



AN OFFICER AND A MAVERICK

Teresa Southwick

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An Officer and a Maverick

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The Curious Case of Detective Dreamy Rust Creek Ramblings By now, you've all heard about Lani Dalton, everyone's favorite Ace in the Hole bartender. Observed singing and dancing fully clothed in the park fountain on the Fourth of July, she was hauled off to jail dripping wet by dashing detective Russ Campbell. Readers, what would you do if you found yourselves in the strong arms of the law? Since then, Lani's been reluctant to revisit the Case of the Spiked Wedding Punch. Because helping the arrestingly handsome Russ crack the case could risk breaching family confidentiality—and Lani never breaks a promise! So why does Russ keep showing up at the Ace? We at The Gazette would never kiss and tell, but reports of Lani and Russ's mutual distrust are greatly exaggerated...

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“I’m sorry. That was wrong.”

Lani blinked at him, trying to focus her fuzzy brain. “Why?”

“I’m an officer of the law. Using a position of power to take advantage of you is the very definition of sexual harassment. You have every right to be upset.”

Upset? Lani wasn’t the least bit upset. Russ had finally noticed her! He’d kissed her, and it had felt really, really good. She wanted him to notice her some more. “I’m not upset.”

“Well, I wouldn’t blame you if you added sexual harassment to that false imprisonment complaint.”

“Why did you really stop?” She slid closer, until their thighs were touching and her arm brushed his. The heat of just that small contact threatened to make her go up in flames.

“I’ve sworn to uphold the law. There are rules.” His voice was ragged and he was breathing hard.

So was she. And right this moment she didn’t give a flying fig about rules.

* * *

Montana Mavericks: What Happened at the Wedding? A weekend Rust Creek Falls will never forget!

An Officer and a Maverick

Teresa Southwick



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To my brothers—Jim, Mike, Dan and Chris.

Thanks for always being there. You're my heroes.

I love you guys!

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Fourth of July

“I wouldn’t be surprised if someone strips naked and jumps in the park fountain,” Lani Dalton said out loud, to no one in particular.

And no one in particular paid any attention to her, what with all the partying going on around her at the wedding reception. Everyone was having a really good time. Braden Traub had married Jennifer MacCallum, and there was little that folks in Rust Creek Falls liked more than celebrating a happy occasion. And wow, were they celebrating!

It looked as if the colors of American independence had exploded all over Rust Creek Falls Park. Picnic tables were covered by red-and white-checkered oilcloth covers, while red and blue tarps had protected people from the afternoon sun, although it had gone down a while ago. Fireworks had

been shot off but people were still hanging around, dancing, talking, laughing and drinking wedding punch.

She'd just finished two-stepping with her brother and figured there was something weird going on for that to have happened. Nothing said relationship loser like dancing with your brother. Anderson was her favorite, but still... After chug-a-lugging her fourth—or was it fifth?—cup of punch, she felt a little light-headed. Sitting down suddenly seemed like an awfully good idea.

Walking around and searching for an empty seat, she wasn't watching where she was going. As a result, she ran into what felt like a brick wall and was nearly knocked onto her backside.

Strong hands reached out and steadied her. "You okay?"

Lani was pretty sure that voice belonged to Russ Campbell, a detective from Kalispell who filled in sometimes to help out Sheriff Gage Christensen here in Rust Creek Falls. She felt a familiar quiver of attraction lick through her as she looked up to confirm her suspicion. "Detective Dreamy."

"Excuse me?"

"Lani Dalton." She pointed at herself. "I work part-time at the Ace in the Hole, the local bar and grill. You're Russ Campbell."

"I know."

"I know you know who you are." She giggled and that surprised her because she wasn't normally a giggler. "I meant that *I* know who you are and was introducing myself to you. Lani Dalton," she said again.

"Okay."

"Not much of a talker, are you?"

The sheriff was short a deputy and Russ filled in at least once or twice a week. That's about how often he came into the bar but he never really paid much attention to her. She, however, had definitely noticed *him*. He was tall and broad-shouldered with thick, wavy brown hair and hazel eyes that didn't miss a thing. Except her.

He was nice-looking, but if you happened to catch a glimpse of one of his rare grins, he was absolutely adorable. As far as she knew—and she'd asked about him—no female in Rust Creek Falls or anywhere else for that matter was on the receiving end of those smiles.

"Okay, then." He cleared his throat and continually scanned the crowd of people who were getting happier by the minute. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I have to keep moving."

After months of being ignored, Lani had finally struck up a conversation. Sort of. It was an opportunity, and she wanted it to go on.

"Are you here for the bride or groom?" she asked.

"What?"

"Are you a friend of the bride or groom?"

"Neither." He indicated the gold shield hooked to the belt at the waist of his worn jeans. "I'm working. Sheriff Christensen hired me to help with crowd control."

Looking way up at him, his features seemed to blur and she swayed a little. Again, his hands reached out to steady her. She couldn't help noticing his arms, where the sleeves of his black T-shirt stretched across impressive biceps. It was swoon-worthy—that must be why she was a little woozy.

"Wow, you're really strong. And your reflexes are really good." Did she just say that? It wasn't like her to say whatever popped into her head.

He was already frowning, but her words seemed to turn the frown into a scowl. "I think you should lay off the liquor."

"All I had was punch from the reception, and they said it was some concoction with sparkling wine. No hard alcohol allowed in the public park. You should know that. So I haven't had any liquor to speak of. I swear," she said, raising her hand, palm out. "That's the thing. I work at the bar but I hardly ever drink alcohol. Am I talking too much?"

"Uh-huh." His tone was unnecessarily sarcastic. "Let's find you a place to sober up."

“I’m not drunk. And I was looking for a place to sit when you ran into me.”

“For the record, *you* ran into *me*,” he said.

She shook her head—that was a big mistake. “I don’t think so.”

“Take my word for it.” His mouth tightened as he scanned the tables and didn’t spot an empty place. “Let’s go over here.”

She felt his fingers on her arm as he led her through a maze of people who moved for him as if he was Moses parting the Red Sea. “Where are you taking me?”

“To the park fountain. The edge is wide enough to sit on, and it’s cooler there.”

They were passing the last of the tables when she saw her older brother Travis chatting up a pretty blonde who Lani happened to know was dating a hot-tempered, jealous cowboy. She would have warned him off, but Detective Dreamy had her in a pretty tight grip. And she spotted her other brother Anderson moving in. He would make sure Travis didn’t do anything stupid.

“Here you go,” Russ said after they crossed the open grassy area then reached the fountain that was spewing water in the center. “Have a seat.”

Lani did and set her flag-stamped cup beside her. “Thank you, Detective.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ma’am? She was a generic female who could be anywhere from nineteen to ninety-five? Seriously? She knew he was on duty, but it wouldn’t hurt him to work on his people skills. Honestly, sometimes she wondered why she was attracted to him at all. Except he was pretty cute, and she’d seen him at the bar, chatting up other people and making them laugh. Apparently, he just wasn’t that into *her*. Well, she wasn’t into being called *ma’am*.

“You can call me Lani. I’m not crazy about sweetie, honey or babe. But please don’t ever call me ma’am. It’s like nails on a chalkboard.”

“Understood.”

Loud voices suddenly cut through the general celebratory hum of activity. They were coming from the direction where Anderson had just walked. Skip Webster, the jealous cowboy, was arguing with Travis, who was trying to back away. Then the cowboy took a swing when Travis wasn’t looking. Instead of turning the other cheek, his fists came up to retaliate. Anderson stepped between them to defuse the situation. The other man punched him, and Anderson lashed out with a fist, a knee-jerk reaction.

