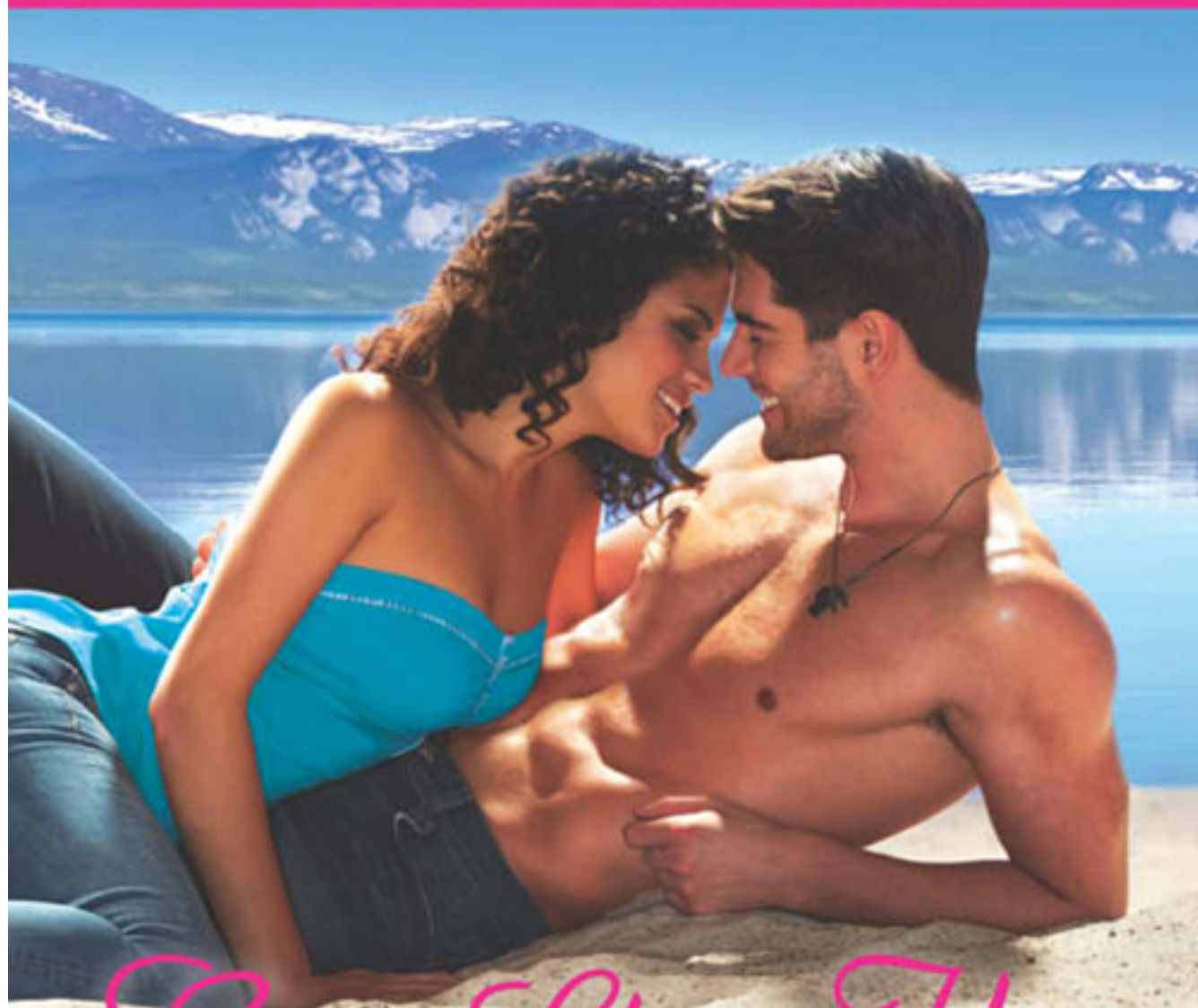


New York Times Bestselling Author

Susan Andersen



Some Like it Hot

"Guaranteed snap, sizzle and sass!"

—*New York Times* bestselling author Carly Phillips

Susan Andersen
Some Like It Hot

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Wrong for each other never felt more right...Even a lifelong traveller like Harper Summerville has to admire the scenery in Razor Bay, Washington. There's the mountains. The evergreens. The water. And Max Bradshaw, the incredibly sexy deputy sheriff. Still, Harper's only here for the summer, working covertly for her family's foundation. And getting involved with this rugged, intense former Marine would be a definite conflict of interest – professionally and personally. Max's scarred childhood left him determined to put down roots in Razor Bay, yet one look at Harper – a woman who happily lives out of a suitcase – leaves him speechless with desire for things he's never had. He might not be big on talking, but Max's toe-curling kisses are getting the message across loud and clear. Harper belongs here, with him, because things are only beginning to heat up...

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Reviewers love New York Times bestselling author

SUSAN ANDERSEN

“This warm summer contemporary melts hearts with the simultaneous blossoming of familial and romantic love.”

—Publishers Weekly on *That Thing Called Love*

“A smart, arousing, spirited escapade that is graced with a gentle mystery, a vulnerable, resilient heroine, and a worthy, wounded hero and served up with empathy and a humorous flair.”

—Library Journal on *Burning Up*

“A sexy, feel-good contemporary romance... Palpable escalating sexual tension between the pair, a dangerous criminal on the loose and a cast of well-developed secondary characters make this a winner.”

—Publishers Weekly on *Bending the Rules*

“This start of Andersen’s new series has fun and interesting characters, solid action and a hot and sexy romance.”

—RT Book Reviews on *Cutting Loose*

“Snappy and sexy... Upbeat and fun, with a touch of danger and passion, this is a great summer read.”

—RT Book Reviews on *Coming Undone*

“Lovers of romance, passion and laughs should go all in for this one.”

—Publishers Weekly on *Just for Kicks*

“Andersen again injects magic into a story that would be clichéd in another’s hands, delivering warm, vulnerable characters in a touching yet suspenseful read.”

—Publishers Weekly on *Skintight*, starred review

“A classic plot line receives a fresh, fun treatment... Well-developed secondary characters add depth to this zesty novel, placing it a level beyond most of its competition.”

—Publishers Weekly on *Hot & Bothered*

Some Like it Hot

Susan Andersen



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Dear Reader,

I am so excited about this second book in my new Razor Bay series. You first met Max Bradshaw in *That Thing Called Love*, where he took his “man of few words” reputation to new heights when he caught sight of Harper Summerville. Max’s tongue might get tied in a few knots around the sophisticated newcomer, but in a town the size of Razor Bay, he can’t avoid her.

Many of you know the setting of fictional Razor Bay holds special meaning for me. I plunked it down on the precise spot on Hood Canal—a sixty-five-mile saltwater fjord in western Washington—where my folks built a little cabin when I was nine. Long before that, I’d spend two weeks every summer running wild with my brothers and cousins, swimming in icy, buoyant water until my fingers and toes were pruney, playing until the sun sank behind the soaring Olympic Mountains, roasting marshmallows and hot dogs over blazing bonfires. This, to me, is the most wonderful spot on earth.

I imbued Max with my love for this incredible corner of the world. Having spent too many years in war-torn countries, he has no plans to leave Razor Bay again. But he’ll have his work cut out for him convincing Harper to share a life with him there....

~Susan

This is dedicated
with love

to

Jen and Margo

For always making me look way better than I would
without your priceless participation

And

to

the Mazama Crew:

Ken, Sue, Ron, Steve, Doug, Mimi, Martha & Gary
for the marvelous food, music, skiing,
snowshoeing and shopping.

And, oh, mama, for all the laughter, which is the glue
that glitters through everything else.

Love you all

~Susie

Contents

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

CHAPTER ONE

OH, MY GOD. Is he coming here?

Before Harper Summerville glanced out her front window to see Max Bradshaw striding up the sun-dappled trail between the evergreens on the inn grounds, she'd been enjoying her day off. It was fun puttering around the little playhouse-size one-room-plus-loft cottage that was part of her employee compensation as the summer activities coordinator for The Brothers Inn. She loved, loved, loved the glimpses she could catch from up here of the fjord that was Hood Canal and the soaring Olympic mountains beyond it. The spectacular scenery was what brought people to the little resort town of Razor Bay, Washington.

Seeing a huge, unsmiling man bearing down on her, however, made that enjoyment falter. And her heartbeat inexplicably pick up its pace.

He looked different than he had during their previous two brief meetings. Plus, the first time she'd seen him, as well as on the handful of occasions when she'd glimpsed him around town, he'd been wearing his deputy sheriff's uniform. But there was just no mistaking a guy that big, that hard-looking, that intense and contained for anyone else.

She blinked as he suddenly left the path and disappeared from view, then shook her head at herself. Oh, good show, Harper. Conceited much? Because, despite her cottage being the only one up here before the trail wound into the woods, it apparently hadn't been Bradshaw's destination. Breathing a sigh of relief—right?—she plugged in her earbuds and turned back to the couple of boxes she'd put off unpacking.

Within moments, she'd revived her earlier enjoyment. She loved seeing new places, loved meeting new people and diving into a new job that was never quite like any other. Since she'd structured her life to do exactly that, she was generally a happy woman.

Harper sang along with Maroon 5 as they played through her earbuds. As she efficiently unpacked the boxes of odds and ends her mother had insisted on sending her, she swiveled her hips and bopped in time to the music.

Thoughts of her mother's hopes and expectations for her, however, elicited a sigh in the midst of crooning along with Adam Levine. Gina Summerville-Hardin refused to believe that Harper could live very contentedly without a permanent base or a host of belongings, since making a home had been her way of coping with the constant moving from place to place that had been part and parcel of her husband's work. Neither Gina nor Harper's brother, Kai, had loved the adventure of seeing new countries and meeting new people the way Harper and her dad had.

Still, Harper had to admit that she adored the throw pillows and candles her mom had sent. They added a homey touch to her minuscule cabin. Admitting as much certainly didn't take away from how she chose to live and honor her dad's memory.

All the same, when the song ran its course, she thumbed through her playlist and pulled up her father's onetime theme song.

"Papa was a rolling stone," she sang along with The Temptations as she focused on finding a place to put the other items her mother had sent, given that storage space was at a premium. "Wherever he—"

Something warm brushed her elbow. Her heart climbing her throat like a monkey riding a rocket, she jerked her chin downward. She stared at the rawboned, big-knuckled masculine hand touching her.

And screamed the house down.

“Shit!” Max Bradshaw’s voice exclaimed as she ripped the earbuds from her ears and whirled to face him.

He was in the midst of taking a long-legged step away from her. His big hands were up, palms out, as if she had a howitzer aimed at his heart.

“Ms. Summerville—Harper—I’m sorry,” he said in a low, rough voice. “I knocked several times and I heard you singing, so I knew you were here. But I shouldn’t have let myself in.” Slowly lowering his hands, he stuffed them into his shorts pockets and his massive shoulders hunched up. “I sure didn’t mean to scare the sh—that is, stuffing out of you.”

Even through the embarrassment of knowing he’d seen her shaking her butt and singing off-key, it struck her that these were probably the most words she’d ever heard him string together at one time in her presence. Drawing in a deep breath and dropping the hands she’d clasped to her heart like an overwrought silent film heroine confronted by the mustache-twirling villain, she pulled herself together. “Yes, well, intention or not, Deputy Bradshaw—”

“Max,” he interjected.

“Max,” she agreed, wishing she’d simply said that in the first place. After all, not only had they been introduced on the day she’d interviewed for her job at the inn but they’d attended the same barbecue just a couple weeks ago. “As I was saying—”

Her already open front door banged against the living room wall, and they both whirled to stare at the man barreling through it. From the corner of her eye, Harper saw Max reach for his right hip, where his gun no doubt usually resided.

The stranger’s forward momentum carried him across the threshold and into the small room, the screen door slapping closed behind him. As he left the glare of sunlight flooding the porch, he coalesced into a tall, gangly man in his mid-thirties.

Then he was blocked from view as Max stepped in front of her. She leaned to peer around him.

“Are you okay, miss?” the man demanded, glancing about wildly. She assumed his eyes had adjusted to the dimmer interior lighting, for it was obvious from the way they suddenly widened that he’d gotten his first good look at Max. His prominent Adam’s apple rode the column of his throat as he swallowed audibly.

For good reason. Max was six-four if he was an inch and probably weighed in the vicinity of two-twenty.

Every ounce of it solid muscle.

But Harper had to give the resort guest credit. He was clearly outmatched, yet while he looked as though he’d give a bundle to go back out the way he’d come in, he instead moved closer and ordered firmly, “Step away from her, sir.”

