

His smile was addictive. She could become a fan. Wait, she already was.

"I sure am."

"Ten miles," she warned. "I usually go longer, but tomorrow's the race."

“Ten miles is no problem. I’ve run marathons, so I know you’re right about not pushing too hard the day before.”

“Really? I mean, you’ve run marathons?” She felt a little foolish repeating his own words back to him, but verbal dexterity seemed to have deserted her.

“I have,” he replied. He had the most delicious smile, spontaneous and easy. “Where should we meet and what time?”

She sensed that he was issuing a challenge, and she was always up for that. “Pioneer Park, top of the trail, and give me about twenty minutes.”

He opened the door wider. “Will do. See you there.”

That was one dangerous man, Bex concluded as she walked to her vehicle.

Those flashy good looks concealed a sensitive interior if he was dropping off his son’s homework. Besides, he’d definitely stood up to Greg and he’d had no obligation to do so, other than his friendship with Tripp. Even more than his support of Tripp, his obvious concern for Tara and Josh—especially Josh—had particularly appealed to her.

So he was a runner. Huh.

She’d show him the true definition of *a run for his money*. She had some frustration to work out.

Predictably, Tara was in bed when Bex got to the house to change her clothes. Her sister was bleary-eyed and seriously in need of coffee when she emerged from the guest bedroom.

It was almost noon.

Bex went into the kitchen, pressed a button on the coffeemaker and prepared the coffee. The lunch money mattered not at all. Josh did. As she delivered the coffee, she said, “Tara, I get that your life is upside down, I really do. But you need to talk to Josh. Make sure he doesn’t have issues you haven’t addressed.”

“Like what?”

How could the woman be so self-involved? So obtuse? And about her own child! Oh, boy, Bex *really* needed this run. “Can you just talk to him? That’s all I’m asking.”

She’d have to leave it at that for now and hope Tara discovered her better self—not to mention her maternal instincts—in the next few hours.

* * *

TATE MET HER at the top of the path in a dark T-shirt and gray sweatpants, and she had to admit to a small—well, not *that* small—heartthrob moment.

It wasn’t just that he was handsome, or tall, or all-around gorgeous. Oh, he was all those things, but none of that meant as much to her as dropping off his son’s homework at school in the middle of the day. She wasn’t sure why that was such a turn-on; it simply was. The single dad at the elementary school who was also a sexy former pilot. She went for interesting when it came to guys, and he qualified.

She pointed. “This way.”

They took off, and she immediately had to tone it down, because she was such a competitor and this wasn’t the time for

it. He was definitely very fit from what she could see, and she was *really* looking. She knew he'd be able to outpace her. "Ten easy miles, okay?"

He ran with the grace of a natural athlete, and she liked the symmetry of his stride. "Easy is better for me. With the boys, I don't have much opportunity. I'd love to run more often. I can't manage it."

She wanted to ask about his wife, but shied away. Will was still an unhealed wound for her, so she should give Tate the same consideration by avoiding the places that remained raw and sore. Instead she concentrated on the path. "The temperature is perfect. Not cold, but cool enough."

"The scenery is perfect, too."

It was true that the mountains were magnificent with their forested sides and snow-covered peaks, but he was studying her. She said wryly, "I have a feeling I was paid a compliment and I have no idea how to respond—except to point out that I probably look as tired as I feel—and there are a lot of miles between me and that finish line tomorrow."

"What if I take Josh and the boys out to eat and we watch the finish? I'm sure they'd want to be there when you cross the line. The boys would think it was fun, waiting for you to show up. Would that work?"

For her, yes. And it was generous of him to include Josh. Tara was like a bulb that went on and off. Sometimes she was a great mother and sometimes—now, for instance—she just wasn't

there. "I'm not his guardian in any way, so I'll ask my sister, but I suspect you're on. Thanks for the offer."

"Seems to me you're very much his guardian right now." He said it seriously. "Of course, I do need his mother's permission. Tripp mentioned your brother-in-law's visit to the club. I've met him, and he doesn't seem dangerous, but he is angry."

Naturally she'd shared the whole story with Hadleigh and Mel, which was why Tripp, and no doubt Spence, had heard it, too. Bex shook her head. "Greg doesn't like me and the feeling is mutual. I wish Tara hadn't told him I tried to talk her out of marrying him in the first place, but she did, and after that there was no going back. He was running around on her when they were engaged and, needless to say, after they tied the knot. The entire town knew it, and she married him, anyway."

They rounded a curve. "Fidelity in marriage is not negotiable."

Curious at the vehemence in his tone, she looked at his profile as they ran. His expression was suddenly remote, as though he was thinking of something else. No woman in her right mind would cheat on *him*, so that couldn't be it.