Skip went down then started shouting for help. He spotted Russ and hollered for an immediate arrest.

“I have to go,” Russ said.

Lani had a bad feeling. “What are you going to do?”

“Arrest that guy for assault and battery.”

That guy would be her brother Anderson, and that wasn’t good anytime, but he had a personal legal issue pending. An arrest wouldn’t work in his favor considering he was going to try to get custody of a child he’d just learned he had. Detective Russ Campbell was headed toward that ruckus unless she did something to stop him. Whatever it was had to be loud and immediate.

She heard the water gushing from the middle of the fountain behind her and did the first thing that popped into her mind, which was clearly becoming a habit tonight. She jumped into the water then gasped at the cold liquid soaking the bottom of her skirt. Russ looked at her as if she was nuts then started toward the arguing men. She couldn’t think how else to stop him, so she started belting out “Firework,” her favorite Katy Perry song, which certainly made her more of a spectacle!

Well, good. Anything to help Anderson...

At the same time she smacked the water, sending a wave over the edge that hit Russ’s back. When he turned, she added some dance moves to go with the song.

He walked over and stopped in front of her. “Please come out of there, *ma’am*.”

Now she was just mad and used both hands to shower him with water. Satisfaction circled through her when he swiped a hand over his wet face, and she sang even louder. Surprisingly, she was enjoying herself.

“Okay, you’ve had your fun.” Russ was using his I’m-the-law voice. “The show here is over.”

But it seemed no one was listening to him. A few people were stopping to see what the disturbance was all about. Lani appreciated her fan club, especially because Russ kept glancing over at her brothers and Skip Webster, who was still demanding justice at the top of his lungs. Officer Campbell was clearly dying to give it to him—at the expense of her brother. She couldn’t let that happen and had to up her game.

“Come on in, the water’s fine.” She waved to the few onlookers who seemed to like the idea of a dip in the fountain.

“Whoa,” Russ said, putting his hands up to warn them off. He sent a glare in her direction. “That’s inciting public disorderliness. If you don’t come out of there voluntarily, I’m going to have to arrest you.” He glanced over his shoulder again.

Lani didn’t much like the idea of going to jail, but better her than Anderson. She didn’t have any legal problems, although that could be about to change.

“I dare you to come in and get me, Detective Dreamy.”

Russ reached out to grab her, and the frown on his face deepened when she backed up and eluded him. “Come on, Lani. Out of the water.”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“As it happens, I am. I told you already, Gage brought me in for crowd control, what with the wedding and Fourth of July celebrations going on at the same time.” He looked around at the happier-than-normal people scattered throughout the park. “And it was obviously the right call.”

“You look hot under the collar.” Although he wasn’t actually wearing a collared shirt, or technically a uniform. But there was something about his ensemble of choice. The black T-shirt, jeans and boots made him about as hot as a man could get.

“Doesn’t he look hot?” she said to the crowd around the fountain.

“Cool him off,” someone called out.

“Okay.” She sent walls of water at him as hard and fast as she could. Not much connected, though, on account of her keeping her distance so he couldn’t grab her. The physical effort had her staggering, and she almost slipped.

“That does it,” he said impatiently. “I’m arresting you for drunk and disorderly conduct.”

“That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me, Detective.” Until a few minutes ago it was practically the only thing he’d ever said with the possible exception of *could you get me a beer*.

His expression went from grim to really grim as he stepped over the edge into the fountain. Lani winced at what the water would do to those leather boots. Well, it couldn’t be helped. This was for Anderson. She backed away from the advancing lawman while one person started chanting, “Lani! Lani!”

With the water choppy from their movements, it was hard to dodge him. He was bigger, stronger and faster, so she couldn’t get away indefinitely. But the longer she could keep his attention focused on her, the better.

She backed up a step, and her sandal hit a slick spot on the bottom of the fountain. Down she went, not completely underwater, but enough to soak the top of her dress and ruin her hair. A second later Russ was right there in front of her, holding out a big hand to help her up. She wasn’t sure where the idea came from but at this moment she didn’t really care. After putting her hand in his palm, she yanked forward with all her strength. He was already off balance and fell on top of her.

“Damn it,” he sputtered. “You’re under arrest—”

“So you said.” She brushed the hair out of her face.

He gripped her arm and tugged her up with him when he stood. “You have the right to remain silent but there’s probably a snowball’s chance in hell of that happening.”

He finished with her rights then started walking her out of the fountain. When she slipped again, he swore under his breath before swinging her into his arms. Lani sincerely regretted that fate hadn’t warned her about Russ Campbell picking her up, because she would have lost a few pounds in preparation. Points to him that he made her feel as if she weighed nothing.

After stepping out of the water, he set her down. When she wobbled a bit he asked, “Can you walk?”

“Course. I’ve been doing it for years.”

“Good.” He curved his fingers around her upper arm and, without another word, started moving.

“Aren’t you going to put the cuffs on me?” she asked sweetly.

His eyes narrowed as he looked down at her. “Are you going to resist arrest?”

“No.”

“Okay, then.” He kept walking and tugged her along with him.

Wow. She was going to the slammer.

For the first time since running into Russ she didn’t say what popped into her head. She didn’t think it would improve his mood if she started singing “Jailhouse Rock.”

* * *

Russ Campbell walked Lani Dalton into the sheriff’s office, his temper rising with every step. This was the last place he needed to be—and she was the last person he should be with.

Her eyes were wide, but she looked more curious than scared. “Wow, I’ve never been in the slammer before. This is kind of exciting.”

Glancing around the room he tried to see the hub of Rust Creek Falls law enforcement through her eyes. It was a big room with a couple of desks, one where the dispatcher sat. The other was for the deputy, although Gage was short one right now. While the sheriff looked for a replacement, Russ filled in when he had time off from his detective job with the Kalispell Police Department. A room off to the right had a closing door, and that’s where the sheriff worked. The place wasn’t especially intimidating, but then again, he’d worked in Denver, where the department was bigger—and so were the problems.

“If you think this is cool, wait until you see the cell.”

“Isn’t there some law against false imprisonment?”

He took her arm and led her through a doorway, where there were two six-by-eight-foot cells. Either she was naturally sassy, putting on a front to hide her nerves, or she was still not sober enough for her situation to sink in. *Sink* wasn’t the best choice of words after that surprise swim in the fountain. He couldn’t believe he’d let his guard down and should have known better than to let her distract him. But Lani had been a distraction from the first time he saw her.

“This arrest is ridiculous. My father is a lawyer, and I’ll be out of here before my dress dries.”

He figured she was trying to look defiant but with those pretty big brown eyes of hers, she only managed to come across as innocent, and they both knew she wasn’t. The drive over from the park was short, and she was still wet. He was having a devil of a time not staring at the way that bright yellow sundress clung to her small waist and curvy hips. And, dammit, the material was wet, which made it practically transparent. He didn’t need her reminding him about that.

He curled his fingers around the smooth skin of her arm and tried not to think about the fact that he could use another dunking in the fountain to cool off. “Come on. I’ll give you a guided tour of the slammer.”

“I can see it just fine from here.” She stood her ground and looked up at him, wobbling just a little. “Is it really necessary to lock me up?”

“Yes. Between the Fourth of July and that wedding reception, there’s been way too much celebrating going on in this town. I’ve been looking the other way most of the night, but things are starting to get out of hand. My job is to not let that happen.”