“Oh, for God sake,” she heard Max mutter, and hysterical laughter bubbled up Harper’s throat. She swallowed it down as she watched Max do as directed.

Then she looked at the resort guest. “I’m okay,” she said soothingly. “It’s really not what you must think.” She ran him through her mental database. “You’re Mr. Wells, right? I believe your wife is in my sunset yoga class.”

“Sean Wells,” he agreed, shedding some of the tension that caused him to all but vibrate.

“This is Deputy Bradshaw,” she said. “I screamed because I had my earbuds in and he startled me.”

Sean relaxed a bit more, but he shot Max a skeptical look as he took in the bigger man’s khaki cargo shorts, black muscle shirt and the tribal tattoos that swirled down his right upper arm from the muscular ball of his shoulder to the bottom of his hard biceps. “You don’t look like a deputy.”

The dark-eyed gaze Max fixed on him froze the other man in place. “It’s my day off,” he said with “Just the facts, ma’am” directness.

Harper had no idea why she found that so damn titillating.

“I just came by to ask Ms. Summerville to dinner,” he added, and shock whipped her head around.

She gaped at him. “You did?” Crap. Was that her voice cracking on the last word? She hardly ever lost her poise. But in her own defense, during their previous encounters she’d gotten the impression Max viewed her as a mental lightweight. She would have sworn, too, that she hadn’t even registered on his Attraction-O-Meter.

“Yes.” Dull color climbed his angular face. “That is, Jake sent me. Jenny’s having a dinner party tonight and wants you to come.” Glancing away, he leveled an are-you-still-here look on Sean Wells.

The man immediately mumbled an excuse and melted out the door.

“Thank you,” Harper called after him, then quirked an eyebrow when the deputy turned back to her. “You sure know how to clear a room.”

“Yeah.” The shoulder with the tattoo lifted and dropped. “It’s a talent of mine.” He gave her a level look. “So, what do you want me to tell Jenny? You in or you out for tonight?”

“I’m in. What should I bring?”

“You’re asking me? I’m the guy who usually shows up with a six-pack of beer.”

She grinned at him. “I’ll call Jenny.”

He didn’t smile back—yet something in his expression lightened, which might have been his version of one. Hard to tell, since his deep voice contained its usual crispness when he said, “Good idea. I’ll leave it to you to let her know you’re coming, then. So.” He gave her the terse nod she remembered from their earlier encounters. “Sorry about scaring you. I guess I’ll see you tonight.” He turned for the door.

“I guess you will,” she murmured to his already retreating back. She trailed in his wake as far as the screen door and watched through it as he strode down the path. She didn’t turn away until he disappeared around a bend.

Wow. Nothing, not even the photograph she’d seen of him in the dossier the Sunday’s Child’s investigator had sent her, could adequately describe the sheer impact of the man in the flesh.

Then a small smile curved up the corners of her lips, and she shook her head. “At least this time he didn’t call me ma’am.”

* * *

MAX BANGED THROUGH the door to the upstairs room that his half brother, Jake, used as a workspace. Striding right up to the long desk where Jake sat, he stopped, slapped his hands down on its surface and leaned his weight on them. “She said yes. She’ll come.” He sternly ignored the way his heart rate continued to rev from those brief moments spent with Harper. “I still don’t know why the hell you couldn’t just invite her yourself—it’s your fiancée’s party.”

“Like I told you, bro.” Jake dragged his attention away from the computer monitor he’d been studying. “I’ve been home four lousy days, and they’ve got me on one of the tightest deadlines of my life.”

“What’s their big rush?” he demanded, all jazzed up and more than willing to take it out on his younger half brother. God knew that had been their mutual M.O. up until a few months ago. “Hell, you only lasted ten days of the three weeks you were supposed to be gone before you turned around and came home again. Shouldn’t they have all kinds of extra time?” Pushing back, he folded his arms over his chest and gave Jake an assessing gaze. “For a guy who was in such a red-hot rush to get out of Razor Bay, you sure seem to have developed a taste for it.”

“Yeah.” Jake smiled. “You can blame Jenny and Austin for that.”

“No fooling.” Max’s half brother had come back this spring to claim his newly orphaned, then-thirteen-year-old son Austin, whom he’d walked away from when he was just a teenager himself. His

plan to haul the kid back to New York with him had hit the skids when he'd instead fallen head over heels in love not only with Austin but with the Inn's manager, Jenny Salazar, who had been a sister to his son in everything but blood.

Thinking about their relationship set off the "something's not adding up" instincts Max never ignored. "Why do you think Jenny decided on a dinner party when she knows your deadline?"

"Beats the hell outta me."

He found that hard to believe and simply fixed Jake in his best cop gaze.

And was tickled to see his half brother squirm.

"Okay," Jake said, giving the monitor a concentrated attention Max found suspicious, considering how rapidly he opened and closed the photo thumbnails, "I may not have stressed to her how short my deadline is."

"Seriously? Didn't stress or didn't mention it at all?"

"I might have forgotten to mention it." Jake essayed a negligent shrug, then gave up pretending to work. "Hey, if Jenny wants a party, then a party she gets." His smile was so fatuous Max was embarrassed for him.

"Okay. But getting back to your cut-short trip, what's National Explorer's hurry?"

"Unlike you, they never really expected it to take me the entire three weeks to do the job. And it was always understood I'd turn in the preliminary shots for them to choose from within a week of my return."

"So what you're saying is it isn't really the tightest deadline of your life."

Jake frowned up at him. "What the hell, Max—you gonna break out the hose and bright lights next?"

"Hey, I'm just trying to get things to add up. Like, if you knew that seven-day deadline thing going in, why aren't you further along?"

"Uh, I might have spent most of it getting it on with Jenny."

"Jesus, do not tell me stuff like that!" Max involuntarily shuddered. "It makes me wanna scrub my brain with industrial-strength bleach to get the image out of my head." Until his half brother had come to town, he'd never once thought of Jenny as a sexual being.

Jake snorted. "Please. You're just jealous because you've got no women to roll around with."

Max's mind immediately went to the woman in the little cabin nestled just this side of the woods in the back acre of the resort. Harper. Of the beautiful creamy light brown skin. Of those big olive-green eyes and dark spiral curls. That smoky voice. He'd give his left nut to roll around—

With a rough, impatient jerk of his head to shake her image out of it, he said, "Hey, I could get a woman just...like...that!" He snapped his fingers under Jake's nose. Except he wasn't interested in any of the ones he could get. He was fascinated by Harper Summerville, and had been since he'd first clapped eyes on her when she'd shown up at Team Photo Day with Jenny.

He scowled at his half brother. "Next time find somebody else to run your errands. You're a dad, for God's sake. Why didn't you just order your kid to do it?"

"Would've if I could've, bro, but it's summer, he's fourteen and he's off in his boat somewhere with Nolan and Bailey, and bound to be gone all day. Besides—" Jake shot him a sideways glance "—didn't I carve some precious time outta my schedule to make coffee for you?"

"Big whoop."

"Hey, I showed you my work. Shared the genius of my very efficiently taken-in-ten-days photographs with you. I don't do that for just anyone, you know."

"And it was real special." He deliberately made his tone sardonic, but the truth was, getting to see his half brother's talent in a behind-the-scenes way...well, it really had been a treat. It wasn't every day a guy got to see hundreds of freshly downloaded photos taken in various locations throughout Africa by a well-known National Explorer magazine photographer.

He walked over to the open window of The Sand Dollar, the luxury cabin Jake had been renting on The Brothers Inn grounds since he'd come to town, and faked an interest in the eagle flying through the compound with a seagull and several crows hot on its tail. Watched as the summer breeze sent the heavy boughs to swaying in the evergreens that dotted the grounds.

Then he shoved his hands deep into his pockets and looked over his shoulder at his half brother.

Damned if even under deadline pressure, Jake didn't look like Mr. Upscale with his expensively cut sun-streaked brown hair and his pale green hundred-dollar silk T-shirt the exact same shade as his eyes.

Max still found it amazing that he and Jake were developing an honest-to-God relationship after almost an entire lifetime spent hating each other's guts. Who would have ever predicted that? Not him, that was for damn sure. Yet the fact that they were made it easier to turn around and admit, "It really was pretty awesome to see some of your process for winnowing down all those photos." His eyebrows drew together. "Doesn't mean you don't still owe me, though."

"Right," Jake said in a tone that was desert dry. "It being so tedious and all, having to talk to a pretty woman."

"She's not pretty, you idiot, she's beautiful. And have you forgotten the other two times you've seen me talk to her?" The way he'd lost all verbal skills when he'd found himself thrown in her company those times was nothing short of pathetic. He was a damn deputy sheriff—hell, a former marine, for God's sake. He could usually talk to anyone.

Except the silver-spoon girls.

"Oh." Jake sobered. "Yeah. You were really pitiful." He gave a decisive nod. "Okay. I do owe you."

"Damn straight," he muttered. "Although I will admit I didn't do as badly today. Which is a damn good thing," he said drily. "Embarrassing myself like that again doesn't bear thinking about. Not when I've got such ready access to an entire arsenal I could use to put myself out of my misery."

Jake raised skeptical brows. "Get real. You and I both know you're too much of a hard-ass pragmatist—never mind that law-and-order thing you're so wedded to—to ever choose such a permanent solution to a temporary problem." He shot Max a cheerful smile. "And look on the bright side, bro—you can only improve."

"Hell, yeah," Max said sarcastically, heading for the door. "How can I not, with faithful encouragement like that to prop me up? Get to work. I've got stuff to do, too—I can't hang around here all day. I'll see you at Jenny's at seven."

But as he loped down the staircase to the first floor, he thought, From your lips to God's ear. Because improvement couldn't come quickly enough to suit him. He let himself out the front door of The Sand Dollar, allowing the screen door to bang shut behind him. Not nearly quickly enough.

For he was sure as hell tired of acting more tongue-tied than a horny thirteen-year-old with his first crush every time he stumbled across Harper Summerville.

CHAPTER TWO

MAX SLAMMED HIS car door and hotfooted it across the little parking lot to the back of Jenny's cottage. He took the stubby flight of stairs up to her mudroom in two big steps.

He hadn't deliberately been late for her dinner party. After leaving Jake's he'd gone out to Cedar Village, the group home for at-risk boys a few miles out of town. And he'd ended up staying longer than he'd planned.

Which was hardly a surprise, considering it was the same thing he did every time he went out there. At one time he'd been an angry teen himself. He knew what it was to get into his share of trouble, knew about having anger he didn't quite know how to manage. So he liked volunteering some of his free time to work with the kids. He understood where they were coming from.

But he'd let the time get away from him. The boys had roped him into a vigorous game of basketball, and the demand that he join them had been the first sign of softening he'd seen from a

couple of the kids. If he'd blown off the opening they'd given him, he would've risked having them never give him another. That hadn't been an option.

He was already running late when he'd finally pulled himself away, but he'd had no choice but to go home for a quick shower and a change. Jenny, bless her heart, threw reasonably casual parties, but he was pretty sure she'd expect him to at least shave and throw on something a bit less scruffy than his day-off knock-around clothes. Especially when Jake, the love of her life, was one of those GQ-type dressers. And he didn't even want to think about what she'd have to say if he showed up smelling as ripe as only a guy who'd pounded up and down a court with boys who could run him into the ground could.

He smoothed his hand down the navy T-shirt he'd tucked tightly into his low-slung jeans to get the drawer wrinkles out. Straightened the button placket of the loose weave, sage-green short-sleeved shirt he'd worn open over it to dress things up a little. Shifting the six-pack of Fat Tire beer that Jake preferred to the Budweiser Max would have chosen were it just for him, he rapped on the mudroom door.

It whipped open, and the sound of dishes clattering and women laughing in the kitchen poured out at him. He looked down into the face of his nephew, Austin.

"Dude!" The fourteen-year-old, who was at that all shoulders, arms and legs stage, grinned at him. "Thank God—we need more guys here. Jenny invited way more chicks."

"Oh, way more, my butt." Jenny stuck her head into the room, her shiny brown hair catching the overhead light. "I invited a couple of women from work who didn't have plans. Hey, Max." She crossed the small space at the same time he stepped into the mudroom.

Having learned her ways, he obligingly bent so she could give him a hug. That was something new to him, and he always stood stiff as an oar in her embrace. Considering she kept doing it every time he arrived or left, however, Jenny apparently didn't mind.

And he had to admit, there was something nice about it—even if it did make him feel awkward as a working girl at a revival.