Could it?

"I agree." She was hitting a comfortable pace now, and hoped the same thing happened tomorrow. She decided to change the subject. "So you're building a house from the foundation up and going into horse-breeding as a new business, plus you're a single parent. Sounds like you have a stress-free life."

"You bet. I am completely without cares in this world. Hey,

didn't you recently franchise a chain of fitness centers? Does that mean you're as happy-go-lucky as I am?"

"Sure thing." She grinned and then responded in a more serious voice. "The reality is somewhat different from the dream, but I worked hard to get this far, so I refuse to complain."

"Do you always wear that bracelet?" That question came out of nowhere.

He was referring to her bracelet with the three charms from the marriage pact.

He'd noticed.

She said, "Always."

Tate sent her a sidelong glance. Damn him, he wasn't even breathing hard. He obviously did run on a regular basis; he hadn't made that up to impress her. "Yeah, Hadleigh and your other friend, Melody, wear them, too."

She just nodded, didn't explain.

A moment later, he spoke again. "Not that you don't have enough on your plate—what with Tara and Josh and all—but I'm supposed to make some decisions about the finishes in the house so they can be ordered. Would you mind, if you have a free evening, going shopping with me? I'd like a second opinion. Otherwise I'm fairly sure everything would end up brown. Not because it's my favorite color, but because the boys can do the least harm to brown. They're dying for a puppy. I get asked on a daily basis and you've seen them with Muggles, Ridley and Harley, so we all know I'm going to give in once we have space for

a pet. Which means more brown will be needed for the obvious reasons, like muddy paws. If there's another option, please save me."

Bex laughed. "Looking at paint and wallpaper, hmm. Are you asking me out? I hope I'm not being presumptuous here—but it sounds like an interesting first date."

"Personally I consider running ten miles together a first date. So that would technically be our second date. Dinner's on me."

Date. She'd rarely said that word out loud since she'd heard about Will's death. Sure, she'd danced at weddings and even flirted once in a while, but for the most part, she'd gone out with her friends and immersed herself in her business. She hadn't given any serious thought to a relationship in many years.

Tate Calder wouldn't be the place to start, though. She didn't have time for a built-in family, especially since she had Tara and Josh living with her these days. And if Greg was unwilling to even pay for his son's lunch at school, it was going to be a very messy divorce. At least Tara recognized that she no longer had any option, other than divorce...

What she hoped would happen was that Tara would finally get control of her life now that she'd actually made the decision. Some depression was natural, of course, but she needed to think about her son.

"I'll make you a deal," Bex said as they jogged along, sticking to the runners' side of the path as two cyclists whizzed past. "I'll be more than happy to offer my unbrown opinions in exchange

for advice on six-year-old boys. Lunch cards? I remember them from when I was in school, but you couldn't load them online then. It never occurred to me to ask Josh if his was paid for. What else am I missing? He's a sensitive kid, and he doesn't discuss whether he misses his dad. I don't have video games or anything like that yet, and if I asked Greg for anything, he'd tell me straight where he wants me to go."

"He'd better not." Tate's voice had a hard edge.

Nice to know that between him and Tripp, not to mention Spence, she had some male backup.

He added, "You have a deal. His class has a field trip coming up, and they have to bring a sack lunch. It's next Tuesday. If you like, I'll pack a couple and send them both with Adam. I have two cupboards, one labeled What You Want Them to Eat, and the other What They'll Eat When You Aren't Watching. I've learned to combine them and hope for the best. I've tried to stare down young Ben Calder over his aversion to cooked carrots before with no success, and then discovered he *would* eat them raw. The bonus is that they're actually healthier that way. I pick my battles, and with that one, I figure I came out the winner."

This new responsibility scared her a little. Well, more than a little. Tara would emerge from her emotional stupor—she had to—but when? Until then, Bex knew she was in charge by default.

"I'm not up for this, am I?" she said ruefully.

"It is definitely a learn-as-you-go process, and it seems to me that you're doing just fine."

She wasn't too sure about that, but at least she had another ally now, one with on-the-ground experience, so to speak. "I'm trying."

"If you really don't mind helping me out, would you like to see the house sometime soon? Maybe it'll help you visualize the project."

"Sometime soon," Bex agreed, with no hesitation at all. "How about after the marathon?"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEXT MORNING, Tate found himself riding herd over three boys as opposed to the usual two.

He could handle it, but they were kind of a wild bunch. They'd eaten a civilized breakfast—he'd insisted some fruit be included, not just pancakes and syrup—and then they'd gone to the park. Josh seemed happy enough, and he and Adam got along well, while Ben obviously enjoyed being the kingpin.