“So I’m the lucky one you decided to make an example of. But you don’t really work here in Rust Creek Falls,” she reminded him.

“That’s funny. Gage Christensen pretty much said he was paying me to be on duty. Sounds like work to me.” He gave her his detective glare, the one he used to intimidate people who broke the law. It came more naturally right now, since his jeans were heavy, and water squished in his boots. “Thanks to you, I’m really earning that paycheck tonight.”

“The sheriff wouldn’t have arrested me.” Her tone was defiant. “But you’re not from around here.”

Not one of us, she was saying. That struck a nerve. Before he’d left the Denver Police Department everyone had been avoiding him as if he had the plague. He was treated like an outsider for blowing the whistle on a crooked cop then busted down to patrol. When his career went backward his fiancée dumped him. So much for loyalty—and love.

“I might not live in Rust Creek Falls, but I’m the one with the badge.” He drilled her with a look. “You broke the law on my watch, Lani Dalton.”

Her eyes widened a fraction. “Since when aren’t you calling me *ma’am*?”

Not using her name was a way to keep his distance, and he’d been trying to do that since the first time he’d seen her. She had long brown hair and creamy skin that tempted a man to touch her. Resisting that temptation tested his willpower under normal circumstances, but nothing about this night was normal.

“Do you know who my father is?”

“You said he’s an attorney, but right this minute I don’t much care.” He walked her through the doorway and into one of the cells then pulled the door shut behind them. The bolt clicked into place and echoed off the bare walls.

She flinched slightly. “So, we’re locked in.”

“No,” he said. “You’re the one locked up, and I’m the cop who has the key in his pocket.”

Her eyebrow rose. “You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“You’re very confident.” Lani shrugged then walked over to the metal-framed bunk. She lifted the sheet covering the thin, plastic mattress. “Wow, five-star accommodations. That looks like a yoga mat.”

“Let me know if it’s comfortable. You’re going to be here awhile.” She wasn’t as far gone as some he’d seen under the influence. In his opinion, she could be left alone, and that was a good thing. Russ didn’t have time to babysit the princess. “It’s nuts out there, and your stunt in the fountain took me away from where I need to be.”

“Lighten up, Detective. Everyone’s just having fun.”

“I don’t think the cowboy who got decked was having such a great time.”

“Oh? I didn’t notice.” She put just a little too much innocence in those words.

“Then you’re the only one in Rust Creek Falls who didn’t. Now I have to go deal with the guy who decked him.”

“You’re not really going to arrest him?” Her bravado slipped for the first time since he’d politely suggested she exit the public fountain.

“Yeah, I am. On the upside, you’ll have some company in here tonight.”

“Seriously, you’re going to leave me alone?”

Apparently, the reality of the situation was sinking in, because some of the spunk finally seemed to drain out of her.

“You’ll be fine.”

“I don’t think so.” She put a shaking hand up to her forehead and swayed on her feet, the color draining from her face. “I’m feeling a little dizzy. I think I might be sick.”

In one stride he was beside her, sliding an arm around her waist. She collapsed against him, clingier than the wet dress. She was deadweight, and her hand clutched him, just below his belt, trying to hang on and keep from falling. He practically carried her to the bunk and settled her on it, sitting beside her.

“Take deep breaths. Put your head between your knees.”

“I’ll fall on my face.” She sat stiffly on the thin, plastic mattress, hands clenched into fists on either side of her, and breathed deeply several times. “I think I’m feeling a little better.”

Russ studied her face and noted the color was returning. “I’ll get you some water.”

“No.” That was a little more emphatic than necessary. “What I mean is, I’m afraid it might come back up.”

“After drinking too much, the best thing you can do is hydrate. And a couple of aspirin wouldn’t hurt, either.”

There was something about her that brought out his protective streak, but he chalked it up to doing his duty. The job he could handle, but being in this small space with Lani Dalton was trouble. There wasn’t enough room for him to avoid the sweet scent of her skin. That made him want to lean in even closer and find out if that sassy, sarcastic mouth of hers would taste as good as he’d been imagining for months now.

Abruptly, he stood and turned his back on her.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

Behind him there was the sound of the plastic mattress creaking as she shifted her weight. He turned, and the innocent expression he’d noted moments ago was back in place. She sat quietly looking at him, hands folded in her lap. Her dress was still wet, and the sight of the thin cotton clinging to her breasts ignited the familiar conflict inside him.

He was really attracted to her but knew that acting on it was a complication he just didn’t need. Not now, not ever. His heart had taken a hit, through and through, and that experience made him determined not to be a fool again. His new philosophy was never trust anyone unless they gave you a reason to. So he’d decided not to get to know Lani Dalton better. And she’d done nothing tonight to make him regret the decision. Although that wet dress was giving his self-control a real workout.

“Okay, I have to go now. Looks like you’re fine.”

“I still feel nauseous. What if I have to throw up?”

“Do what you have to do.” And he would do the same, which meant getting out of here, away from her. “And right now I have to go make rounds and investigate that assault-and-battery incident. I’ll be back before you even know I’m gone.”

“Solitary will be an improvement.” She folded her arms over her chest, trying to look bored.

“Be sure to put that on the customer satisfaction survey.”

But Russ was sure some vulnerability was trickling out. And with that thought he knew it was past time to get the hell away from her. He moved the short distance to the barred door at the same time feeling his jeans pocket for the key. The familiar outline of the metal wasn’t in the usual place so he dug deeper. It wasn’t there. He checked his left pocket then the back ones.

Nothing.

“That’s the damndest thing.”

“Is there a problem?” She didn’t sound the least bit anxious.

“I don’t have the key.” He met her gaze, waiting for her to mock this turn of events.

Lani held her breath, waiting for Russ to figure out that she’d taken his keys and shoved them under the “yoga mat.” She was feeling very bold for some reason and figured she had nothing to lose. The plan was conceived in desperation, and she didn’t expect to get away with it, but couldn’t think of any other way to stop him from arresting her brother.

“I guess you forgot to put the keys in your pocket. And that’s understandable considering how crazy it is out there. It feels like a horror movie—night of the living party-animal apocalypse.”

One corner of his mouth tilted up, and for a moment she thought he was going to give her one of his adorable smiles. But he seemed to catch himself then pulled his cell phone from a back pocket.

“I’ll just give Gage a call.” He pushed some keys and frowned. “Apparently, water and sensitive electronic devices are incompatible.”

“I’m so sorry.” And she really was. Ruining his phone hadn’t crossed her mind when all she could think about was helping her brother. And the longer Russ was distracted with her, the better it would be for Anderson. So she was kind of glad he couldn’t call the sheriff. “I’ll pay for a new phone,” she offered.

He glared at her. “I don’t suppose you have one that works.”

“I do. Because it’s at home.”

“A likely story.”

“Seriously?” She glanced down at her dress and realized the still-damp cotton made her body half a step from being naked. She should be embarrassed, but that tendency toward boldness was still firing on all cylinders. “I rode to the park with my parents and left my purse at home. And really, if I had one on me, it would be as wet as yours. It would also have to be somewhere a gentleman wouldn’t go looking for it.”

“No one would accuse me of being a gentleman, but you’re right about one thing. There’s no point in searching even if you’re lying.”

“Well, that hurts my feelings.”

“Which part?” he asked.

That she was a liar? Or her body was not interesting enough? “Both.”