Jenny was a tiny woman who somehow failed to realize it, and she gave him a quick, fierce squeeze before stepping back. "The men are out on the front porch doing the barbecue thing," she said, patting his arm. "Why don't you take your beer out there—we put a cooler with ice and soft drinks to the right of the door."

She turned to Austin. "What are you doing this close to the kitchen if you're so uncomfortable with all the women?"

The kid puffed up. "I'm not uncomfortable," he protested. "I'm just saying there's a bunch of 'em, and we guys are outnumbered. I only came out here 'cuz I'm lookin' for the croquet set. Dad said maybe we could play a game after dinner."

"Color me corrected." Reaching up, she ruffled his dark hair. "Set's in the shed."

Austin grinned at her and loped out the door.

Not all that certain he was ready to face a kitchen full of females himself, Max took a step back. "Well, I'll just head for the porch. Nice day, huh?"

She flashed him a smile he was pretty sure said, Yeah, right, like you're fooling anyone. But she truly was the nice woman he'd always considered her, because she simply rubbed his arm again and said, "You bet."

Jenny's best friend poked her strawberry-blond head in the room. "Jen, where can I find—Oh, hi, Max."

"Hey, Tasha. How's it going?"

"Pretty darn good." She eyed him where he stood with one foot in the door and the other out on the stoop. "You coming in?"

"I was just gonna duck around to the front and say hi to the guys."

She raised an eyebrow. "Intimidated by the number of women in the kitchen, huh?"

“Completely—and that’s without even knowing exactly how many that is.” He got a sudden vision of how ludicrous he was being and smiled.

Tasha blinked. “Whoa,” she said. “You really oughtta do that more often.”

“What?”

“Smile,” Jenny filled in for her friend. “You’ve got a great one, but you hardly ever use it.”

“That’s because I save ’em up for the prettiest girls,” he said with rare flirtatiousness. “Annd I really am going to the front now.”

He heard them laugh as he strode down the stairs.

Climbing the front porch stairs a moment later, he spotted Jake and Mark, Austin’s best bud’s dad. “Whoa. This is it? Austin wasn’t kidding when he said we were seriously outnumbered by chicks.”

“Wendy Chapman brought her new boyfriend,” Mark said, then shrugged. “But he’s in that shit-faced-in-new-love stage, so he’s hanging with the women in the kitchen.”

They all shook their heads at the mystery of that.

Jake looked at the six-pack in Max’s fist and laughed. “Hey, you brought the good stuff. There’s some Bud in the cooler for you.”

Refusing to acknowledge the blanket of warmth his half brother’s thoughtfulness wrapped around his heart, Max made room in the cooler for the Fat Tire bottles, then fished out a Budweiser. He drank the beer, stuck his two cents in on how best to barbecue the steaks—because, really, what guy could keep his opinions to himself when fire, sharp utensils and red meat were involved?—and jawed with Jake and Mark.

He set up a long table when Jenny asked for a volunteer and Jake refused to relinquish the barbecue fork—then eyed a couple of the women as they decked it out with a tablecloth before dealing out festive plastic plates, silverware and napkins. They even plunked down a vase of flowers in the middle.

Then Harper carried out a big bowl of salad greens, and he was hard pressed to keep his gaze from following her every move.

Sometimes there was a stillness about her that made her look like a queen. Maybe it was the way she was put together: all exotic coloring, long lines and good bones. Or her posture, so proudly tall. Hell, maybe it was the solemnity of her full mouth in repose or the heavy-lidded eyes that gave her that appearance of aloof distance. Whatever it was, it reinforced the well-educated rich-girl image that never failed to tie his tongue in knots.

He didn’t know where it had come from, this awkwardness he had around the silver-spoon girls. Surely it didn’t go all the way back to the sixth grade crush he’d had on Heather Phillips. His mother had pointed out, with her usual I’m-unhappy-with-the-world surliness, that the girl was too damn rich for the likes of him.

Hell, it wasn’t like he’d been bothered by Mom’s flatly stated warning that he’d better not expect an invitation to any of that kid’s parties anytime soon. She hadn’t been wrong. And even if she had been, aside from the subject of his father, he’d mostly blown off Angie Bradshaw’s negativity. If he’d allowed it to stop him from doing things or going after what he wanted, he would’ve been paralyzed a long time ago.

Because, face it, the woman bitched about everything, and had from the moment his dad had left them for Jake’s mom.

But coming back to Harper, well, he oughtta cut himself some slack. He’d done all right earlier today. Besides, she hadn’t been all that aloof when he’d caught her shaking her very nice butt and singing along with music only she could hear. She was also smiling and laughing with Tasha now as they carried out more salads, bread and a fruit platter and arranged them on the table. When she was like this, she radiated a friendliness, a charisma, that was electric.

“Meat’s done,” Jake said and piled steaks onto a platter.

Jenny carried out a pitcher of sangria damn near as big as she was, and Mark went around to the side of the cottage to call the kids who were setting up a croquet course there. For the next several moments pandemonium reigned as people took seats at the table.

Max sorted everyone out as the food was passed around. There were the teens Austin, Nolan and Austin's girlfriend, Bailey, plus Nolan's little brother. The unattached females consisted of Tasha, Harper and Sharon, the latter of whom he really didn't know all that well since she'd married a local who had graduated a good fifteen years ahead of him. They'd divorced a couple of years ago, and she had stayed to run the housekeeping department at the inn while the local had moved to Tacoma. Then there was him, Jake and Jenny, Mark and his wife, Rebecca, and Wendy, who owned Wacka Do's Salon on Harbor Street, and her new guy, Keith somebody or another.

The platters completed their circuit, and the laughter and chatter quieted down as everyone dug in.

A while later Tasha leaned forward to look down the table at Harper. "I saw the advertisement in the new brochures for the sunset yoga class you teach. I could use something like that. I'm not nearly bendy enough." She appraised Harper. "You, on the other hand, look real flexible."

Harper flashed the smile that changed her entire look. It was wide and heart-shaped and showcased not only bright teeth that looked as though someone had sunk a fortune into them, but a flash of the healthy gums in which they were anchored, as well. "You should drop in sometime," she said. "I doubt Jenny would mind that you're not an inn guest, since she told me you're her bestie."

"Oh, please." Jenny, who was sitting next to Tasha, grinned. "Be my guest."

Her friend gave her a friendly bump, but continued to address Harper. "You know, I'd definitely take you up on that—if it wasn't right in the middle of my busiest time."

"That's right. You're the owner of the pizza parlor in town, aren't you?"

"Yep. Bella T's."

"I haven't had a chance to try it yet, but I hear it's fabulous."

"Best pizza anywhere," Austin's friend Nolan said through a mouthful of corn on the cob.

Mark tousled his son's hair but smiled at Harper. "The execution could have been more elegant, but the sentiment is dead-on."

"Then I'll definitely have to make the effort to get in there." She looked at Tasha. "Let's talk after dinner. We can probably come up with a time that'll work for both of us."

"What did you do before you came here?" Mark's wife, Rebecca, inquired.

"A little of everything—much to my mother's dismay. Since we came back to the States I've taken a number of temp jobs. I've worked at Nordstrom's, for a little college press and a remodeling company and did a stint as a contracts coordinator for a midsize construction company—"

Max didn't plan his interruption, but he couldn't help himself. "Why were you out of the States?" And who is we?

She tilted her head and looked into his eyes. "Would you like the long version or the short?"

"Long," all the women said in near perfect synchronicity.

"O-kay." Her olive-green eyes were mostly blocked from sight behind the dense lashes that formed little crescents when she laughed. "My folks met when they were in college and married within two months. Mom is Cuban, African-American and Welsh. My daddy was the only child of an old Winston-Salem family. It was no longer the South of the Sixties in those days, but his parents still weren't thrilled with his marriage. In fact, they went so far as to suggest he annul it."

She shook her head, a small, reminiscent smile curving up her lips. "You'd have to have known my dad to appreciate what a mistake that was. Grandma and Grandpa did know better, but I guess they panicked, probably worried about what their friends would say." She made a wry face. "Anyhow, Dad's response was to pack his newly minted civil engineering degree and move Mom to Europe. We lived all over the world. I was born in Amsterdam and my brother, Kai, in Dubai."

"Wasn't that hard?" Jenny asked. "Constantly having to pick up and go?"

“No, it really wasn’t. I was not only a daddy’s girl but a chip off the old block. He and I loved getting to see new places and meet new people. Kai and Mom weren’t as thrilled with the constant upheavals.” A faint shadow flitted across her eyes. “I think that’s why my mother’s having trouble with the fact that I continue to travel. She and my brother were beyond happy to settle down after we moved back to the U.S. It bothers her that I haven’t done the same.”

Tasha planted her chin in her hand. “Did your folks ever reconcile with your grandparents?”

“Yes. Quite early on, actually. I don’t personally remember the rift, just the stories about it. By my first memory, they’d come to love Mom almost as much as Dad did. And they were the greatest grandparents.” Her smile lit up the room and made something in Max’s chest ache.

Jake, who traveled extensively for his magazine, asked Harper about some of the places she’d been, and they compared their impressions from locations they’d both visited. Max sat silently listening...and working overtime not to give in to jealousy. God knew he’d spent far too many years doing exactly that—being resentful of his half brother—already.

But the sophistication of Harper’s upbringing dredged up old insecurities. It was a universe removed from the way he’d been raised, and chewing over the contrasts between their worlds, watching the ease with which Jake conversed with her, it was hard not to regress to feelings he’d thought safely in his rearview. He could feel them crowding in, however, demanding attention. He pushed them back, because damned if he’d allow the same tangled morass of twisted emotions he’d once had for his half brother to regain the purchase they’d claimed when he was a kid. He wasn’t giving way to them now that he and Jake were finally in a good place.

Their mutual father had left Max and his mother when Max was just a toddler. If Charlie Bradshaw had simply left town as he had when he ultimately deserted Jake and his mother, as well, things might have been different. Or if Max had had a different kind of mother...

He gave an impatient twitch of his shoulders. Because neither of those things had happened. Charlie was one of those men who was all about the current family. In Max’s case that had meant Jake and the second Mrs. Bradshaw. He’d seen the old man with them around town sometimes. It had been damn hard to miss, given the size of Razor Bay. So he’d witnessed Charlie acting the way Max assumed a dad should toward Jake, while he might as well have been the incredible Invisible Boy, so concealed had he appeared to be from his father’s sight.

Even with his mind mired in the past, he was aware of Harper across the table, and he tracked her movements as she reached for the pitcher of sangria. The container was still fairly full, the distance wasn’t optimum for her reach and he watched its weight immediately tip forward as she picked it up. Surging to his feet, he leaned across the table to steady the pitcher and slapped his free hand over hers on the handle to correct the forward momentum.

It was as if he’d grabbed the business end of a live wire. Heat streaked like lightning through his veins, and it wouldn’t have surprised him in the least if someone started slapping at his head and yelling that his hair was smoking. He wondered if she felt it, too, or if this began and ended with him. She’d gone very still, and those big eyes were locked on him and rounded in the same O as her lips. But, hell, that could very well be due to the sheer speed of the events from her reach for the pitcher, to its tipping, to him leaping to the rescue like a tattooed, beefed up version of Dudley Do-Right.

The instant the pitcher touched the tabletop again—this time nearer her where its entire weight wouldn’t be dangling from her hand with no arm muscle behind it for support—he yanked his hands clear. Thumped back into his chair.

He did his best to ignore the residual electricity zinging through him from the feel of her skin. Making a point of not looking at her again, he deliberately forced his thoughts back to the relative safety of his old animosity toward Jake.

His mom sure as hell hadn’t helped the situation. Not that he’d seen that at the time; it wasn’t until he was old enough and distanced enough to view the situation with an adult’s perspective that he’d realized if Angie Bradshaw had been a different kind of woman, he probably wouldn’t have

suffered much damage from the desertion. Hell, he'd barely been two years old when Charlie had moved out. Most of the memories of actual time spent with his father had come through the home movies Charlie had left behind.

His mother, however, wasn't a big believer in letting things go. Rarely had a day gone by that she hadn't reminded him of what they'd lost. All he'd ever heard were acid-etched stories of the slut who'd stolen his father away, and of his little shit of a half brother who had gotten everything that should have been his.

It hadn't helped that in school his half bro had been a serious student and run with the kids of Razor Bay's movers and shakers, while he had pulled average grades, run with a wilder crowd and frequently gotten into trouble.

No wonder he was so fucked up when it came to the silver-spoon girls. They were simply the female version of Jake.

"Max?"