Bex could've requested a better day for the marathon, though. Later on, about two hours into the race, a storm front rolled through and the weather turned bad.

Into every life some rain must fall, but a lot was falling at the moment. He did carry an umbrella somewhere in the back of his rig and he dug it out when the clouds began to gather. True to form, the boys were immune to the inclement weather, especially when the first person crossed the finish line to a chorus of cheers and shouts. "I thought Aunt Bex would win." Josh looked deflated all of a sudden.

This was the delicate part of being a parent, Tate knew. The smallest nuances could make a major impact, so situations like this had to be addressed carefully. In as offhand a voice as possible, he said, "The men will come in first for the most part. We're built a little differently. We can run faster. It's just how it is. She might still win, but in the women's race."

"It's the same race," Josh pointed out.

Interesting territory.

"But the male and female runners are judged differently, with different times." He handed Josh a juice box.

"Why?"

A kid who took things literally. Tate considered his response. "It's like flying a Cessna," he eventually said. "Those are sleek planes that can do just about anything, but you don't want to be the pilot in a storm. On the other hand, a 757 can generally handle all sorts of weather."

The plane analogy was lame, but he meant well, and it was what he knew. In the end he put it in simpler terms. "Men and women aren't built the same. It's a biological thing. In plenty of ways, the female of the species has the advantage over us guys."

He might have elaborated but more runners were crossing the finish line. As predicted, all men so far, but the boys were enjoying the spectacle, soaking up the excitement, the thrill of achievement, and that was never a bad thing.

When the kids spotted Bex, they started hopping up and down, yelling and waving, and she managed a smile and a small wave as

she crossed the line and began to walk it off, accepting the bottle of water one of the volunteers handed her.

Bex hadn't won, as it turned out, but she placed third. Tate was impressed. He kept the boys corralled until she finally walked over. He was merely going to give her the lightweight jacket she'd left with him; instead he draped it over her damp shoulders in what felt, for some reason, like a very intimate gesture.

She met his eyes and said, "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Well done, by the way."

Despite the umbrella, the boys were completely wet because they couldn't stay still, but luckily it wasn't all that cold out. She limped next to him as they walked to his vehicle. Her smile was rueful. "No matter what I do, my feet are always bleeding after I run one of these."

"And you feel like Rip van Winkle, I know. Asleep for twenty years and just woke up." He wasn't quite sure, since she was already drenched, why he felt the need to hold the umbrella over her, but he did it, anyway. "A hot bath will do wonders. How was your time?"

"Personal best." She smiled as she said that, looking pleased.

And beautiful, even soaking wet and exhausted, with no hint of makeup on her face. He had a hard time keeping his gaze from slipping downward to where her shirt clung to her breasts. For someone so athletic, she still had very feminine curves, not to mention those long, toned legs.

He realized she'd caught him staring when her brows went up

a fraction. "Please tell me my shirt isn't transparent now. I'm too tired to look down."

"Unfortunately not." He pressed a button on his key fob to unlock the SUV. The boys had scampered ahead and had almost reached the back doors. "But it wouldn't hurt my feelings if it was. If you need any help getting out of those wet clothes, just call me."

"Generous of you, but I think I can manage." Her wry expression changed. "How was Josh?"

"Well behaved and polite," he assured her. It was the truth.

"Good." She smiled in relief, a smile that turned into a look of concern. "I mean, he usually is, but then again, he didn't tell me about the school lunch thing, either."

"I'm sure he's anxious about what comes next, once his parents are divorced, but I saw that in Ben and Adam when their life underwent a big change. All you can do is be there and answer the inevitable questions as honestly as possible. For the record, I'm not a child psychologist, but I believe that 'I don't know' is a perfectly acceptable response if that happens to be the case. Those words have certainly come out of my mouth more than once."

"The trouble is, he's not really asking." She stopped to face him, her lashes starred by raindrops.

Those incredible eyes. He was back to thinking they were green again.

This attraction was getting out of hand, and he needed to put

an end to it, but he had a feeling *that* wasn't too likely.

"I learned the hard way that you don't have to be a superhero. I was determined to make everything okay for my sons, but the truth is, I couldn't fix...what had happened."

That sounded preachy, so Tate amended it with a grimace as he opened the passenger door. "It's like flying without controls, if you ask me. You take the plane up and hope for the best possible landing."

She laughed and shook her head as she put a foot on the running board. "You and Tripp. He says stuff like that all the time. You do realize I'm going to get your car seat all wet."

Tate looked at the boys in the backseat, equally soaked and laughing loudly about something or other, Ben leaning over to punch Adam in the arm. Tate said, "I suspect the vehicle in general might need to dry out, so don't worry about it. Do we still have a date tonight or will you be too worn out?"