But what was that saying about poking an angry bear? Lani had lost count of all the times Russ Campbell had been at the Ace in the Hole with Gage Christensen and never talked to her. She’d asked Gage about him and knew Russ was a detective on the Kalispell Police Department and had moved back to Montana from Denver. No one knew why.

Now she was finally having a conversation with him, but it was about her being deceptive and lacking even a speck of sex appeal. That was disappointing and humiliating in equal parts. And, if that wasn’t bad enough, now there was every reason to believe he really didn’t like her. Well, he was pretty cute, but that didn’t stop her from being a little annoyed with him right now, too.

He sighed. “I just meant that if you had a phone, yours wouldn’t work, either.”

“It’s really not important,” she finally said.

That all-seeing hazel gaze of his narrowed on her. “You’re one cool customer, Lani Dalton.”

“Oh?” Cool as in attractive, intriguing and alluring? Or cool as in nifty and annoying?

“Yeah. I’ve seen women fall apart over being stopped for a speeding ticket, and you don’t seem the least bit upset about the fact that you’ve been arrested and locked up in jail.”

“So are you,” she reminded him.

“But I’m not in legal trouble.”

Okay, he won that round. She wasn’t too worried about the fountain dance, although after tonight probably a notice would be posted on it with a warning to keep out. But destroying his phone and helping herself to the jail cell keys could be a problem. Intellectually, she knew that, but her lovely buzz made it impossible to care.

“I’m not really worried. Ben Dalton is my father. You may have heard he has an excellent legal reputation.”

“Ah.” He nodded, but the tone and his expression hinted at a deep well of sarcasm.

“What does that mean?”

“That you’re the little princess. Rules don’t apply to you because daddy can find a loophole and make it all go away.” He moved back until bumping up against the bars stopped him.

Lani was pretty sure he was staying as far away from her as he could get, and it bummed her more than a little.

“You don’t know my father. Or me.” She didn’t much care about the angry defensiveness in her tone. Russ had gone out of his way *not* to know her. “He took an oath to uphold the law and wouldn’t compromise his principles. Ever. Not even for one of his children.”

That was the truth and probably why Anderson hadn’t said anything to anyone else in the family about his legal trouble and made her swear not to, either. She’d caught her brother at a weak moment, and he apparently had been feeling the stress of carrying this burden alone. That’s the only reason she knew.

Russ didn’t say anything, but clearly he wasn’t a happy camper. And who could blame him? Her cotton dress was drying faster than his jeans and T-shirt, and those boots were probably dead to him. She should offer to pay for those, too.

“Look, Russ—”

“I should be out there. Gage hired me to help him keep the peace with so much going on today, and now he’s alone.” He started pacing. “There’s no telling when he’ll check in. It might not be until morning what with half the town three sheets to the wind.”

Guilt weighed on Lani. If only she knew that Anderson and Travis had walked away and not escalated the situation, she would confess her sins and take her punishment. But she didn’t know and had to keep up her distraction as long as possible.

“Okay,” she said, “we’re stuck. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. We should talk.”

The look he sent in her direction was ironic. “I suppose it was too much to hope we wouldn’t have to.”

“Are you always this mean or do I just bring out the worst in you?” She met his gaze and refused to look away. “We should get to know each other.”

“That’s really not a good idea—”

“It could be. You have an opinion of me. I have an opinion of you and maybe we’re both wrong. Attitude is everything. Think of it as an opportunity to make a better impression.” She refused to be put off by the stubborn, skeptical expression on his face. “Okay, I’ll start.”

[Chapter Two](#)

Russ stared long and hard at his prisoner. She was sitting on the bunk in a jail cell looking all wide-eyed and perky and pretty damned appealing. If she was the least bit intimidated by him or the situation, he couldn’t see it. Although as she’d so helpfully pointed out, he was locked in, too, which kind of took the starch out of his intimidation factor.

How the hell could he have forgotten to put the keys in his pocket before walking her in here? That wasn’t like him. The movement was automatic, muscle memory.

As much as he hated to admit it, she was probably right. It *had* been a crazy night, and there’d been a lot of calls to the sheriff’s office. He’d been busy, distracted.

Now he was uncomfortably and undeniably distracted by his “roomie,” who wanted to share personal information. Last time he’d checked, it wasn’t a cop’s job to spill his guts to a detainee.

“You want to join hands and sing ‘Kumbaya’ because it’s not bad enough that we’re locked up together?” he asked.

“No.” She shifted on the bunk and spread out the damp skirt of her sundress. “Look, the fact is that we’re stuck in here, unless one of us can bend steel in their bare hands, and that sure isn’t me.”

“Superman. That’s just great.” He nodded grimly.

Doing the right thing had cost Russ his law enforcement career in Denver, but somehow that never seemed to happen to the legendary comic book superhero. And Lois Lane never dumped him when everyone else thought he was gum on the bottom of their shoe.

“Seriously, Russ, we don’t know how long it might be before someone comes looking.”

“I don’t think it will be that long before Gage checks in.” He hoped he was right about that, but the situation in the park hadn’t been quieting down when he’d brought Lani in.

“That’s just wishful thinking because obviously you don’t like me very much.”

“Arresting you wasn’t personal.” Russ figured it was best not to put a finer point on that statement by saying he didn’t *want* to like her. There was a difference. “It’s my job.”

“Whatever.” She met his gaze. “We could sit here in awkward silence. Or we can make conversation to help the time pass a little faster.”

He hated to admit it, but she had a point. “Okay. But if you say anything about braiding each other’s hair, I’m pretty sure my head will explode.”

“If only.” She gathered the stringy, drying strands of her long hair and lifted them off her neck. “I’d give anything to be able to brush this mess.”

“You should have thought of that before dancing in the fountain—”

She held up a finger to stop his words. “I thought we had a truce.”

“My bad.”

“Okay, then. Have a seat.” She patted the mattress next to her. “There’s nowhere else to sit in here. I’ll have to have a word with your decorator about what a conversation area should look like.”

He didn’t want to sit next to her but couldn’t say so or he’d have to explain why. And he didn’t quite understand that himself, other than the fact that he’d just arrested her. Since she occupied the center of the bunk and showed no inclination to move, he took the end, as far away from her as he could get.

Lani looked at him expectantly and when he didn’t say anything, she cleared her throat. “I was born here in Rust Creek Falls twenty-six years ago, number five of six children.”

“Braiding hair is starting to sound like a high-speed freeway pursuit.” When she laughed, the merry sound burrowed inside him, landing like a gentle rain that softened rock-hard soil.

“Compared to what you do my life *is* boring, but I like it. And I love this town.” She shrugged. “I live with my parents here in Rust Creek Falls and work on the family ranch, which is north of town. I do everything from mucking out stalls to riding fence and feeding stock.”

“What about working at the Ace in the Hole?”

“That’s part-time. Rosey Traven, the owner, is the best boss in the world.”

Russ had been in his share of bars and seen how badly guys who drank too much behaved. A woman as beautiful as Lani would be a first-class target for come-ons and drunken passes. The thought of some jerk hitting on her made him almost as mad as the water in his boots. But all he said was, “It probably gets rough in there.”

“It can sometimes. But Rosey’s husband, Sam, was a navy SEAL. He knows three hundred ways to immobilize a creep with a cocktail napkin.”

That made Russ feel a little better, but not much. “What do you like about the job?”

Her shrug did mind-blowing things to what was under the top part of that sundress. The material was thin, still damp, and he could almost see her breasts. They looked just about perfect to him and made his hands ache to touch her and find out for sure. And this wasn’t the first time he’d experienced that particular feeling around her, but he’d always made sure not to get too close.