The sound of Harper's voice snatched him from his stroll down memory lane, and as his awareness raced to catch up with his inner musings, he realized his name hadn't been the first word she'd directed at him. Looking at her across the table, he felt the same crazy-ass clench of his heart he experienced every damn time he laid eyes on her.

And clearing his throat, he lied without compunction. "Sorry. I was thinking about work for a minute there. What did you say?"

"I was just asking what you did with the rest of your day off after I saw you."

Okay, this was something he actually liked talking about. "I went out to Cedar Village." He was surprised to see startled recognition in her eyes and raised his brows. "You're familiar with it?"

"I've heard it mentioned, although I can't remember where. It's a...boys' camp?"

Jake snorted, and Max gave her a one-sided smile. "Don't mind him, he thinks it's more like a reformatory. It's actually a group home for troubled kids—boys. And, yeah, most of them have been in trouble. But, so was I at their age and—"

"Look how well that turned out," Jake deadpanned.

He grinned at the sarcasm in his broth—half brother's voice. "I know, damn good, right? For instance, unlike Mr. Shutterbug here, instead of playing with cameras, I have a real job."

Harper was staring at him, and his smile faded, his self-consciousness resurfacing. But damned if he'd allow it to short-shrift his responsibility to the Cedar boys. He rolled his shoulders. "Anyhow, a lot of these kids come from dicked-up backgrounds—broken homes, substance-abusing mother or father or sometimes both. None of our boys' parents are physically abusive, but some are purposefully neglectful, while others simply have to work killer hours just to put food on the table or hang on to their house. A few of the boys actually come from warm, involved families—they just lost their way for a while or fell in with the wrong crowd. In every case, they need the attention, the stability that the counselors out there provide."

"Is that what you are—a counselor, as well as a deputy?"

"Me?" That startled another one-sided quirk of his lips from him. He shook his head. "Nah. I'm on the board of directors, but mostly I just hang out with the boys. But, speaking of my board position..."

Everyone except Mark's youngest son and the woman named Sharon groaned, and Max laughed outright. "That's right, boys and girls. It's put-up-or-shut-up time. Our pancake breakfast fund-raiser is next Sunday. I know most of you have already bought tickets, but we also need volunteers to help man it. I just happen to have a sign-up sheet in my car."

"Can we be excused, Jenny?" Austin asked, hastily pushing back from the table. His friends Nolan and Bailey followed suit. "We have to finish setting up the croquet stuff."

"I'll take that as a yes," Max said. "You guys wanna be waitstaff or work in the kitchen?"

"Aw, man! Do we hafta?"

“We have several boys from the Village who’ll be working the event, but we could really use more help.” He looked his nephew in the eye. “These kids haven’t had the advantages you’ve had. It’s for a good cause.”

Austin sighed but nodded. So did his sidekicks. Max turned his attention to the adults.

“Don’t look at me,” said Sharon. “Those boys scare the crap out of me.”

“No, c’mon. They’re just kids.”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter, they still scare me. I’ll buy a ticket, though.”

He knew better than to feel resentful on the kids’ behalf, but it took a little effort to say mildly, “Thanks, that’ll help. You want the eight or nine-thirty sitting?”

“I’ll take the eight.”

“You can sign me up to help,” Harper said.

Max’s head whipped around. Oh, yeah, baby. Sternly telling his libido it was out of line and to take a damn seat, he raised a brow. “Yeah?”

“Yes, sure. I have next Sunday off and it would be a good way to see the town in action. I’ll wait tables. I can get to know more people that way.”

“Excellent. Thank you.” He leaned back in his chair and looked around the table. “Now, that’s what I’m talking about, people. Harper and the kids just gave us a decent start here. So, how ’bout the rest of you?” He gestured with uncharacteristic expansiveness. “Step right up, ladies and gents. The line forms to the left.”

CHAPTER THREE

LAUGHTER, DEEP, LOUD and masculine, rolled out of the community center kitchen and across the counter where Harper had just picked up her industrial-sized platter of pancakes. She froze for an instant, and the chatter and clatter of crowded tables full of hungry pancake diners faded away as she searched the packed kitchen for the laugh’s source.

Not that there was any doubt as to whose large chest that had come out of. She’d only heard it once before, and God knew it hadn’t been directed at her. But no one who’d ever heard Max Bradshaw laugh would mistake it for anyone else’s. Even someone as new to Razor Bay as she was grasped it was a rarity. Hell, a simple grin from him at Jenny’s dinner party earlier this week had all but knocked her on her butt. His laugh was a steamroller that threatened to flatten her.

She needed to keep in mind that all this interest was one-sided. And, c’mon, how hard could it be to do so—she only had to remember Max’s assistance at Jenny’s when she’d tried to pick up the sangria pitcher from too far away and had nearly poured it all over the picnic table instead. His touch when he’d wrapped his hand around hers had all but electrified her—exactly the way it had the first time they’d met when she’d touched his bare forearm. It wasn’t possible for a man’s skin to be any hotter than anyone else’s. So why did her mind insist it was?

She gave her head a subtle shake. The answer to that hardly mattered, so there was no sense even going there. Because if she’d been electrified, he had shaken free so fast you would’ve thought she was toxic waste, and he without his hazmat suit. Charm had always come easily to her, but either her ability abandoned her around the good deputy or he was immune. Either way, her mad skills were wasted on him.

She located him now over by the gargantuan stove, standing head—and in most cases shoulders, as well—above the boys around him. He looked like a Hell’s Angel with those brown-ink tribal tattoos, his disreputably torn blue jeans and that brilliantly white, batter-splattered T-shirt that clung damply to his big shoulders and muscular chest. The faded blue bandanna tied around his dark hair only added to the image.

But his face was alight with whatever amusement had set him off, his teeth flashing a white bright enough to rival his T-shirt’s, and most of the teens gaped at him as if he were a rock star. Given the absorption with which she was staring at him herself, she could hardly blame them. If their

interactions with the guy were anything like her own admittedly limited exchanges, they, too, were likely more accustomed to seeing him sober and serious.

Forcing herself to get back to the business at hand, she turned away to carry her tray over to one of the long tables in her area. “Who’s ready for more pancakes?” she demanded cheerfully.

And only glanced over her shoulder once to make sure that Max was no longer visible from this vantage point.

A largely male-voiced roar of enthusiasm from the patrons greeted her question, and she laughed and chatted up people as she dished out fresh stacks to everyone who indicated an interest.

“How’s the syrup holding up?” she inquired at one point and, being told that it was getting low, waved one of the teen volunteers over to exchange a full dispenser for the almost empty one. She summoned two other helpers as well to refill empty glasses from the pitchers of water and orange juice they manned.

“Megan, Joe, hello!” She forked pancakes onto the plates of two guests from the inn who had been in her guided kayak tour the day before. “I’m so glad you made it.”

Joe grinned. “Seriously good pancakes. We’re glad you told us about it.”

She laughed. The pancakes were decent but nowhere close to seriously good. But they were plentiful, and the atmosphere in the hall was loud, cheerful and fun, all of which she suspected contributed to the food tasting better.

She ran out of pancakes halfway through the next table and almost mowed down Tasha on her way back to the kitchen for another refill. “Oh, hey, sorry.” Reaching out, she steadied the other woman’s tray, which unlike her own was loaded. “I wasn’t looking where I was going—I was too busy marveling at the pancake-eating contest over there.” She indicated a table on the stage at the end of the cavernous hall.

“I know, it’s always kind of like watching jackals taking down a gazelle. You really want to look away, but find you can’t.”

“So this isn’t just an impulsive boys gone wild event? They’ve done this before?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s an annual event.” Tasha tipped her head toward the wiry little guy in the middle packing away an amazing quantity of pancakes. “Greg Larson will likely win. He almost always does. But every now and then, just often enough to keep things interesting, we have an upset.” She shrugged and looked at Harper. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m doing great. Upbeat crowds like this give me oomph.”

“Well, lucky you, Energizer Bunny.” The strawberry blonde gave her a weary smile. “I had a long shift at Bella’s last night that ran late, so I’m starting to wilt. And I’d sure like to know how the hell Jenny managed to weasel out of this detail.”

Harper shrugged. “She said there was too much to do at the inn.”

“Yeah, that’s the story she fed me, too.” Tasha raised her brows at Harper. “You buy that?”

“Not for a minute. Oh, not that the inn isn’t really busy, because it’s definitely jumping. But while I haven’t been around forever like you natives, I get the impression that Jenny thrives on the summer madness.” She looked askance at Tasha, who nodded her agreement.

Harper hitched a shoulder. “That being the case, and going by the fact that Jake’s not here, either, my guess would be that they’re sneaking some time together to make up for him being out of town.”

“Yep. That’d be my take, too.” Tasha really looked at Harper. “You know what? You and I should have a girls’ night one of these days. Jenny can join us if we can pry her away from Lover Boy, but right now she’s deep into that all-Jake-all-the-time stage, so I don’t hold my breath over that happening. What do you say? You in?”

“Absolutely.” One disadvantage to all of the traveling she’d done in her formative years was that she’d spent considerably more time with adults than people her own age. The upside, of course, was that it had resulted in far more sophisticated experiences than she likely would’ve received otherwise.

But after the age of twelve she hadn't had what most women would consider real girlfriends. Watching Tasha and Jenny together made her feel she'd been missing out.

"Good." Tasha glanced down at her loaded tray. "I'd better pass these out while they're still lukewarm. I'll give you a call, okay? And this time I really mean it. I kind of let the yoga thing get away from me."

Harper executed the particularly French shrug she'd picked up during the eighteen months she and her family had lived in Clermont-Ferrand. "Believe me, I know how that goes."

They parted ways, Tasha plunging into the crowded room and Harper heading back to the food service counter that divided the hall from the kitchen.

She chatted up one of the boys on the other side while he refilled her tray with more pancakes. He'd just finished loading up when a horrendous crash of glass smashing to smithereens made them both jump as if someone had unexpectedly fired off a shotgun next to them. Her head swiveling in the direction of the sound, she focused in on two teenage boys standing in a quickly dissipating wreath of steam from the open door of a huge dishwasher. As she watched, one shoved the other.

"Look what you made me do, you dumb shit!" The shover gave the other, larger, teen another shot to the chest.

"Who the hell you callin' a dumb shit, ass cap?" The bigger boy pushed back, making the first kid stumble back several paces. Following up his advantage, Big Boy dogged the retreating boy's footsteps, thrusting his face into the other youth's. "You're the one who backed into me, you stupid fuc—"

"That's enough." Max's deep voice cut through the obscenity, and suddenly he was just there, reaching between the boys to separate them. "Sometimes accidents are just accidents. Jeremy, grab the broom."

"Why the hell do I have to sweep up his mess?" Big Boy demanded.

"Because we work as a team and I asked you to," Max replied evenly, giving the teen a level look that had Jeremy slouching away. The remaining boy snickered.

Max turned to him. "I wouldn't be too smug if I were you, because you're not off the hook. Go get a dustpan and the mop. After you pick up the glass Jeremy sweeps, you can mop the area."

"Hey!" The slighter boy adopted a belligerent stance. "He only hadda do one thing. How come I gotta do two?"

"Rules of the road, Owen." Max's voice was matter-of-fact yet somehow as calming as cool water poured over scorched earth. "Jeremy wasn't wrong, you know—you picked up a huge tray of glasses, then backed up without once looking behind you. And the guy going in reverse is always at fault."

"That sucks!"

Max reached out and squeezed the boy's shoulder. "Maybe so. But rules are rules, kid. Go grab the dustpan and mop."

The boy grumbled but did as he was told. Harper picked her tray up off the counter and turned away.

Great. Like it wasn't bad enough that she already harbored a fascination for this guy. Why did he have to go and be good with kids, as well?

She didn't understand this damn attraction; it was so not her general M.O. She'd never gone for the big, physical guys—she was usually drawn to older, more sophisticated men. But Max Bradshaw... Lord, whenever he was near she felt like a vampire trying to do the stay-on-the-straight-and-narrow-blood-bank thing.

All the while scenting a juicy vein.

And if that didn't make everything more complicated, she didn't know what did. Like things weren't convoluted enough already...considering the job with The Brothers Inn wasn't her sole reason for being in Razor Bay.

“You prob’ly better move, lady,” the boy who had refilled her tray suddenly said, shaking her out of her reverie.

“What’s that?” She blinked, then, following his gaze, glanced over her shoulder. Other volunteers, awaiting their turn, had begun stacking up behind her. “Oops.” She flashed them her friendliest smile. “Sorry.”

Picking up her tray, she threw herself back into dishing out pancakes.

When the last patron left, Harper nearly did, as well. She had wiped down her tables and straightened the chairs. And since she’d tucked her driver’s license into her back pocket so she wouldn’t have to deal with a purse, she was good to go.