She sat down and reached for the seat belt, clicking it in place. "I believe I owe you. I'll be fine tonight. Who's watching the boys or are they coming along?"

He loved his sons, but no way.

Tate went around and got into the car. "Can you picture them selecting bathroom tile or kitchen countertops? Hadleigh offered to watch them. I accepted. She said she'd be happy to have Josh, too."

"You do know she's matchmaking."

He almost didn't hear what she'd said because the boys were

getting rowdy and he'd just flipped the ignition switch. Bex sat there, dripping, looking straight at him, as if life was like the marathon she'd just run, something to be met head-on and conquered.

Tate conceded. "Yeah, I've noticed." What else could he say?

* * *

THE RED SILK DRESS was too much for what was essentially a trip to the hardware store, so Bex changed again. Black pencil skirt and white camisole with a pale gold sweater. Okay, that was better. Besides, after 26.2 miles, heels weren't an option, so plain black flats were, at any rate, comfortable. Her toes needed some TLC.

Bex had no idea where they were going for dinner, so for Mustang Creek, this outfit was middle ground. A little upscale for Bad Billie's, but dressy enough for O'Henry's on a Saturday night. There weren't a lot of other decent choices.

Tara was watching television again, but at least she was with Josh. She'd readily agreed to the idea of his spending the evening with Hadleigh and Tripp, which wasn't entirely reassuring. Bex felt almost guilty for going out.

Almost, she told herself firmly. Josh would have fun at the ranch, as he always did, and she deserved a night out.

"You look nice." Tara stirred, finally showing some animation. "Tate Calder must be worth the mascara and lip gloss."

She thought about Tate's wavy chestnut hair and those

magnetic dark eyes. He *was* worth the effort, no question about it. "He saw me sopping wet earlier. It seems like the only time I see him is when I've been running. I thought I might try to make a better impression."

"You're always pretty, Bex." Her sister's eyes were glassy with tears. "Thanks for everything you've been doing for Josh. Thank Tate for me, too, will you? I can't deal with it right now."

Bex had to admit she wished Josh hadn't heard that. "I love Josh, so everything's okay. We're going to meet Tate at the ranch. You ready to go, buddy?"

He grabbed his backpack. "Yep."

"Maybe give your mom a hug before we head out?" She suggested it gently. It was their relationship, Josh and Tara's, and they didn't need her interference, but *she* couldn't figure out how to deal with her sister at the moment, so he was probably even more confused.

Tara held her little boy close and murmured against his hair, "Have fun with Aunt Hadleigh and Uncle Tripp."

They made a quick exit and Bex debated again about asking him how he was feeling as she pulled out of the driveway, but decided to take Tate's advice and wait.

If Josh himself mentioned it, that would be different. At his age, she, Hadleigh and Mel hadn't had any secrets from each other, but she wouldn't have shared them with an aunt, either, so that was something to keep in mind. Maybe Ben and Adam were the key; Josh might talk to them.

Tate's truck was already parked by the house when they pulled in, and all three dogs swarmed out to meet them. It was heartwarming to see Josh jump out and laugh as they greeted him, tugging at his backpack and leaping up to lick his face. He loved it and he needed it. She'd get him a puppy—she'd thought about getting a dog more than once—but for all she knew, Tara would move out tomorrow, and dogs needed to be walked and trained, and her own schedule didn't permit it. So far, Tara had no place to go, since Greg was still living at their rental, so with everything up in the air, a puppy was the worst decision in the world. In theory it sounded great, but if Josh had to leave his new dog behind, and she had to find someone else to take care of it... Good intentions, sure. But a really, really impractical idea.

She could swear her life had been simple at one time.

Tate came out to greet her, that unforgettable smile firmly in place. She was relieved to see that whatever he had in mind, he'd dressed like her to the extent that he wore khaki slacks and a button-up blue shirt, but no tie.

The dogs and Josh raced into the house. He took her elbow and guided her toward his car. "Let's get the hell out of here while it's calm. I brought over every game system we have. Tripp will be as riveted as the boys. He's hooking it all up now. Hadleigh's already figured out she can watch a movie in another room with her feet up and toss a frozen pizza in their direction. You can say hello when we pick them up. Let's go select the paint, the appliances and whatever else goes into a kitchen and be done with it."

“I know Hadleigh, and she won’t feed children a frozen pizza.” Bex climbed in the truck and he closed her door then got in on the driver’s side.

“I was joking. She did say something about roasted chicken and broccoli. I wish her luck with the latter, but anything’s possible. They’re now sold on her spinach lasagna, although I have to take some credit, since I told all three boys the spinach was a wild plant cowboys used to eat.”