“I’m a people person,” she finally said. “I like chatting with the regulars, and almost everyone in Rust Creek Falls comes in to hang out at some point or other. You know, guys’ nights, girls’ night out, poker games...or people just coming in for a burger and a beer. I like hearing what’s going on in their lives and apparently, that makes them want to talk to me.”

He laughed, but there was no humor in the sound.

“What’s funny?” she asked, a small frown marring the smooth skin of her forehead.

“My job is the polar opposite. I’m a detective for Kalispell PD, and no one wants to talk to me.”

“I see what you mean.” She smiled her happy, under-the-influence smile. “But can you blame them? It makes a difference when your job is selling drinks as opposed to interrogating a perp.”

“I suppose.”

She half turned toward him in her earnestness to make him understand. “I’m somewhere between a family counselor and confessor. People feel comfortable baring their heart and soul to me, and I take that as an obligation. I consider it part of my job description to offer sensible advice or sometimes to simply listen. Whatever the situation calls for.”

“I had no idea the job was so demanding.”

“Go ahead. Make fun.” There was annoyance in the look she settled on him. “But I think people trust me.”

“In what way?”

“Rust Creek Falls is a small town. Everyone knows everyone, and some people think that gives them the right to every last detail of a person’s life. But some things shouldn’t be spread around. I know the difference, and folks who know me know I’ll keep that sort of information to myself.”

“I know what you mean about a small town,” he said.

“How? Kalispell is a pretty big city compared to Rust Creek.”

“I grew up in Boulder Junction. It’s a small town about halfway between here and Kalispell.”

She nodded. “I know it. That’s farming country, right?”

“Yeah. My family has one. Mainly they grow wheat, corn and hay. But they have smaller crops, too.”

“Like what?”

“Apples. Potatoes. Barley.”

“Sounds like a pretty big farm.”

“Yeah.” One of the biggest in Montana.

“Family, huh? Does that mean you weren’t found under an arugula leaf?”

“It does.” The corners of his mouth turned up a little in spite of his resolve to keep his distance. “I actually have parents and siblings.”

“Plural?” she asked. “Boys? Girls?”

“Two brothers and a sister. I’m the oldest.” He didn’t usually talk this much, but there was something about Lani Dalton, something in her eyes that said she was sincerely interested. She was listening, and he didn’t even have to buy a drink, just arrest her for drinking too much.

“So you grew up in a small town, too. Have you done any traveling?” she asked.

“Some.”

“Lucky you. I’ve never really been anywhere.” There was a wistful expression in her eyes. “Have you ever thought about leaving Montana?”

“No.” Not since he’d come back from Colorado a couple years ago.

“Really?”

Russ had done enough interrogations to spot a technique for coaxing information out of someone who was reluctant to part with it. He wasn’t inclined to do that. “Really.”

She studied him for several moments then nodded, as if she knew the subject was closed. “Tell me about your brothers and sister. Anyone married? Do you have any nieces or nephews?”

“No to all of the above. What about you?”

“I have two sisters and three brothers. The oldest two were at Braden and Jennifer’s wedding—”

“What?” he asked when she stopped talking.

“Nothing.” But her body language changed. She sat up straighter and shook her head. There was something she didn’t want to talk about. “My brother Caleb got married last year. My sister Paige took the plunge the year before that, and now she and her husband have a baby boy.”

“Good for them.”

“Yeah, they seem happy. But I’m not sure it would work for me.”

On a night full of surprises, that might have been the biggest one yet. “Doesn’t every girl dream of a long white dress and walking down the aisle?”

She laughed. “I’m not every girl. And in case you didn’t get the memo, a woman doesn’t need a man to be happy and fulfilled.”

“Spoken like a woman who’s been dumped.” He was watching her and saw a slight tightening of her full lips, indicating he’d gotten that one right.

Irritated, she leaned in closer to make a point. “Is that observation based on crack investigative skill, Detective Campbell?”

“Nope. It’s based more on gut instinct.”

“Wow, who knew I was going to get locked up with Dr. Phil?”

“I have my moments.” He could feel the heat from her body and her breath on his cheek. The sensations were taking him to a place he was trying very hard not to go. “You know, Lani, it’s none of my business, but I don’t think you should let one bad experience sour you on marriage.”

“Why? Because you’re married and highly recommend it?”

“No.”

“Ever been married?”

“No.”

“Then how are you qualified to endorse marriage?”

“There’s a lot to be said for it.” He hoped that didn’t sound as lame as he thought, especially because it didn’t really answer the question. He just kind of liked the way her eyes flashed when she was annoyed. It made the green and gold flecks stand out, warm colors that hinted at the fire inside.

“Like what?” she demanded.

“Well...” He thought for several moments. “Having someone waiting for you at the end of the day.” He’d missed that when Alexis walked out on him. “Someone there to listen to you bellyache about the bad stuff. And celebrate the good.”

“I have girlfriends for that.” She slid a little closer, practically quivering with indignation. “Frankly, I don’t get the appeal of being with one person for the rest of your life. Guys just stand you up. Make promises they don’t intend to keep. I mean, seriously? The very expression—tying the knot. Sounds an awful lot like a noose around your neck.”

“You said yourself that marriage is working for your brother and sister,” he challenged.

“Yeah, well, those two always were the black sheep of the family. Who wants to be tied down? Take the plunge? Think about that. Every expression referring to wedded bliss has a negative connotation. And I don’t think I’d like having to answer to someone else when I want to come and go.”

If that’s what she wanted, why should it bother him? And that, in a nutshell, was the damn problem. It did bother him. The idea of her playing the field seemed wrong. When confronted with right and wrong, wrong tweaked his temper every time.

“You know what?” he said. “Forget I mentioned it.”

She rolled her eyes. “How come your badge is all bent out of shape? You brought it up.”

“No, you did,” he reminded her. “Asking about my family and telling me about yours.”

“I thought most guys wanted to be bachelors, but you’re the one pushing the perks of matrimony. I disagree with everything you said, and now you’re crabby—” She stopped. “Make that *more* crabby.”

She was full of intensity and obviously capable of strong feelings. More than his next breath he wanted to hold all that passion in his arms. And every rational part of his brain not drenched in testosterone was telling him to move as far away from her as he could get. The problem was the locked door meant he couldn’t go anywhere. Shutting down this conversation was his only choice.

“You are absolutely right. Being on my own is good. I like being on my own.” His face was only inches from hers. “The best thing about my life is not having any commitments.”

“A girl could get a serious case of whiplash the way you change your mind. Just what makes you so happy about not being committed?”

Before Russ even knew what was happening, he closed the small distance between them. “Because if I were committed, I couldn’t do this.”

He hadn't planned to kiss her, didn't know he was going to until his lips touched hers. But once it happened, he couldn't seem to stop. She had, without a doubt, the sweetest mouth he'd ever tasted. He cupped her smooth, soft cheek in his hand, ready to go wherever she would take him. Her sigh of contentment said she'd take him somewhere special, make him forget where they were.

That thought was like getting a bucket of ice water dumped over his head. They were in jail, dammit. With an effort, he pulled back and dropped his hand. "I'm sorry. That was wrong."

Lani blinked at him, trying to focus her fuzzy brain. "Why?"

"I'm an officer of the law. Using a position of power to take advantage of you is the very definition of sexual harassment. You have every right to be upset."

Upset? Lani wasn't the least bit upset. He'd finally noticed her! He'd kissed her and it felt really, really good. She wanted him to notice her some more. "I'm not upset."