But looking into the kitchen, she saw Max and his crew still hard at work cleaning up. She could see the boys had about reached their limit of volunteerism, and, with a quiet sigh, she rounded the end of the counter and crossed the kitchen to the teen who was about to carry a stack of plates on which he’d precariously balanced more glasses than was safe. He was the larger of the two boys Max had separated earlier, the one she’d privately labeled Big Boy.

“Let me give you a hand with that,” she said, reaching to pluck the glasses off the plates and efficiently stacking them into two towers.

“Thanks, lady.” The teen pulled an overhead cupboard open and shoved the plates in. He jerked his head to the cupboard next to his. “Glasses go in there.”

“I’m Harper.”

“Jeremy,” he said in a voice that didn’t encourage her to get chatty.

“Nice to meet you.” Stepping alongside him, she reached up to set the glasses in her right hand on the shelf. Apparently she’d stacked them just a little too high, however, for the bottom of the uppermost cup bumped the edge of the cupboard and began to tilt back toward her.

Warmth radiated against her back, even though nothing actually touched it. At the same time a suntanned, white-cotton banded biceps came into her peripheral vision, and Max Bradshaw’s deep voice said, “Hang on, let me take a couple cups off the top.”

It only took him a second, but that moment stretched languorously as a cat after a long nap, her senses bombarded with his heat, with the salty, slightly musky scent of him mixed with that of pancake batter and laundry soap. She eyed the up-close view of the tail end of his tattoos undulating from beneath his sleeve hem with the movement of his arm, then transferred her attention to the muscles and tendons that flexed in his forearm, his rawboned wrist and long hand as he swiftly slid a couple of cups from the stack she still held aloft, dropped them onto the one in her left hand, then removed four or five of those and put them in the cupboard.

“There you go.” He stepped back and Harper put the rest of the cups alongside the minitower he’d placed on the shelf.

Exhaling softly, she glanced at him over her shoulder. “Thank you. You seem to have a knack for rescuing me from glassware accidents-about-to-happen.”

He stilled for a moment, and something hot and fierce flashed in his eyes. Or perhaps she only imagined it, because in the next instant he gave her a faint smile, polite nod and a murmured, “My pleasure.”

Oh, trust me, it was mine, as well.

Probably a less than brilliant idea to go there, however, so she shook the thought aside and injected some starch in her spine. Then, seeing an opportunity and not shy about taking advantage of it, she turned to him fully. “Listen, I only work three-quarter time at the inn. I’d love to volunteer some of my free hours to Cedar Village.”

“Yeah?” He studied her through shuttered dark eyes. “What do you have to offer?”

“I don’t know. What do volunteers generally do? I’m pretty much a jack-of-all-trades. But what I really rock at is organizing activities. And fund-raising.” When he continued to simply look at her

with level, noncommittal eyes, she shrugged impatiently. People usually jumped at her fund-raising skills. “If that doesn’t work for you, I could always just provide a woman’s touch.”

“I wouldn’t mind a woman’s touch,” drawled a blond boy who was swabbing down the counter a few feet away, and his tone told Harper he wasn’t thinking motherly thoughts.

“That’s enough, Brandon,” Max said, but it was the look that Harper aimed at the youth that made the boy squirm. It was a thousand-yard stare she’d perfected when she was twelve, a nonthreatening but cool gaze that made the recipient completely question the wisdom of uttering the words that had warranted it in the first place.

“Sorry,” Brandon muttered.

“Not a problem.” She gave him a slight smile that was warmer without encouraging him to repeat his blunder. Then she turned back to Max. “This won’t help for today’s event, but I could tell you how to make your next pancake breakfast more profitable. And while I can’t promise anything until I talk to Jenny, maybe she’d let us offer the occasional supervised use of some of The Brothers’ resources.”

Max dug his wallet out of his back pocket, fished out a card and handed it to Harper. “Why don’t you give me a call and we’ll talk about it. But for now, you should go enjoy the rest of your day off.”

Sliding the proffered card into her own back pocket, she nodded, recognizing a dismissal when she heard one. “I’ll do that.” She glanced at the teen still stacking dishes next to her. “It was nice meeting you, Jeremy.” She nodded at the other boys who had stopped working to watch her.

Then she strode to the kitchen door and let herself out.

“Dude,” she heard one of the boys say as the door closed behind her. “She’s hot. Why’d you let her get away?” There was a beat of silence, then, “Oh, man. It’s not because she’s black, is it?”

Harper froze. Omigawd. Was it? That hadn’t even occurred to her, maybe because she’d spent the majority of her life in Europe where race wasn’t as big an issue—or at least didn’t have the history that it had in the States. But for all she knew—

“Hell, no,” Max’s voice said emphatically. “Listen, kid, men don’t hit on every hot woman they see.” He was quiet for a moment, then said slowly, “Besides, did she strike you as the kind of woman who would welcome me hitting on her?”

Yes! Embarrassing as it was to admit, she definitely would welcome that.

“Nah, I guess not,” the boy said.

“Oh, for c’ris—” Harper cut herself off, blew a pithy raspberry and stalked over to her car.

Her feet hurt from being on them all morning and she was cursing having worn her tallest wedged espadrilles as she blew through the front door of her cottage. Loggins and Messina played “Your Mama Don’t Dance” on the cell phone she’d deliberately left behind, and she crossed the room and snatched it off the little coffee table.

“Hi, Mom.” She kicked off her shoes and headed straight for the mini-fridge, where she pulled out a nice cold bottle of raspberry-green-tea-flavored artesian water. She rolled its cold plastic across her warm forehead.

“Hey, Baby Girl.”

Ever since her dad had died—and that had been a few years ago now—she and her mother had been at odds more often than not. So, hearing the nickname gave her a rush of pleasure. Tucking the phone between her ear and shoulder, she twisted the cap off the bottle and drank half of it down in one large swallow.

“For heaven’s sake, are you gulping something in my ear? Did your Grandma Hardin and I not teach you better manners than that?”

Harper tried not to feel resentful, she really did. She was thirty years old, for God’s sake; long past the age to be either scolded like a child or react as if she were one.

She inhaled and blew out a quiet breath, and still a vestige of attitude she simply couldn't expunge colored her voice when she said, "Sorry. I just spent three-plus hours serving pancakes for a Cedar Village fund-raiser, and I'm tired and thirsty."

There was an instant of silence. Then Gina Summerville-Hardin said softly, "How did that happen?"

Oh, God, it had been so easy, Harper still couldn't quite believe it. She'd almost fallen off the picnic bench at Jenny's dinner party when Max had presented the opportunity. "My boss's boyfriend's half brother is Max Bradshaw."

The sudden silence was so absolute that Harper began to wonder if they'd lost the connection. "Mom?"

"Yes, I'm still here. The same Max Bradshaw who's on the Cedar Village board?"

"Yes."

"I was quite impressed with his dossier, being both a deputy and a veteran and all. He sounds like a very responsible man. Still, I must say I'm stunned at the coincidence."

For a few seconds, her thoughts got hung up in that touch they'd shared over the sangria pitcher. Then she shrugged it off. "Well, Razor Bay is pretty small. It's tougher to maintain my anonymity in a one stoplight town, but the upside is it's easier to get to know the players, as there are just plain fewer of them. But, man. I thought I was lucky to get the job at The Brothers." A dry laugh escaped her. "I had no idea how lucky."

She'd taken the position because it was right up her alley, considering it was the kind of job she'd done before her dad's death had pulled her into the nonprofit charity her parents had started when her father retired his engineering degree. But primarily she'd taken it because ever since she had joined the fold, her year-round job had become assessing the worthiness of the less-established charities applying for grants from Sunday's Child. In this case Cedar Village had submitted a request to the family foundation for a grant that would enable them to hire an additional counselor, fill the gaps in their supplies and fix the roof on the classroom building where the boys kept up with their education even as they learned the skills they'd need to reenter society as fully functional young men.

Her dad was the one who had originated the policy of anonymous evaluations after his first few trips to meet grant applicants had resulted in lavish dog and pony shows presented strictly to impress him. He'd decided a better way to get the true measure of how a charity was run was to assess them anonymously in their day-to-day business.

"I still don't understand why you took that job at all," her mother said, pulling Harper from her reverie. "It doesn't take you thirteen weeks to make your assessment."

"Mom, I told you—the only other reason to be in a town this size would be to take a vacation, and who'd believe a single woman on vacay had a sudden yen to volunteer at a home for delinquent boys? How would she even hear of it? Besides, I kind of needed a vacation."

"So you took a job?"

Harper bit back a sigh, because they'd had this conversation before. "I took a fun job, and it's a break from lying to people. That is a vacation."

"Yet you're lying to these people, too, aren't you?"

Harper was suddenly so weary she could barely hold her head up. What the hell had happened to them that they were so far apart these days? "Yes, Mother. You're absolutely right. I'm a liar no matter what I do."

"Darling, I didn't mean it that way. I simply think if you're unhappy, you should let someone else do that job and come home."

"I'm not unhappy." Yes, she got tired of the subterfuge sometimes, but she genuinely got the reasoning behind it. And she loved the new places, new people aspect of it. Loved getting to help charities that made things easier for kids. But her mother, who wanted her to quit traveling and settle down, would never believe that.

And she really didn't feel up to justifying her choices yet again. "Whoops. There's the doorbell. I'll talk to you soon, Mom."

"Harper, wait—"

"Gotta go. Bye." She disconnected. Then, blowing out an unhappy breath, she tossed the phone on the table and flopped back on the couch.

This was the right way to do things, she assured herself. Her dad had done it so, and she still trusted his judgment unswervingly. As for the niggle of doubt her mother's words had created?

Taking a steady, calming breath, she flicked it away.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAX WAS ON his way to Harper's cottage the next evening when a movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention. Glancing left, he expected to see someone lounging in the inn's hot tub. Instead, the spa appeared empty. Then another tiny shift along the water's already bubbling surface drew his focus, and he saw a woman free-floating, only her neck and head supported by the edge of the tub.

Her warm, gorgeous coloring seized his attention, and it never even occurred to him to question her identity. He knew who she was by the hot jolt of electric pleasure that sparked through his veins. Veering off the path, he made a beeline for the little oasis of plantings where the tub resided just outside the inn's pool house. This made things both simpler and more difficult.

Simpler because he wouldn't have to be alone with Harper in her tiny bungalow. And harder because, well, hell—look at her. Close up, he could see the light brown skin of her breasts, framed by the deep V of her black-and-white patterned halter top, rising out of the bubbling water. The uppermost curve of her long, smooth thighs and her orange-tipped toes broke the waterline, as well.

He shook his head impatiently. He'd sworn to himself he would meet with her tonight and not think about sex.

Yeah, it was a stupid promise, but his word was his word, dammit. "How could you have made the pancake breakfast more profitable?" he demanded as he stopped at the tub.

And watched her give a start and damn near go under before she righted herself. Her head came up, and her shoulders shot out of the water as her butt lowered to sit on the submerged seat. And he realized she hadn't merely been überrelaxed. "Aw, crap. Did I wake you?"

"What? No, of course not." She yawned widely, then dropped the dripping hand she'd raised out of the water to cover her mouth and gave him a tiny lopsided smile. "Well, maybe. What time is it?"

He consulted the big tank watch on his wrist. "Going on eight."

"It was around a quarter 'til when I climbed in the tub, so I guess I did drop off for a bit."

He couldn't help it; deputy was pretty much his default mode. "You know it's not safe to sleep in a hot tub, right?"

"Yes, Papa." She started to roll her eyes but apparently thought better of it, for she went all faux solemn-eyed on him and offered a polite smile instead. "Is there something I can do for you?"

A raft of dirty suggestions popped to mind, but since he wasn't a damn fourteen-year-old—even if that was the way he invariably felt around her—he wisely swallowed them. Particularly since he didn't know why he'd come to grill her in the first place. Hell, hadn't he given her his card so she could be the one to get in touch with him?

Whatever his reasons for showing up unannounced, here he was, so he might as well make the most of it. Hooking a hip on the corner of the tub, he braced his other foot against the grass and ignored the splashed water soaking into the seat of his jeans. "You said yesterday morning you could tell me how to make the next pancake breakfast more profitable. How would you do that?"

She merely looked up at him for a moment. Wreathed in steam, moisture beaded her face, and her hair, pulled atop her head in a high ponytail, curled wildly, crazy little corkscrews plastered damply to her temples and nape. "Buy me a Coke and I'll tell you."