“Clever.”

“It seemed to work.” He backed out of the drive. “Ben was probably on to me, but Adam bought it and he’s the picky eater. Speaking of which, if *you* are, tell me now, because I was thinking Thai food for dinner.”

There was certainly no Thai restaurant in Mustang Creek, so Bex sent him a quizzical look. “I love Thai. Mel, Hadleigh and I used to eat it all the time in college, but the closest place I know of is pretty far away.”

“Not if you fly.”

“Oh.” That hadn’t occurred to her. “You have a plane?”

“Sort of.”

“How do you *sort of* have a plane?”

He shrugged. “Technically it belongs to my father. He doesn’t like flying commercial, which means we have an arrangement. He bought the plane, he pays for the hangar and if he wants to go somewhere—business or pleasure—I man the cockpit. My aunt gets to keep the boys while I’m gone, which she loves. So

everybody wins.”

Bex felt a certain amount of curiosity about the kind of business that allowed a person to buy a plane, but she didn't ask. It sounded as though Tate came from a well-to-do family, but she was lucky that money wasn't actually one of her problems. “Sounds like it,” she said. “What are you going to do with the horses if you have to pick up and leave?”

He pulled out onto the road and headed in the direction of the municipal airport. “Tripp introduced me to the local vet. Nice guy and he wants to go in with me. We've met a couple of times and I trust Tripp's judgment. Another win-win, since I'd obviously have to hire him, anyway. I know horses, since I was raised with them, but I don't know a lot about breeding them yet. Nate Cameron has that part down, so I'm on board with taking care of the day-to-day and building the stables, and he's willing to come and stay at the house if I have to fly out. We're still hashing out the business details, but it looks good.”

It did sound good and Bex also knew Dr. Cameron; he was pleasant, reliable and competent. He'd gone to high school with Tripp and Will. His practice was mostly large animal, but he did have a clinic for small animals open several days a week with an older veterinarian who was close to retirement.

That brought her thoughts back to Tara. She'd dated Nate Cameron for about six months during her senior year. Why couldn't she have married him instead of Greg?

Tate distracted her from that thought, which was just as well,

since it was going nowhere. “My boys want to go fishing,” he said, “and I have a friend with a cabin on a nearby lake. Do you suppose Josh would like to go? I don’t know Greg, but if he’s inclined to join us, that would be fine with me. The place is rustic, outdoor facilities, woodstove, and there’s nothing to do but hike and fish. If Greg’s the outdoor type and wants to come along, he’s invited.”

That was generous. Very.

Score another point for Mr. Calder.

“I’ll ask my sister to have that conversation with Josh. I’m sure he’d love it. And I’ll tell her to mention it to Greg.” Who probably *wouldn’t* love it. Not one bit...

CHAPTER FIVE

HE SUSPECTED IT was unfair not to prepare her for his family, but then again, it was impossible to be prepared, so Tate had made an executive decision just to hope for the best. As the plane touched down sweetly on the landing strip, he thought it might be prudent to say *something*.

“You’re probably about to meet my aunt and my father. Unless they’re out, in which case we’re in luck, but my aunt’s usually there. After my mother died, she moved in and took over, sort of like a certified dictator at large. She’s terrifyingly efficient.”

Bex looked startled, and he didn’t blame her. Her gold-green eyes widened.

He pointed at the house. It was far away but there was a Jeep parked near the airstrip to get back and forth. “There’ll be a lot

more decorating choices around here than in Mustang Creek. The builder suggested I go to a more cosmopolitan area to pick out what I wanted and have it shipped. I'm hoping this will be a forever house for me, so why skimp at this point, right?"

"Right," she said, but the word wasn't loaded with enthusiasm. She was gorgeous in a slim skirt and a sweater that set off her eyes, and he knew his family would embrace the idea that he might be seeing someone. Meeting them so early on, though—that was asking a little much. He figured the run together didn't count, so this was their first date.

The house was like a minicastle minus the turrets. Most people found his father's place a bit...overwhelming. Should he have given her more warning, some kind of initiation, so to speak? Well, too late now. He'd better get this out of the way. He opened the Jeep passenger door in what could only be described as a gentlemanly fashion and, despite her tight skirt, she climbed in with matching grace. That shouldn't surprise him; she was an athlete, after all.

The more he told himself he didn't have the time or inclination to date Becca Stuart, the more he was convinced he was going to override the system and do it, anyway. Ben and Adam liked her, and that *really* counted.

Then there was the undeniable sexual attraction. Tate was drawn to Bex on a very basic level—other interests aside. That had never been in dispute, not from the moment they met.

Not exactly what he needed at this point in his life, perhaps,

but things didn't always go as predicted. Or as planned.