"Well, I wouldn't blame you if you added sexual harassment to that false imprisonment complaint."

"Why did you really stop?" She slid closer, until their thighs were touching, and her arm brushed his. The heat of just that small contact threatened to make her go up in flames.

"I've sworn to uphold the law. There are rules." His voice was ragged, and he was breathing hard.

So was she. And right this moment she didn't give a flying fig about rules.

"Maybe rules were made to be broken." She searched his eyes for a moment and then leaned in and kissed him.

She felt his hesitation and heard him make a sound that was somewhere between a groan and a curse. Suddenly, he was kissing her back, touching her everywhere, and she was tugging the shirt from his waistband. All she could think about was getting closer. The sound of their ragged breathing filled the small space.

"Damn it. I don't have protection." Frustration snapped in his voice.

"It's okay," she whispered. "I'm on the pill."

"Oh, thank God."

He slid her dress up to her waist then yanked his shirt off and lowered his jeans. She couldn't believe that he wanted her as much as she did him. Still, it seemed they'd been heading toward this since the moment he'd scooped her into his arms earlier. Never taking his mouth from hers, he gently lowered her to the mattress and slid her panties off. He ran his hand down her side, letting his fingers graze her breast. Everywhere he touched she caught fire, but it wasn't nearly enough.

"Lani, I want you." The words were hardly more than a breath against her lips.

All she could say was yes and that was all he needed to hear. When he tenderly and carefully entered her, she wrapped her legs around his waist. With every stroke he took her higher until pleasure exploded through her and she cried out from the sheer power of the feelings.

"Lani—" A groan cut off his words, and he went still then found his own release.

Their breathing slowed and returned to normal, the only sound in the small cell. Cuddled up to Russ, being held in his strong arms, made Lani decide that getting arrested wasn't so bad, after all. She wasn't sure what she'd been drinking at the wedding reception, but something had lowered her inhibitions and let her go for it.

And suddenly she was really sleepy and found her eyes sliding shut.

She wasn't sure how long she dozed, but sometime later she felt him move.

"My arm is numb."

Lani blinked her eyes open at the sound of the deep voice. It took her several moments to realize where she was. And what she'd done. What *they'd* done, right here in the cell. And he'd let her sleep, long enough for his arm to go numb. That was awfully sweet.

“We better get dressed.” Without waiting for a response, Russ rolled away from her and off the bunk. He picked up her panties and handed them to her. Then turned his back while she righted her clothes.

“Thanks.” Although he was correct that they should dress, she missed the warmth of his arms around her, his body pressed to hers. And he’d gone back to the good-looking guy who didn’t notice her.

A little while ago they’d been as intimate as a man and woman could be, but now he wouldn’t even look at her, and you could cut the awkwardness with a dull knife. She straightened her dress then stared at the bars. If they weren’t locked in, she could quietly slip away, but any walk of shame was limited to a six-by-eight-foot cell.

“I feel as if I should say that this isn’t something I normally do.” Russ met her gaze.

“Me, either.”

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You look kind of—I don’t know.” His mouth thinned to a straight line, clearly regretting what happened. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She shook her head. An apology implied what they’d done was wrong, and she refused to believe that. The responsibility for them being in this situation was hers, and she had to confess. “Look, I need to tell you something—”

He held up his hand to stop her. “I know what you’re going to say. I guess technically it’s morning and you hate yourself.”

“No, I—”

The outer door opened and slammed closed. “Russ? You in here?”

“Back here,” he called. There was a grim look on his face. Probably because he was about to face his boss and explain how he got locked in here.

Gage appeared in the doorway and did a double take when he saw them in the cell. “What the hell?”

“Boy, am I glad to see you.” Russ dragged his fingers through his hair.

“You want to explain to me what’s going on here?” the sheriff asked.

“Not really. But I guess you should know, since you’re the boss.” Russ took a deep breath. “I lost the key.”

A wry look settled on Gage’s face. “I’m not a detective like you, but I sort of figured that out. It’s the part where you’re in the cell with Lani Dalton that could use some kind of explanation.”

“I arrested her for creating a public disturbance.”

“It’s true,” said Lani, looking as apologetic as possible—and truthfully, she felt pretty bad at the moment. At least, about nearly getting caught doing the deed with Russ. She’d only meant to stop him from arresting her brother, not get him in trouble altogether! “I was dancing in the park fountain. And I pulled him in. I swear I didn’t have liquor. Not really. They’d said that punch was only sparkling wine, but *punch* was sure the right word for the wallop it gave me—”

“This is my responsibility—” Russ’s voice was clipped.

She felt the least she could do was come to his defense, since this was all her fault. But he gave her a don’t-do-me-any-favors glare that kept her silent.

“Be that as it may,” Gage said, “Russ, I’d like to know why you were on that side of the barred door when it automatically closed.”

“Lani—the prisoner—was anxious about being left alone. And argumentative.”

“You couldn’t have calmed her down and argued with her while standing over here?” Shaking his head, Gage put a hand on the barred door in question. “Rookie mistake.”

“How long before I live this down?” Russ asked.

“Hard to say. Could take on legend status,” the sheriff told him, grinning. He inserted the key, and the lock opened with a loud click. “Good thing I have another set of keys or you’d be stuck in there a whole lot longer.”

Lani was okay with that, but one look at Russ told her that one minute more than necessary in here with her was about as appealing as brain surgery with a chain saw. When the door slid wide, Russ walked out and Lani started to follow him. He stopped, and she ran into his broad back.

“Not so fast.” He turned and looked down at her. “In case it slipped your mind, I arrested you.”

It kind of *had* slipped her mind, what with having sex in the slammer. She may have locked them in, but he’d started *that*. All things considered, the park incident felt like years instead of hours ago, and her head was starting to pound.

“Let her go, Russ.” Gage rested his hands on his hips. “Given the way this night has gone, her behavior is small potatoes. Sometimes you can pick and choose which hill to die on, and this is one of those times. She’s not a hardened criminal, and it was nothing more than mischief. You and I have more important things to deal with right now.”

Russ looked at the sheriff for several moments then nodded. “Whatever you say.”

“Do you need a ride home, Lani?” Gage asked.

“No.” She was already feeling guilty for taking up law enforcement time on false pretenses.

“Okay, then. Don’t get into any more trouble and make me regret cutting you some slack.” Gage gave her the intimidating lawman look that was becoming familiar tonight.

She saluted. “Yes, sir.”

Gage grinned again then turned and walked out, leaving them alone on the free side of the cell door. Lani was feeling equally happy to be sprung and guilty for what she’d done. Even though protecting her brother was a sound enough reason as far as she was concerned. But all of a sudden it seemed very important that Russ not think too badly of her.

She cleared her throat. “Russ, I just want to say—”

“Not now, Lani. I’ve got work to do. And first I have to make sure you get home okay.”

He walked her to the door of the sheriff’s office then opened it and waited for her to go outside. When she did, he let the automatic locking door close behind them then moved to the sheriff’s cruiser parked at the curb and opened the rear door. She had no choice but to get in.

Shouldn’t she feel better about this reprieve? About this get-out-of-jail-free card? She probably would except that she felt guilty, and Russ refused to even look at her.

So nothing had changed. He was back to ignoring her.

Chapter Three

When Russ pulled the sheriff’s department cruiser to a stop in front of her house, Lani opened the rear door. It was a short ride from the office, but he hadn’t said a word to her the whole time. The overhead light revealed the tension tightening his jaw.