Good idea. A nice cold drink might cool him down, help him quit thinking about licking the water drops sliding down her silky-smooth cleav—

He surged to his feet. “Be back in a sec.” Fishing his wallet from his back pocket, he crossed to the vending machine in the ice machine room attached to the pool house.

Moments later he was back. He popped the tab on one icy can and handed it to Harper, then opened his own and knocked back half of it as he resumed his perch on the edge of the tub.

She took a long swallow herself and used the tip of her tongue to absorb a drop of soda from her upper lip as she lowered the can. Setting it aside on the little shelf that filled the gap between the back of the hot tub and the pool house’s outer wall, she focused her attention on him.

“One way to make your breakfast more profitable,” she said, “is to host a silent auction. That can be as elaborate or as simple as you want, but you have a captive audience in the people who come to eat, and everyone loves the idea of getting something at a bargain price.”

Pushing against the foot planted on the ground, he straightened. “Is it hard to do?”

“Not really. It can be time-consuming, but that’s where volunteers like me come in. You use us to solicit donations from local businesses and set up a table or two to accommodate the acquisitions. We can also help with things like deciding on a price to start the bidding for each item and at what increments to increase and make individual sheets for them—”

“Wait, wait. Explain what you mean. And pretend I don’t have a clue.”

She laughed. “Because you don’t?”

“Yeah.” His own mouth crooked up in a smile. “I’m a cop—and before that a marine. Stuff like this is way outside my experience.”

“Okay.” She scooted to the edge of her submerged seat. “Say Wendy at Wacka Do donates a haircut and she usually charges thirty-eight dollars. You’d make a sheet that says Haircut at Wacka Do’s, value thirty-eight dollars. And since it’s a service and not, say, a pretty gift basket that visually pops to catch a potential bidder’s attention, you might want to add a photo of Wendy doing a haircut, or a styled wig on a wig stand. You with me so far?”

“Yep.”

She took another sip of her pop. “Regardless of the visual, the sheet needs a starting bid, so say three-fifty or around ten percent of its value, with fifty-cent or one-dollar increases. Now, if your brother were to donate one of his photographs, on the other hand, you’d have a much higher value amount because he’s well known in his field. That would make both the starting bid and the increments higher. See?”

“Yeah, I do.” And he liked the idea. No one else in town was doing anything like it. “So you just flop the stuff down on a table and you’re good to go?”

“God.” Her mouth quirked up. “You’re such a guy. The idea is to try to make the presentations as striking as possible to capture as much bidder interest as you can. You also need to give people enough time to both look at what’s offered and to bid again if someone trumps them. And have a clear end time. Then you’d need someone responsible to collect the money, but that’s pretty straightforward. The winner simply brings the sheet to the cashier and pays the final bid amount on it. And since it’s for a charity, you don’t have to deal with collecting sales tax—although I’d double-check that one in case Washington state differs in that respect.”

“That’s so cool. What else you got?”

She blinked those olive-green eyes at him. “Scuse me?”

“You said ‘for starters.’ Does that mean you have even more ideas?”

“Oh, honey.” Stretching her arms out along the tub’s rim, she tipped her head back and let her torso float up to the surface again. Smooth skin stretched over toned thigh muscles and all that beautiful cleavage as her various curved parts cleared the roiling water. Raising her head again, she caught him dead to rights checking out the entire kick-ass package and sank back beneath the water. “I’ve got a million of ’em.”

“Excellent.” He grinned and settled in, feeling truly comfortable with her for perhaps the first time since they’d met. Hell, she had pointed it out herself; he was a guy. When guys were presented with tits and gorgeous legs, they looked. They sure as hell didn’t apologize for it. “Let’s hear ‘em.”

“Was the community center space donated?”

“Yeah. We had to put down a damage deposit, but we got it all back. Well, except for the cost of replacing some broken glasses.”

She grinned at him. “Yes, I was having my tray refilled when that happened. Did you solicit the food and the paper goods?”

“Huh?” That straightened him up. “No. We got a rebate from the pancake manufacturer for fund-raising, but it never occurred to us to ask The General Store to donate it.”

“Next year make a list of everything it takes to put on the fund-raiser, then try to get as much of it donated as possible. I’m guessing your boys are from places other than just here, right?”

He nodded. “We don’t actually have any kids from Razor Bay—they’re mostly from the Silverdale or Bremerton areas. But some come from as far away as Seattle or Olympia.”

“From what you’ve said about some of the boys’ home lives, parental involvement might be far different from the families I’ve worked with. But if any of the parents do actively engage in their kid’s recovery—especially if they live in the nearby areas since the regional aspect works best—get them to hit up their local grocers, printers, party stores—anyplace that might contribute something you’d otherwise have to buy. The idea is to funnel as much profit back into the program as possible, right?”

“Absolutely.” The timer for the jets clicked off, but for once his attention didn’t go to her suddenly much more visible body. He gave her a puzzled look. “How do you know so much about this?”

“I’ve had a bazillion temporary jobs, and one of them was taking over an auction coordinator position for a private school when the one they had was put on bed rest during the final trimester of her pregnancy.”

“And you just—what?—knew what to do?”

“No.” She gave him a rueful smile. “Far from it. I didn’t have the first notion how an auction was run. Luckily for me, several of the parents who’d spent their PIP hours working on the auction did, and they taught me.”

“What the hell are PIP hours?”

“Oh, sorry. It stands for Parent Involvement Program. Most private schools designate a given number of hours parents are expected to volunteer at their kids’ school.” She stood up and water cascaded down her. “Hand me that towel, will you?”

Sweet Mother Mary. His good intentions went up in smoke, but screw it—he claimed the guy defense again. Fumbling for the towel folded near his feet, he handed it over, then simply stared as she patted herself dry. He’d assumed she had on a bikini, which until tonight he’d pretty much considered the gold standard of sexy beachwear.

The one-piece suit that molded faithfully in all the right places was hands-down sexier. The band beneath the black-and-white bra part tied around her neck and behind her back like a bikini top, but was attached to a solid black body that was cut in toward her waist, low on her back and high on her thighs. And its wet spandex clung to every luscious inch it covered.

“Hooyah,” he breathed when she turned three-quarters away from him, propped a foot on the edge of the tub and bent to dry her lower leg. He had to physically restrain himself from reaching out to stroke the sweet, firm curve of her ass. He cleared his throat and sternly recalled the topic they’d been discussing before her rise like Venus from a fucking shell had blown it from his mind. “Why didn’t one of those parents just take over?”

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “You’re a logical thinker, aren’t you? And hiring someone familiar with the program would make sense...if even one of them had been in the market for a short-term job that was about to transition from part-time to ten-hour days.”

That got his mind back in the game. “I thought you said it wasn’t that difficult!”

“The scenario I propose for Cedar Village isn’t. But the kind of auction I did for the school was held in an Atlanta hotel, featured a sit-down meal and included enough items to fill a ballroom. It also employed an auctioneer at a live auction for the high ticket items. That’s a much more time-consuming endeavor.”

She climbed from the tub and balanced gracefully on one foot while raising the other to towel it dry. Upon finishing both feet, she turned, crossed her arms beneath her breasts and pinned him squarely in her sights. “So, have I demonstrated enough experience to volunteer at the Village?”

Luckily for him, it was dim out here, so the blood he felt surging up his throat and onto his face likely didn’t show. He’d inferred that she might have nothing the home could use yesterday—or that the boys would make mincemeat of her, because he’d been rattled by the microsecond spent all but wrapped around her when he’d stepped in to help with the leaning tower of glasses. Rattled—and wanting nothing more than to avoid running into her at the one place he felt most like himself.

But he’d known when she’d made Brandon squirm with nothing more than a look that she could hold her own with the Cedar Village boys. “Yes,” he said honestly. “And then some. Do you want a regular schedule—” which he’d prefer so he could arrange, for both their sakes, to be elsewhere “—or—”

“I’d rather come when I can, if that works for you. My hours at the inn change week to week and sometimes even day to day.”

“Sure.” He pulled out his wallet again and searched through it for a Village card. Locating the one he knew was in there somewhere, he pulled it out and extended it to Harper. “Sorry this’s so battered, but the director Mary-Margaret’s name and number are on it. She’s the one to talk to, but I’ll let her know about our conversation on Thursday, which will be the next time I’ll be there, so she’ll know who she’s talking to when she gets your call.”

“Thanks, Max.” She pulled a vivid red cover-up over her suit and slid the card in its pocket, then gathered her room card and the still half-full can of pop from the little shelf. “I’ll give her a call on Friday.”

“Are you headed back to your place?”

She nodded. “Yeah. It’s been a busy day—I’m going to call it a night.” She looked him over. “You have to be pretty whipped yourself. You slaved over a hot stove and rode herd over teenage boys for a good part of yesterday, and have obviously worked today.” She indicated his department uniform and holstered gun.

He shrugged. “What can I say—I’m tough.” One hand hovering just above the small of her back, he gave her an after you sweep of his free fingers. “Come on. I’ll see you to your place, then I’m gonna head home, myself. I’ve got a beer calling my name.”

“You don’t have to walk me home.” She grinned up at him. “But you’re going to anyway, aren’t you, ’cause you’re Mister Responsible.” She turned in the direction he indicated and headed down the path that intersected with another that led to her cottage, getting ahead of his hand, which he dropped to his side.

“That’s me,” he agreed. “And for a woman I’d lay odds on being pretty damn independent, you’re being suspiciously easy to steer.”

“Never get between a man and his beer, I always say.”

“No fooling?” Tucking his hands in his front pockets, he strolled a scant inch behind her. “I just might have to marry you.”

He thought he saw her step falter, but maybe not, because he blinked and she was walking with hip-swinging ease. Not to mention the wry smile she shot him.

“You don’t think you might have kind of low standards for a future wife?” she inquired.

“Hey, I’m pretty serious about my beer.” And damn amazed that for this moment, at least, he felt downright at ease with her.

“Ah, well, then.”

They arrived at her cottage, and she turned to face him. “Thanks, Max. You truly are a nice guy.”

“No, I’m not!”

Her dark brows furrowed. “That’s not an insult.”

Except for the part where being a “nice” guy was usually the kiss of death when it came to getting laid.

He straightened. What the hell difference did that make? It wasn’t as if a woman like Harper was going to sleep with a guy like him anyway.

“You’re right,” he said, giving her a stiff smile and falling back into the professionalism he’d used from day one as a shield against his attraction to her. “It was a very nice compliment—it’s just been a long day, like you said. But I’m always glad to be of assistance.” He tweaked the room card from her fingers and slid it into the slot, then turned away for her to punch in the code.

He twisted back when he heard the door open and gave her a crisp nod. “You enjoy the rest of your night, now.”

“O...kay,” she said faintly.

But he was already off her porch and halfway down the path.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I’M SO GLAD we finally managed to get together.” Harper said as she slid into a chair across a small wooden table from Tasha at The Anchor bar Friday afternoon.

“No fooling—I’m happy you could get away during the day.” The tall, attractive strawberry blonde gave her a rueful smile. “I’m afraid the downside to owning my own pizza joint is that my work is generally just kicking into high gear about the time everyone else’s is winding down and they’re getting ready to go home for the day.”

“And erratic hours are rather the upside of my job. I guided a kayak group along the shoreline to town this morning, but Fridays are a big transition day—checkouts in the morning and even more ins during the late afternoon, so I don’t have anything scheduled until my sunset yoga class this evening. So, good-oh for us, huh?”

“What’s good-oh for you two?” A purse landed on the table next to Harper, and she looked up to see Jenny pulling out the chair beside hers. “Tell me I didn’t miss anything good.”

“Nah.” Tasha shook her head at her friend. “We were just congratulating ourselves on finding some mutual time off.”

“Yeah, too bad about you peons.” Bouncing a fist off her chest, Jenny flashed them a big smile. “It’s good to be boss.”

“Hey, I’m a boss, too,” Tasha said. “I’m the boss of me.”

“And yet you’re always tied to Bella T’s from late afternoon on. Hell, from lunch on most of the summer.”

“Yeah, I should probably think about hiring more people to give me some flexibility.” She slid them a sly smile. “Still, it could be worse. I could be the peon like Harper.”

“Now, that’s just cold!” But Harper laughed, enjoying herself immensely. She’d been sitting with the two women for less than five minutes and already it had occurred to her that she’d done herself a huge disservice when she’d failed to pursue more female friendships over the years.

Tasha grinned at her, and Harper determined then and there that she would actively work at having a relationship with her and Jenny. For once in her life she wasn’t going to allow the length of time she spent in a given town to dictate the effort she put into getting to know people. This time she’d make friends on a deeper level than her usual enjoy-them-while-they-last-but-don’t-get-too-involved way.