Aunt Gina *was* home. She'd heard the plane, so there was no going back. She was already on the front porch, waving hello, when he pulled up in the Jeep; she hesitated briefly when she saw that he wasn't alone.

"Hello." Tate didn't even turn off the ignition, but jumped out, returned the offered hug and stepped back. "We aren't staying. We're on a shopping trip, so I'm taking the Jeep into town, then we'll fly back to Mustang Creek from here. This is Bex Stuart, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you," Bex said, looking—and sounding—a little shy.

"And you, as well. Surely you can stay for dinner." His aunt, petite and dark-haired, was eyeing Bex with a speculative gaze, her size no indication of her force of will, which could blast the top off a mountain. He sensed approval on the appearance front, but there was plenty in Bex's appearance to approve of—all of it, in fact.

Maybe he was just being hopeful that they'd get along.

He sidestepped the dinner invitation. "Some other time when I can give you advance notice," he told his aunt gently. "We'll grab a bite in town. Bex has had a long day, so we need to make it an early night."

For once, Gina let it go. "Your father's on a conference call at the moment, but at least stop in and say hello on your way back."

A clear order.

“Will do,” he agreed hastily, all but saluting.

As he and Bex drove away, turning onto a street that was lined with discreet driveways and manicured lawns, Bex asked him, “Is every date with you this interesting?”

“Wait until you get to the exciting part where we look at kitchen countertops and built-in ovens,” he said drily.

“This is quite the neighborhood.” She gestured at the massive rooflines they could glimpse in the distance, behind the professionally landscaped grounds.

“Not what you’d call homey, is it?”

“It’s impressive, anyway. May I ask in general terms what your father does for a living? Oil wells? Gold mines? Diamonds?”

At her joking tone, he shot her a sidelong glance. “Nothing so glamorous. He owns a manufacturing company that makes engine parts for almost every major car company in the world. I’m sure the conference call is with Japan or Germany or someplace like that. He does a lot of business in the US, but there’s a high demand overseas, as well.”

“Rich kid, huh?”

He had been. Part of that had been good, part of it not so good. “I’ve made my own way. Other than my college tuition—and I had an athletic scholarship, so I essentially paid for some of the tuition myself—Dad doesn’t give me a dime, and I don’t ask for anything. Never have. I earned the money to pay for the land and the new house by working some long hours and making a few decent investments. I thought about asking my father if he

wanted to invest in the breeding venture, but he's still ticked off at me because I turned down a corporate pilot's job arranged by a friend of his. I would've been away from home a lot, sometimes for weeks at a time, so I said no. Dad's great, don't get me wrong, but growing up, I barely saw him, he worked so much. I want to *raise* my children."

"You do seem emphatic about it."

He was. Tate couldn't have explained why he was telling her so much, but he'd been dated for his trust fund before, although he already knew Bex wasn't the type to marry for money. His wife, Sandra, had felt differently, though, so he wanted to be clear on that before he entered into any potential relationship. Making that mistake once was definitely once too often.

He continued, his voice even. "The plane is a compromise. I don't mind being able to fly now and then, because if I didn't love it, I wouldn't have done it in the first place. And I don't mind letting the boys have time with their great-aunt when I take my father here or there on short business trips. But Mustang Creek is the kind of place I wish I'd grown up."

"It's great," Bex said. "Hadleigh and Mel and I had a ball as kids, riding our bikes everywhere, eating ice cream in the park, playing Optimist softball... Small-town stuff, but those are good memories."

He turned on to Cheyenne's main thoroughfare, busy with traffic, and headed toward the warehouse store his builder had recommended, saying he often did business with the company.

They were reliable and carried quality materials. “Seems to me the three of you are still making them. Good memories, I mean.”

“That’s true—not that everything’s quite as simple these days.” Bex laughed, her profile serene. “Hadleigh’s the impulsive one, and Melody can be outspoken, not to mention stubborn. I have my faults, too, of course. I can be really competitive, but I’m also the peacemaker in the bunch. If we were all the same, I doubt we’d get along so well.”

“I’d really like it if Ben, Adam and Josh formed that kind of friendship. They’re young boys, so they’re over-the-top sometimes, but they seem to enjoy being with each other. It’s good for all three of them. My kids are new to town, essentially, and Josh is going through a tough time.”

“The fishing trip is a wonderful idea.”

Tate spotted the building and pulled into the lot. “You aren’t the one who’s going to be taking all those minnows off the hook.” He chuckled. “Hey, we’ll have fun. They’ll learn to pee in the woods, like real men.”

“Don’t you dare encourage them to do that,” Bex warned, but she was laughing again.