“Can you get inside by yourself?” he asked.

She almost winced at the curt, cold tone. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

“There might not be anyone home. You don’t have a purse and that means no keys.”

Guilt swept through her, and she wished for another cup of wedding reception punch and whatever magical ingredient had made her bold and fearless. She didn’t feel that way now.

“I can get in. Thanks.” She met his gaze. “Look, Russ, let me just say—”

“Please close the door, Lani.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. Good night.” Empty words because she knew his night had already been anything but good. Thanks to her. But the next time she saw him at the Ace in the Hole, she would buy him a beer and not let him ignore her. “I appreciate you bringing me home.”

She got out, shut the cruiser door then watched until the red taillights disappeared when he turned the corner. One glance at the house’s dark windows told her that her parents and sister were in bed, which was a big relief. There might just be a chance that her fountain performance would slide by under the Dalton family radar.

Her parents kept an emergency house key hidden in the backyard under one of the bricks that lined the patio. She retrieved it and let herself in the French door to the family room. Moving quietly

through the shadowy interior toward the kitchen, she saw the microwave's green digital readout of the time. Holy cow, how did it get to be so late?

Apparently, time really did fly when one was having fun. And she really had been—between the time she'd gotten Russ talking about himself and the moment he'd frozen her out after making love to her. Probably she should feel remorse about being “easy” but couldn't muster it. What happened had really meant something to her but now, thinking about being in his arms, the experience seemed surreal, as if she'd been dreaming.

It was good she wouldn't have to face her family right now. She'd have time for her head to clear and sort out what went down before seeing anyone.

Suddenly, she heard the click of a light switch and lights blazed on.

“Where in the world have you been?” Her sister, Lindsay, was standing at the bottom of the stairs where the kitchen, family room and front hall all came together.

Startled, Lani let out a screech. “Dear God, you scared the crap out of me.”

“Sorry.” Her sister didn't sound sorry. She sounded irritated and anxious. “I heard noises and came down to check it out.”

“Why are you still up?”

“Couldn't sleep. I was worried. In the park I looked everywhere for you. We were supposed to meet after the fireworks and come home together.”

“Unless one of us hooked up, remember?” When they'd discussed the plan, Lani had added that but was joking. She wasn't psychic and never in the world could have predicted she would hook up with Russ.

“I guess that means you were with a guy?” Lindsay's brown hair was pulled into a messy ponytail on top of her head. She was wearing boxer-style sleep shorts with SpongeBob SquarePants printed on them and a pink, spaghetti-strapped tank top.

“Define *with*,” Lani hedged.

“Look, I saw you get out of the sheriff's car just now. Why did he drive you home? Something is up, and I want to know what it is.”

Her sister's voice was a little louder, and Lani glanced at the stairs leading to the second floor, where her parents were sleeping. “Shh. You'll wake Mom and Dad.”

“I'm okay with that.” Lindsay folded her arms over her chest. “What in the world has gotten into everyone tonight? You disappeared. Travis and Anderson got into it with Skip Webster in the park—”

After what happened with Russ in jail, Lani had forgotten about her brother. “Is he okay?”

“Skip is fine. He has a fat lip, but with that temper of his it's not the first time.”

“Not Skip! Anderson. And Travis,” she added.

“The boys are fine. Upstairs sleeping it off. Anderson had too much to drink to drive himself back to his place and bunked in his old room for the night. But it's not like them to drink that much.” Lindsay gave her an accusing look. “I could have used your help. Where were you? Are you okay? And why did the sheriff bring you home?”

“Technically it wasn't the sheriff,” she said cautiously.

“That's not the point.” But then she said, “So who was it?”

“Russ Campbell.”

“Who?”

“I've told you about him. The detective from Kalispell PD who comes in to the Ace in the Hole.” *And acts as if I'm invisible*, she thought.

Lindsay looked puzzled for a moment, then the confusion cleared. “Yeah. The really cute cop who doesn't know you're alive?”

He does now, Lani thought. After what they did, he would have a hard time ignoring her from now on. But she only said, “That's the one. He was working a shift for Gage Christensen because of the holiday and wedding reception in the park.”

“Smart,” Lindsay said. “It was crazy out there. I still can’t believe I had the guts to get between our brothers and Skip Webster. It’s weird. And all I had to drink was the punch from the reception.”

“Weird, all right,” Lani agreed.

“And you still haven’t explained where *you* were tonight.”

“Oh, you know—”

“Not really. And that’s why I’m asking.” Lindsay’s blue eyes narrowed.

Lani wasn’t up for this. “Look, just because you’re in law school and working in Dad’s office this summer doesn’t mean you can cross-examine me.”

“And just because I’m the baby of the family doesn’t mean I’m not entitled to know what’s going on. If you won’t tell me where you were, I’m sure Dad can get it out of you. We both know how good he is.”

Her sister half turned, as if to head upstairs and make good on her threat. “Wait,” Lani said. “Don’t wake him. It’s late.”

“Okay, then, spill.”

She took a deep breath and said, “I was arrested.”

“What?”

“I was dancing in the park fountain. Singing, too. When Russ Campbell tried to pull me out, I pulled him in.” Lani shrugged. “I forced him to take me to jail.”

“Why would you do that?” Lindsay blinked, completely at a loss.

“Seemed like a good way to keep Detective Campbell from arresting Anderson for assault and battery.”

“So you took one for Team Dalton?” The younger sister shook her head. “That fight was no big deal.”

“But Skip Webster was demanding someone be arrested, and Russ seemed more than happy to oblige.”

“But there was no real harm done. Surely Dad would have gotten Anderson out of jail and smoothed it over.”

“I figured it would go easier for me. Being a woman. And being a public nuisance is less serious than punching someone.”

“You do realize,” Lindsay started, “that Dad would say you should have let our intoxicated brothers suffer the consequences of their actions?”

That sounded about right for Ben Dalton, Lani thought. But she couldn’t reveal the real reason it was necessary to keep Anderson’s record spotless. When their brother was ready, he would tell the rest of the family.

“At the time, it seemed like a good idea to keep Russ distracted.”

“Russ? Sounds like you got pretty chummy with him in the clink.” Lindsay stared her down. “You’re not saying anything, and I know that look on your face.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She knew exactly what her sister meant. They were close enough that the sisters knew if one wasn’t telling the whole truth.

“Then I’ll put a finer point on it.” Lindsay moved closer. “You just said you had to keep Russ distracted. That sounds premeditated to me. And you’re on a first-name basis with him. Just what did you do to keep him distracted?”

Lani felt heat creep up her neck and settle in her cheeks. If only she could have put a bag over her head.

Lindsay’s eyes grew wide even though Lani hadn’t said a word. “You didn’t.”

“Of course I didn’t sleep with him.”

“I didn’t *say* you slept with him. What makes you think that’s what I meant? Why is that the first thing that popped into your head?”

“Good gravy, Lindsay.” Lani had no doubt her sister would be a very good lawyer someday. “You sound like a prosecutor.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” There was a pleased expression on her pretty face just before her eyes narrowed. “But I’m not stupid, sis. Something happened between you and Russ. You were gone for hours, and I’d like an explanation.”

“It’s not a big deal.” Liar, she thought. She would throw her sister a bone and get her off that line of questioning. “We were in the locked cell together. I managed to take his keys and hide them. And before you start, I didn’t want him to dump me there just so he could go back to the park and arrest Anderson.”

“This just gets better and better.” Lindsay shook her head. “I’m speechless.”

“That’s a first.”

“How did you finally get out?”