“I’m surprised you managed to pull yourself away from Lover Boy,” Tasha said to Jenny as she raised a hand to catch a nearby waitress’s attention.

“It wasn’t easy,” the small brunette agreed. “But it’s been far too long since I’ve had any decent girl time. And much as I love Jake, the estrogen deprivation was starting to make me twitch.”

Tasha gave her a solemn nod. “I totally get that. Lovely as men can be, there’s such a thing as testosterone overload.”

“But, oh, what a way to go,” Jenny murmured with a small, private smile.

All three women laughed. “Oh, sure, rub it in for those of us who haven’t been as lucky lately,” Harper said. She raised her brows at Tasha. “Or maybe that’s just me.”

“Nope. Much as I’d love to say it is, I’m part of the ain’t-getting-any demographic myself.”

A college-aged blonde stopped by their table to drop three coasters in front of them. “You ladies ready?”

After they placed their orders, they watched the blonde stride off. Then Jenny turned to Harper. Planting an elbow on the table, she propped her chin in her palm to study her. “I never would have pegged you as a beer drinker.”

“What did you think I’d drink?”

“Martinis,” Tasha said unhesitatingly, and Jenny nodded her agreement.

“Really?” She shifted her gaze between the two women. “Why?”

“Probably because you’ve got that whole—” Jenny rotated a hand “—sophisticated thang going for you.”

This time Tasha nodded.

Then the petite brunette dismissively flapped the same hand. “That’s not important, though,” she said, focusing her attention on Harper. “I was wondering...how would you like to take on some added responsibility at the inn?”

“Well, I don’t know.” Harper was at once excited at the idea and uneasy. She always enjoyed the challenge of learning or conquering new skills. At the same time, the goal that had brought her here had nothing to do with her job at The Brothers. “You know I’m not looking for a full forty-hour week.”

“Right now you’re not even up to thirty hours.” Jenny sat straighter in her chair. “What I have in mind will add maybe an extra five hours a week. And I think it’s something you’d not merely enjoy but be really good at.”

“Okay, now you’ve got me all curious.”

“Me, too,” Tasha said.

“Every year, from the Thursday before Labor Day through the holiday, the town holds its annual Razor Bay Days. Max told Jake, who of course told me, about your ideas to bump the Village’s fund-raising efforts up a notch. That’s exactly the kind of thinking we need for handling the inn’s participation in the events.”

Jenny must have seen her instinctive shake of the head, for she hurried to say, “You don’t have to reinvent the wheel, sweetie. It’s mostly a matter of handling the things we already have in place. For instance, we always buy a block of preferential seating for the Saturday parade and Sunday night fireworks in town, and you’re in a perfect position to let people know they’re available. The actual sales will be handled at the front desk. You’d set up an Adult Night with an appropriate theme and activities, as well as a coordinating Game Night for the kids. You’re so damn inventive, this stuff oughtta be right up your alley.”

“I’m surprised you’re not doing it yourself,” Harper said slowly. “You must have it down pat by now.”

The cocktail waitress arrived then with their order, and the three women exchanged pleasantries with her as she placed their drinks on the table. When she walked away again, Jenny leaned forward.

“That’s actually part of the problem. Razor Bay Days is the inn’s single largest occupancy week, and it’s routinely sold out as much as a year in advance—in many cases to people who come year after year. I feel we need some fresh eyes on this, fresh ideas.”

A few ran through Harper's mind, and she couldn't help the excitement that coursed through her veins. She loved doing this sort of thing. "Okay, it sounds like fun. I'll do it."

"Excellent!" Jenny smiled hugely and leaned into her. "Let's get together at my office tomorrow and—"

"Everything was fine until you came along," a belligerent voice suddenly cut through their conversation, and Harper twisted in her seat in time to see a man take a swipe at the drink in front of another man sitting with a woman at the bar. The top-heavy glass tumbled over, and liquid spilled across the bar to waterfall over the side.

The woman leaped to her feet, brushing at her shorts and the waistband of her top, which were spotted with whatever had been in the glass.

"Crap. Wade's at it again." Jenny, who had turned toward the bar as well, swiveled back in unison with Harper to face center again.

"Who's Wade, and why on earth did he do that?"

"Wade Nelson." Tasha tipped her chin in the direction of the woman who'd jumped up. "He and Mindy were married once upon a time."

"But Wade has issues, and one day she finally had her fill of them and kicked him out," Jenny said, picking up the story. "Eventually she and Curt Neff started going out, and a year or so later they got married. Wade refuses to accept that it's over between him and his ex-wife."

The man was still loudly haranguing the ex-wife's husband. "You'd think they'd be furious, but I don't hear them saying anything to him in return." She wanted to turn around to see, but her manners-count upbringing deemed it best not to gawk at them again.

"They learned through hard experience that ignoring him is best all around," Jenny said. "I don't know if I could keep my mouth shut as well as they have, though. That has to be hard."

"Seriously hard. How long have they been doing it?"

"Seven years."

An incredulous laugh escaped her. "Are you bamming me? They've been apart seven years and he still thinks—what?—that she'll come back to him? When he acts like that?"

"She and Curt have been married seven years," the petite brunette corrected. "Mindy and Wade have been divorced damn near nine now. But you've got the basic idea right. He simply won't admit she's never coming back."

Sunlight flooded the front end of the bar for an instant as the door to the street opened; then the room regained its usual atmospheric dimness once again when it slowly closed behind the new arrival. A no-nonsense voice Harper would know anywhere said, "Let's go, Wade."

Like a compass needle seeking true north, she swung around to watch Max Bradshaw stride up to the bar. He wore his usual uniform of knotted-to-within-an-inch-of-its-life black tie over a khaki shirt with shoulder epaulets. A gold-toned badge was pinned to his chest, and gold, black and green shield-shaped patches, each sporting a spread-winged eagle and the Razor Bay Sheriff's Office designation, decorated his shirt's sleeves above the hems that bisected the solid mounds of his biceps.

His jeans, soft and worn almost white at the seams, might have seemed incongruous with the crisp professionalism of his upper torso if not for the black web utility belt that bristled with the tools of his trade—including a deadly-serious-looking gun. Or perhaps it was his no-nonsense, you-don't-even-wanna-mess-with-me attitude that so efficiently negated any slacker-dude vibe the near-shabby jeans might have otherwise suggested.

She watched him put a big hand on Wade's shoulder—and shivered, remembering how crazy-aware she'd been of it hovering just above her own back when he'd escorted her to her cabin from the hot tub. "Let's go," he said again.

Wade shook him off so abruptly that he himself staggered—then glared at Max as if it were his fault. "Why the hell don't you take him in," he demanded, jutting a petulant chin in Curt's direction.

Max reached out to steady him before the other man lost his balance entirely and replied evenly, “Because the call I got said Mindy and Curt were just sitting here minding their own business when you showed up and made a scene. Since I’ve been called out dozens of times to deal with this exact same situation, I have no reason to question the information.” He gave the other man a level look. “Now, you can come with me peaceably, or I can drag your ass out of here in cuffs. It’s your choice, Wade.”

“Fine.” Tugging the neckline of his stained T-shirt away from his Adam’s apple, Wade twisted his chin, stretching it first to the left, then to the right. “Whatever.” And he shambled toward the door, with Max’s hand planted between his shoulder blades to guide him whenever he hesitated.

At the door Max reached around Wade to pull it open. Sunshine splashed into the room again. Then the two men stepped out into the afternoon and disappeared from view as the door swung shut behind them.

Blowing out a quiet breath she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding, Harper turned back to her companions. “I am simply amazed no one has snapped that man up.”

“Who?” Jenny asked. She blinked then, and sat a little straighter. “Max?”

“Yeah. Oh, I know he’s not the most sociable guy in the universe, but he’s big, he’s built, and God knows the man is competent at everything he does. I find that seriously sexy.” Seeing her new friends gaping at her, she stilled. “Come on. I can’t be the only woman in town who finds him attractive.”

“Um...yeah, you kind of are,” Tasha said. Then she shook her head. “That is, he is an attractive man. He’s built like nobody’s business.”

“And he’s got a killer smile,” Jenny contributed. “But he’s kind of stingy with it.”

“And like you said,” the strawberry blonde concluded, “he’s not exactly Mister Social.”

Jenny snorted agreement, and Tasha looked at Harper. “Max is just so sober and intense. Not to mention disinterested—and I guess between all of that, it scares women off. Because now that you mention it, I can’t say I’ve seen him with a particular woman since he came back to town.”

Harper planted her chin on her fist. “For some reason Max and Razor Bay are linked in my mind. Where did he come back from?” It was all she could do not to squirm in her seat. For the first time since she’d taken over the job of assessing grant applicants for Sunday’s Child, she felt a hint of shame for pretending ignorance. God knows she’d thoroughly studied the foundation-generated dossiers on every Cedar Village board member.

Still, she had a job to do. And much as it bothered her to be duplicitous with Tasha and Jenny, her friends would likely find it odd if she didn’t show an interest.

“He spent years in the Marines—mostly in war-torn countries.” Tasha gave her head an impatient shake, her curls quivering with the motion. “But he’s been back for years, and as I said, I can’t think of a woman he’s ever paid special attention to. Not that I don’t see him talking to different ones occasionally, but it’s usually more like they’re talking to him and he’s mostly just listening. I don’t recall ever seeing him look as though he were with one of them, ya know?” She looked at Jenny. “Can you think of anyone?”

“Nope. I can’t put him with anyone, either. Which is odd, when you think about it. Because I know he’s kind of a lone wolf and all, but there’s sure as hell nothing asexual about him.”

“No shit,” Harper murmured.

Jenny grinned at her. “Oh, good, you do swear.”

She tilted her head slightly to study her friend. “And that’s a good thing?”

“It’s not good or bad—well, unless you’re one of those high school boys who can’t seem to string a sentence together without saying some variation of fuck every other word. It’s just that most everybody does to some extent, but since we’ve met, you’ve just been so damn...perfect.”

“I have not!”

“Yeah, you kind of have,” Tasha said. “You have gorgeous manners, amazing posture—did you go through childhood balancing books on your head or something?—and you always dress exactly right for the occasion. Plus, you sound educated and—let’s face it—rich girl when you speak.”

“Yes,” Jenny agreed. “For an American, your accent is not quite but very nearly British sounding.”

She smiled. “Okay, I’ll cop to that one. Because we moved so much as kids, my brother, Kai, and I often had tutors. And when we did stay in one place long enough to go to a local school, as with our tutors, the English spoken and taught there leaned heavily toward the Queen’s version. I’ve been told I kind of retained the cadence, if not the actual accent.” She took a swig of her beer, then shook her head. “I’m nobody’s rich girl, though. My grandparents on my father’s side are quite well-to-do, and my dad did okay for himself as well, although he didn’t attain their income bracket. But me, personally? Not even close.”

“Ah, but you’re talking to a couple of girls from the wrong side of the tracks,” Tasha said cheerfully. A man passing behind her bumped her chair, and she hopped it in a little closer to the table. “Well, Jenny actually started out on the right side, but circumstances dumped her in my part of town when she was sixteen.” She flashed Harper an easy whatta-ya-gonna-do smile. “So we’re easily impressed.”

Her laid-back acceptance made Harper realize their assessment of her wasn’t a you’re-not-one-of-us judgment; it was simply a recitation of their impressions. She took a sip of her beer and leaned back in her chair. “I spent a good deal more time with adults than kids my own age growing up, so I suppose I don’t sound quite like your average American thirty-year-old. But I can start swearing up a storm if you want.”

They both flashed her unrepentant grins, and she grinned right back.

Then she sobered and gave them a curious look. “Razor Bay is small, and I haven’t seen an overabundance of hot guys our age in the short time I’ve been here. So, weren’t either of you ever even a little tempted by Max? I thought teenage girls were fascinated by the broody Heathcliff/Vampire Edward type.”

“He wasn’t around when Tash and I were in high school, and when he did come home we were both way more interested in improving our futures. So the idea of him as potential dating material never even occurred to us in our impressionable years. Besides, I like guys who make me laugh,” Jenny said.

Tasha nodded. “Same here. And Max just isn’t my type.”

Harper studied her. “What is?”

The strawberry blonde grinned. “I like ’em tall, charming and fun,” she said slowly. The words had no sooner left her lips, however, than her gray-blue eyes darkened as if a thick cloud had suddenly blown across the sun. And her mouth, with its exotically fuller-than-its-counterpart upper lip, tightened. She made an erasing motion. “No, I take that back—I’ve sworn off a type. I have awful taste in men.”