“Males are born with that instinct,” he informed her, “so I won’t *have* to encourage them.” A pause. “Okay, let’s get the hard part over with, shall we? The shopping, I mean. Even though I can make decisions with the best of ’em, choosing kitchen cabinets isn’t one of my strong points.”

* * *

IT WOULD'VE HELPED if he'd taken her by the construction site so she could get a feel for the layout and materials of his new house before he'd flown her halfway across Wyoming to do something as important as advise him on his "forever house," as he'd called it. He'd mentioned something earlier about seeing the place, but that idea had fallen by the wayside.

Still, Bex had to admit, it was fun to look at the different kinds of granite and marble, backsplashes, faucets and other fixtures, spending someone else's money. Tate had asked for her opinions, after all. He approved the spruce cabinets she suggested, and the perfect bronze handles, too, and offered no resistance when she steered him away from granite to a poured concrete countertop a slightly darker color than the cabinets.

"A farmhouse sink," she said firmly as they surveyed that aisle. "It's beautiful and it'll suit the rustic nature of the house."

"I don't even know what you mean by a farmhouse sink. Feel free to enlighten me," he added mildly. "To me, a sink is a sink. That's why I asked for advice."

At first he balked at the six-burner gas stove, not because of the price, although that was substantial, but because he claimed he could cook about five dishes, and none of them required more than two burners. Bex reminded him that preferences tended to change over time, and so did circumstances. He might meet a woman who practiced the culinary arts in a serious way...or he might develop a passion for them himself.

Plus, his sons would grow up and most likely have wives and children of their own, which meant there'd be family gatherings—Thanksgivings and Christmases and birthdays and who knew what other celebrations. *Then* he'd see the wisdom of a properly equipped kitchen.

Tate seemed enthralled, if a bit amused, by the broad picture she painted.

Finally, her case made, she brought the speech full-circle. “It’s your forever house, right?” She ran her hand lightly, almost wistfully, along the gleaming top of the stove. “I think I can speak for most women and say that I’d love to have something like this. My rule is, if you’re going to do it, do it right.”

A stainless-steel side-by-side refrigerator with a bottom-drawer freezer came next, and by then they’d covered the basics. Tate put the total on his credit card—a massive amount—and didn’t blink an eye when the woman obviously assumed Bex was his wife.

Beyond a doubt, this had to be the most unusual first date ever. “Food,” Tate said succinctly as they left the building. “Next order of business. Apparently, making domestic decisions, especially about kitchens and fridges and stoves, causes intense hunger.”

Bex smiled and agreed that it was time to eat. Privately, she was glad he hadn’t accepted his aunt’s invitation to dinner. The people in Tate’s family were probably quite friendly, but sitting down to a meal with them might be too much, too soon.

Besides, she had no idea where this was all going—or if it was going anywhere. Tate was a widower and he'd never mentioned his wife. He had two young sons to bring up, a major construction project to complete and a new business to organize.

Bex's own situation was hardly less complicated; she had her sister and nephew living with her all of a sudden, plus fitness club franchises opening across the country, which meant that, of necessity, she traveled a great deal. There were "significant learning curves" attached to "growing the business," as her financial adviser, who had a great fondness for corporate clichés, constantly told her. And, deep down, she wasn't completely sure she'd ever gotten over Will's death a decade ago.

Bex grasped the permanence of that loss, accepted that there were no guarantees in life. But emotionally...well, some part of her still expected her lost soldier to come marching home.

Granted, things were different now. Tate wasn't fighting in a war. Unfortunately, there were other dangers besides bullets and bombs and, like anybody else, he could die. He was a man who flew small planes and would be working with large animals, both situations that could put him at risk... Death could happen close to home, not just on a faraway battlefield, as it had with Will.

Bex pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind. She was with an attractive—make that sexy-as-hell—man. No need for any big decisions yet. If ever...

Why not simply enjoy the moment?

The restaurant was busy, since it was a Saturday evening, but

they got a table for two fairly quickly, which might have been due to the flirtatious hostess and her interest in Tate as he explained that, no, sorry, he hadn't made a reservation. Bex was still trying to decide if she should be amused or annoyed when they were seated.

"Does that always work?" she asked, settling in.

"What?" Oh, so innocent.

"That suave, charming way you have. That smile."

He pretended to be puzzled, picked up his menu and finally grinned at her over the top of it. "Assuming that I *am* suave and charming, with a memorable smile, I have only one question. Do any of those things work on you?"

Now they were getting onto unstable ground. In fact, this was a quicksand sort of question. Bex felt a flutter in the pit of her stomach, unrelated to hunger, and took her time answering. "The way a man smiles certainly makes a difference to a woman," she said seriously, feeling like a humorless fool, but unable to respond in kind. "And yours just happens to be wicked."