“Gage came looking for Russ. He let us out. When Russ wanted to keep me in jail, the sheriff talked him out of it and said there were bigger problems to deal with.”

“That’s true,” her sister said. “But I can’t believe how underhanded you are.”

“You say underhanded, I say resourceful. The good news is that Anderson is in the clear.”

Lindsay met her gaze. “You’re the one I’m worried about. He didn’t get arrested. I hope Russ doesn’t change his mind and press charges.”

Lani hoped so, too.

* * *

When her alarm clock went off at zero-dark-thirty, Lani felt as if she’d just closed her eyes. But the holiday was over and she had to work at the ranch today. The cows and horses still got hungry and needed attention even if their humans got only a couple hours of sleep. As motivational speeches went it wasn’t great, but she didn’t have the energy to kick herself in the ass.

She dragged on jeans, shirt and boots. Pulled her hair into a ponytail, brushed her teeth, washed her face and put on sunscreen. On her way downstairs she smelled coffee, and her attitude perked up a little, no pun intended. No one in this house but her was ever up this early and brewed coffee, so there must be a God.

She walked into the kitchen and saw Anderson grabbing the bottle of Tylenol from the cupboard above the coffeepot. She was happy that he was here and not in a jail cell.

“Can I have a couple of those, too?” she asked.

He held out the bottle. “You look terrible.”

“Thanks. So do you.” Lani shook some of the white caplets into her palm. “I feel as if there are teeny, tiny elves hammering a Sousa march on the inside of my skull.”

“Me, too.” He poured coffee into a mug and held it out. “Can you give me a ride to my truck? It’s at the park.”

“Sure. How did you get home last night?”

“I’m not exactly sure.” He dragged his fingers through his brown hair. “It’s all a blur. And I don’t even know why. I feel hungover, but all I had to drink was that punch at Braden and Jennifer’s wedding reception.”

She blew on her coffee. “So you don’t remember giving Skip Webster a fat lip?”

There was a frown in his blue eyes as he flexed the fingers on his right hand. “Yeah, that would explain the bruised knuckles, but it’s all a blur.”

“Hitting someone isn’t your style at all, Anderson.” She’d always looked up to her brother and knew what a good man he was. He’s the one who told her Jase Harvey was a sweet-talking charmer who would crush her heart then held her while she cried when he turned out to be right. If only she’d listened to him.

“Dad raised us boys to never start a fight. But he always said that if anyone else did, don’t run away from it.” He rubbed a calloused thumb over the thick handle of his mug.

“If it’s any consolation, I saw what happened. Skip swung at Travis when he wasn’t looking, and you stepped in. He hit you first.”

“Okay, then.” He nodded grimly and met her gaze. “If you were a spectator to that, I guess that means you stayed out of trouble.”

“Define *trouble*.”

Those big-brother blue eyes of his zeroed in on her. “What happened, Lani?”

She figured he had a right to know and was the only person she could tell the whole truth. “Russ Campbell was going to arrest you for assault and battery on Skip Webster, so I created a diversion.”

“What did you do?”

“It was hot.” She had been feeling no fear and wasn’t sure why. And just before the incident she’d thought about someone jumping into the fountain but hadn’t expected that person to be her. “I took a dip in the park fountain, and there might have been some singing and dancing involved.”

His gaze narrowed. “That’s not all, is it?”

Lani figured he had a right to know this, too, and was the only one who would understand why she did it. “I pretty much forced Russ to arrest me to keep him from carting you off to jail.”

“He actually took you in?”

“Yup.”

“Why would you do that? Lani, you should have let him come after me.”

“I couldn’t. Not with the legal challenge you’re facing. If it wasn’t about custody and visitation rights regarding your child, I would have stayed out of it. But you can’t afford any black marks, or even gray ones, on your record.”

His mouth thinned to an angry line. “I’m the one being judged even though Ginnie never saw fit to inform me that I was going to be a father.”

“No one ever said life would be fair.” That was all Lani could think to say. It wasn’t fair that Russ was going to hate her when—if—he figured out she’d taken his keys. And it really wasn’t fair that he’d kissed her and she’d responded and both of them lost control when they were locked up together.

“You okay, Lani?” Anderson gave her a funny look. “All of a sudden you went pale as a ghost.”

“Fine. Part of the hangover that for no apparent reason is shaping up to be epidemic.” She couldn’t think about the *what-ifs* or *if onlys* right now. Her brother was going through a crisis. “Surely the court will take everything into consideration. It should matter that your child’s mother didn’t tell you she was pregnant.”

“I was cheated out of that moment, which was bad enough. But she kept this child’s existence from me for ten years.”

Lani couldn’t begin to understand how he felt. But it was the weight of carrying this burden alone that had finally compelled him to confide in her when she caught him at a vulnerable moment. She would help him through it as best she could. Whatever he needed she would do, no questions asked.

“It’s not right, Anderson, what happened to you. But it’s done. All you can do now is fight for your rights. To do that you can’t afford anything but a spotless record.”

“You’ve got a point.” He sighed. “But I hate that you’re in trouble on account of me.”

“Not really. I think I’m in the clear. After Gage let us out of the cell—”

“Us? You weren’t alone?”

“That’s not important.” It was too early and she was too tired to go into it. “Gage pretty much gave me a free pass because he was too busy dealing with other stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Not sure. But I think a lot of people in town are feeling the same mysterious hangover that we are this morning.” She shrugged. “The sheriff just told me to keep my nose clean. I don’t think there will be any charges.”

“If that changes, Dad can probably help.”

“He could help you, too, if you’d let him,” she pointed out.

“I have my reasons.” Anderson shook his head. “I’m just glad you’re in the clear. I don’t want you taking a fall for me.”

“That’s not your call,” she said. “You’d do it for me or anyone else you love. Just like me, you’d protect your family and have their back.”

“You’re right.” His eyes glittered fiercely. “It’s what Daltons do. And that’s why I don’t want anyone else to know about this legal stuff. You can’t say a word to anyone in the family.”

“But, Anderson—”

“No.” He raised his voice then glanced toward the stairs, clearly concerned he’d wake someone. “Child custody cases aren’t Dad’s field of expertise. If Mom found out, she’d get attached to the idea. You know how much she wants more grandkids. And if I lose, not seeing her grandchild would break her heart. I can’t do that to them, Lani, not unless it goes my way and I get visitation rights. You promised not to say anything.”

“And I won’t.” She put her hand on his arm and met his gaze. “No one is going to find out from me.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “I really appreciate this. And I owe you one.”

“I think you’re on the hook for more than one,” she teased. “Going to jail for you should count more than that. I’m thinking you should give me whatever I want for the rest of my life.”

He grinned. “Don’t push your luck, little sister.”

“I’d never dream of it.”

“Seriously, kid, I hope spending the night in the slammer wasn’t too bad.”

“It was really hideous. I don’t care what they say about orange being the new black, it’s just not my color. And don’t even get me started on the food and those mattresses—”

He reached over and yanked her ponytail. “You definitely have a flair for the dramatic. And while it’s very entertaining, we need to get to the ranch.”

“Right.”

Why did she have to go and bring up the mattress where she’d slept with Russ Campbell? Kissing him was a highlight. Being in his arms had a very high degree of awesomeness. She almost wished he would decide to press charges. That would mean he’d have to speak to her again.

The chances were slim to none that he would drop by the Ace in the Hole while she was working, so her best hope of seeing Detective Dreamy again was to break the law.

And she *really* wanted to see him again...

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