“No, you don’t,” Jenny said firmly. “You had awful taste once. One time, Tash.”

“Well, considering that one time landed my ass in a Bahamian jail,” Tasha retorted coolly, “I think it’s probably enough, don’t you?”

Hello! Harper straightened. That sounded wildly intriguing. But one look at the rigid set of Tasha’s shoulders—not to mention the other woman’s blind-eyed attention to the wineglass in her hand—and Harper knew better than to pursue the conversational bomb that had just rolled onto the table between them. Not even the crystal green and blue waters of the canal at low tide were clearer than the vibe Tasha was putting out that she’d spoken unthinkingly—and this was not a subject she cared to discuss.

So Harper gave the other woman a cocky smile to lighten the mood. “I guess this means my Hunky Deputy and The Handcuffs fantasy is all mine, then, yeah?”

Her new friends laughed, and the tension that had hovered like a noxious mist over their table for a moment dissipated. “Oh, yeah.” Tasha gave her a lopsided smile. “Which is not to say I don’t wish you the best with it.”

“Absolutely,” Jenny agreed. “And should it ever come true for you...well. We expect details.”

“Lots and lots of details,” Tasha said. “Because Jenny’s right. Max is far from asexual, and I for one would love to know if he’s one of those tell-a-girl-exactly-what-he-wants-from-her-in-bed kind of guys.”

Harper stilled. Oh, hell. Like her imagination wasn’t active enough.

That was the last image she needed planted in her brain.

CHAPTER SIX

MAX STOOD IN front of the open refrigerator Saturday morning, absentmindedly scratching his stomach above the cutoffs he’d pulled on when he’d rolled out of bed. When it came to breakfast choices, there wasn’t a lot to select from. The fridge was empty except for a few cans of Coke, fewer bottles of Bud, a lonely, nearly gone quart of milk that might or might not still be drinkable and an assortment of condiments that ran heavily on the mustard and pepper sauce side.

He could always throw on a shirt and some flip-flops and go to the Sunset Café to get himself a big plate of the Fisherman’s special, he supposed. And in truth, bacon and eggs and hash browns, with a side of toast and jam sounded awfully damn good right about now.

But if he scrounged something up here, he could get an earlier start on the home improvement project he’d been planning for his next day off.

Which was today.

“Screw it.” He reached for the milk carton, inverted the fold to the pour position and sniffed. What the hell. It didn’t smell sour, exactly, so he kicked the fridge door shut and grabbed a bowl, a spoon and a box of Froot Loops from the cupboard. He carried everything over to the table, where he shoved aside a stack of unopened mail with the bottom of the milk carton, then unloaded the rest of his haul onto the tabletop. He turned back to give the coffeemaker, sitting cold and silent on the counter, a considering look. Then with a shrug, he returned to the fridge to grab himself a can of Coke. “Breakfast of champions.”

He popped the tab on his way back to the table. As he took a long gulp, he hooked a bare foot beneath the stretcher separating the chair’s back legs to tow it away from the table. Taking his seat, he poured cereal in the bowl, topped it off with milk, then picked up his spoon and dug in.

He ate fast, and as soon as he scraped up a lone Froot Loop and the last of the milk from his bowl, he climbed to his feet again. Taking everything back to the kitchen, he poured the little bit of milk still left in the carton down the drain and dumped the empty container, along with his bowl, spoon and can, into the sink to deal with later. Then he located an old pair of beat-up running shoes, shoved his feet into them and went out to the garage to gather his ladder and tools. He didn’t want to spend his entire day off working, so the sooner he got started, the sooner he could get in a little beach time.

He worked steadily and had just finished applying a peroxide-based cleaner to the last of the cedar shakes on the north side of his house and was up on the ladder scraping mildew out of the grooves of the affected shingles when he heard car tires crunching up the drive. Curious, he tossed the scraper onto the ladder’s shelf, jumped to the ground and strode toward the corner nearest the driveway. He didn’t get much in the way of company.

Or, okay, any as a rule.

Rounding the corner, he was in time to see his half brother climbing out of his fancy-ass Benz BlueTEC. Pleasure splintered through him, a recent sensation that caught him by surprise every time he saw Jake.

He gave himself a shake. It was hardly an oddity that he was not yet accustomed to the new direction their relationship had taken. God knew they'd spent a helluva lot more time being enemies than friends.

"Hey," he said. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I figured the only way I'd ever get to see your place was to invite myself." Pulling his sunglasses down his nose, Jake gave him an unhurried once-over. "You've sure as shit never issued one."

"Yeah." Max rolled his shoulders guiltily. "Sorry about that. Most of the group I used to run with were either gone or on the wrong side of the law when I got back to town, so I guess I'm out of the habit of inviting people to drop by."

"Jesus, dude, don't you have any friends?"

"I have friends," he said defensively. "Most of them are marines, though, so we're scattered all over the place. But I have a couple of guys I shoot pool with at The Anchor or share an occasional beer with around town." But, okay, didn't really see otherwise.

Then he went on the offensive, since everyone knew that was the best defense. "And what the hell, Jake—you're one to talk. I haven't exactly seen you overrun with buddies, yourself."

Jake grunted and shoved his shades back up. "Gotta point." He turned away to check out Max's place.

Max would've sworn he wasn't a jumpy kind of guy. But when Jake took his sweet time surveying the house and its surrounding land, he found himself damn near twitching by the time his brother finally turned back.

Jake gave him an imperturbable look. "This is moderately cool."

"It's hella cool," Max corrected but then grinned. Because given the way they insulted each other on a regular basis, in Jake-speak "moderately cool" was a downright endorsement. It was pretty lame to be so thrilled by his brother's approval, but even in his wildest, what-kinda-trouble-can-I-get-into-now days, he'd never tried to lie to himself.

And that meant he had to acknowledge he pretty much was...well, maybe not thrilled, exactly, since that was for little kids and chicks. But pleased.

It struck him that he no longer thought of Jake as his half sibling—the guy was finally, simply, his brother in his mind. And, yeah, he was pleased that Jake liked his place. So sue him.

He'd stick a needle in his eye before he'd admit as much out loud—especially to Jake—but what he'd long wanted more than anything else in the world was a guy version of the white-picket-fence life. Right down to a loving wife who would put him first. Because that...well. That was something he could only imagine.

He'd never come first in anyone's life.

And he'd like kids, too, one day. He would never do what his father had—he'd sacrifice his right testicle before he'd cheat on his wife or abandon any kid of his.

Not that his lofty principles were of immediate concern, he acknowledged wryly, seeing as he was nowhere near attaining that dream—and didn't know if he ever would. A guy had to actually put himself out there to meet women. But he had this house. It was a first step. And, hell, maybe he'd take that second step one of these days as well, and head into Silverdale some Saturday night to spend a couple of hours at The Voodoo Lounge. He liked to dance, and it was a decent place to meet like-minded women.

And even if he didn't meet The One, at worst he might get laid. He sure as hell wouldn't mind that.

It had been a while.

He merely shrugged now, however, and got his head back in the conversation. They'd been talking about his house, not his less-than-titillating sex life. "I've been working on it. The place was a train wreck when I bought it, but she's got excellent bones and someday I think she'll be a beauty."

"Yeah, I can visualize it. How much land have you got here?"

“Four and a half acres.”

Hands stuffed in his pockets, Jake rocked back on his heels and looked at the large yard Max had platted by removing some of the trees that surrounded it on three sides. “I like the privacy.” He shot Max a crooked smile. “We’re so gonna have to have the next barbecue here.”

The idea of hosting anything sent a blip of panic racing through him. It wasn’t that he was against the idea—and for sure he’d been to enough dos put on by Jake and Jenny that he likely needed to reciprocate. He simply didn’t have any idea how to go about pulling together anything more complicated than putting out beer and chips. Swallowing his discomfort at the mere thought, however, he said, “Yeah. Maybe.”

Jake snorted and shot him a fist to the shoulder, along with a knowing smile, as if he could somehow look right into his mind. But before Max could respond—or even decide how he should—his brother turned to look at the house again. “What were you doing when I got here?”

And just like that, Max’s discomfort disappeared. He loved his place and, unlike a lot of other subjects, could always discuss it without having to dig for conversation. “This is the original stain job,” he said. “Or at least the one that was on the house when I bought it. I’ve been waiting for both a spate of nice weather like we’ve been having and time off to spruce it up. Today I’m washing the shakes and scrubbing out mildew on the north side, getting it ready to restrain.”

“Handy guy. Need a hand?”

Max laughed and eyeballed Jake’s designer T-shirt and shorts. “Yeah, right. And screw up your GQ look?” He indicated the muck splattering his own chin and neck and shoulders, smeared in the hair on his chest and down his abs and spackling his cutoffs. “Your duds probably cost more than my mortgage payment.”

“Please.” Jake made a rude noise. “That’s an easy fix.” Reaching over his back, he pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it aside. Then he unzipped his shorts and let them drop to the ground, stepping out of them and kicking them toward the discarded shirt. He turned back to Max wearing nothing but a tan, a pair of boxers and his Texas. “I’m good to go.”

“Jesus.” Max shook his head. “You must be wicked bored.”

“Yeah.” Jake gave him a sheepish smile. “Jenny’s at work, and Austin went out on his boat with Nolan and Bailey. I’ve cleaned up all my photo files and have been a fucking Suzie Spotless around my place. I need man work.”

Max laughed and led his brother around the corner of the house where he showed him how to scour the shakes. Once Jake started attacking the siding, Max went to the garage to scrounge up another scraper.

With two people working, they finished the north wall in record time. Max found sharing the chore and jawing with his brother a nice change to his usual solitary dig-in-and-just-get-it-done routine. So, after cleaning the brushes and putting them away along with the ladder, he invited Jake into his house to clean up. Then he showed him around, pointing out the improvements he’d made in his spare time over the past couple of years.

“This is really going to be something when you’re done,” Jake said with clear appreciation as they came back downstairs after viewing the still unfinished bedrooms. “Jenny and I have to start looking for something that’s big enough for the three of us and an office and darkroom. I’m tired of living in separate houses.”

“I bet. You gave her the ring—you got any concrete plans on tying the knot?”

Before Jake could answer, the phone rang. Max unearthed his cell from beneath a short stack of Law Officer magazines on the coffee table in the living room and checked the readout. Seeing the caller’s name, he felt his usual combination of enjoyment and tension.

He looked over at Jake. “I’ve gotta get this. There’s beer in the fridge and some chips in the cupboard above it.”

When his brother walked into the kitchen, Max hit the talk button. “Hey, Ma. How’s London?”

“Rainy,” she said, and Max exhaled softly.

So it was going to be one of those calls. Ignoring the discontentment of her tone, he said cheerfully, “We’ve had a pretty good run of weather here for the past couple weeks. I look at it as our reward for the crappy wet winter.”

“Well, I suppose we did have a pretty nice spring here,” his mother allowed.

“There you go. How’s Nigel?” he asked, naming his stepfather.

“He’s doing great.” Her voice perked up, and Max smiled to himself.

He’d been shocked to come home after mustering out of the Marines to discover his mother had packed up and moved to London to marry the man. She hadn’t given him so much as a heads-up.

But Nigel Shevington had turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to Angie Bradshaw. She’d met him while waiting tables at the restaurant in The Brothers Inn. Nigel had proven himself a fast worker, sweeping Angie off her feet and getting her to agree to move halfway across the globe with him practically before she’d even presented him with the check for dinner. Nigel thought she hung the moon, and since meeting him, Angie was probably the happiest she’d ever been.

Happier than he’d ever seen her, at any rate.

Old habits were hard to break, however, and sometimes when they talked she fell back into her old churlish ways. He was content to have diverted her now.

“So what are you doing with yourself in the nice weather?” she asked him. “Are you working today?”

“No, I have a rare Saturday off. I spent some time scraping the shingles on my house to get it ready to stain and thought I might hit the beach in a bit.”

“You and that canal,” she said, her voice half indulgent, half exasperated. “Never in my life have I met anyone else so drawn to the beach and the water as you. I’m surprised you didn’t buy yourself a house on the canal.”

“The sheriff’s department pays a pretty decent salary. But not that decent.”

“I bet that little shit Jake—”

“Ma,” he said with flat-toned warning.

“All right, all right.” She was silent for a heartbeat, then asked, “So, what color are you going to paint your place?”

“I haven’t quite made up my mind yet. I thought I’d ask—” Shit. Jake, he’d almost said, because his brother had a much more artistic eye than he did. And wouldn’t that go over like a fart in church? “—a friend I know who’s good with that sorta thing.”

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