He flashed it then, full force, with that hint of a dimple in his left cheek included, no doubt, to increase the wattage. "Fear not, fair damsel," he teased. "You're safe with me. Translation—lighten up a little." He watched her for a long, silent moment. "I think you just gave me a compliment. I'm still processing that." Another pause. "My aunt liked you."

Bex had managed to relax, ever so slightly. "She saw me for about thirty seconds."

“I know Gina Calder pretty well. She has the instincts of a barracuda when it comes to sizing people up.” Another of those conversational hairpin turns followed. “Are we ordering separately or do we want to share?”

This entire evening she’d been outmaneuvered. Bex gave up. “I say we share. You choose for both of us because I’m too hungry to think. I am planning to have a glass of wine, though, and I’ll feel guilty you can’t, but my feet still hurt and you didn’t tell me I’d be meeting your family. So we’ll be even.”

“I would never drink and fly a plane or drive, but I supervised three boys for at least half the day. Do I get sympathy points for that?”

“Absolutely. Once we touch down safely, I’ll be the first to hand you a cold beer.”

“Like a serving wench? You’d wear the outfit? I want a low-cut bodice.”

“Don’t push it.”

In the end, ordering was a joint process, and they chose spring rolls and mango salad to start, followed by shrimp pad thai and lemongrass chicken; everything was delicious. Her glass of California chardonnay was exactly the kind she liked and accompanied the meal perfectly.

She did meet his father briefly later that evening, when they stopped by the house. Tate’s dad was an older version of his son, with some silver at his temples and a genial smile.

Later still, as they taxied along the runway before takeoff, she

was already yawning. “He seems nice.”

“Most of the time he is. But appearances can be deceiving.”

“Duly noted. I might point out, though, that none of us are nice *all* the time.”

“That’s the third yawn. Feel free to nap. It’s a short flight, but you still have to take Josh home.” He pretended to be concentrating hard. “Let’s see, you ran a race, took a flight you didn’t know you were going to take and helped a hopeless bachelor organize what I suspect will be a killer kitchen. Like I told my aunt, you’ve had a full day.”

Bex sighed, admiring Tate from the corner of her eye.

He had a clean profile and handled the plane so effortlessly he didn’t even seem to be thinking about it. She *was* tired, but pleasantly so. It had been a lovely evening, and a treat just to get away. Her feet did hurt; tomorrow, she knew from experience, they’d *really* hurt. Something to look forward to, although she’d signed up for it, so there was no one to blame but herself.

“You, on the other hand, supervised three boys all morning—as you modestly pointed out. You took them to the race, then you flew us to Cheyenne, drove us around and also did the shopping. And now you’re flying us back,” she said with a sleepy smile. “You’ve had a full day, too.”

The night sky was brilliant with stars, the earlier inclement weather having headed south into the Midwest. A vast arch of velvet black was studded with diamonds, almost like something Melody would make. That gave Bex an idea.

Tate had already done a lot for Josh—and he'd met her nephew mere days ago. She wanted to thank him. Melody had made an impressive clock for her husband, Spence. Everything she did was one of a kind, and in this particular case, she'd used an outline of their ranch house as a background, Tripp had cut the metal pieces required by her design and a local artisan had made the frame from wood found on the property. Everyone who saw it urged Melody to expand her jewelry design business to include artistic clocks.

Unique, personal... Bex loved the thought of it.

A similar piece with a silhouette of his new log house would fit perfectly in Tate's new kitchen. She could commission it, Mel could create it and Tripp would help again because he and Tate were friends. She knew full well that Melody would never take her money. Bex could provide the kitchen design and color of the cabinets, so maybe all of them could go in on the project together.

Housewarming gift: solved.

This landing was as smooth as the last one. Even though it was past Josh's bedtime, it wasn't *too* late, considering two flights, the shopping and dinner. At least she'd be able to sleep in tomorrow, since it was Sunday.

"I'm going to sleep like the dead myself," Tate said, as if reading her mind on the drive back to the Galloway ranch. "This house-building thing was going to be challenging, I knew that going in, but I'm looking forward to being settled again." He sent her a quick smile. "Word of warning—for a vagabond pilot,

I'm darned boring. Coffee black. Toast with butter, no jelly. I've eaten all kinds of different food, like I did tonight, but just give me a medium-rare steak, a baked potato and a salad, and I'm happy."

"Word of warning?" Bex looked at him, which wasn't a chore for any woman. "Is that your way of asking me for another date?"

"Not very smooth, but yes."

There was that darned smile again.

"Hmm, I'll have to mull it over," she told him mischievously. "I'll get back to you."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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