



Romantic Suspense
INTRIGUE

A full-page photograph of a man with short brown hair and a beard, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and jeans, riding a dark brown horse. He is holding a white cowboy hat in his right hand. The scene is set in a grassy field with a wooden fence in the foreground and a sunset sky in the background. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The title 'Rescue at Cardwell Ranch' is overlaid in white serif font on the lower left of the image.

Rescue at Cardwell Ranch

B.J. Daniels

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Аннотация

The highly anticipated continuation of the Cardwell Ranch Collection read by more than 2 MILLION! Saving her once was risky. Rescuing her again may be fatal. When Hayes Cardwell arrived in Big Sky, Montana, for his brother's wedding, the Texas P.I. didn't expect to play hero. But ever since he saved her from a brutal abductor, he can't get McKenzie Sheldon out of his mind and heart. As passion blindsides him, Hayes vows to protect the beautiful business owner from once again becoming the target of a killer intent on finishing the job. McKenzie was drawn to Hayes from the moment she awoke and saw the tall, dark cowboy who'd rushed to her rescue like some Western fantasy. With his lean, sexy looks and fierce protective instincts, the gun-shy bachelor is already lassoing her heart. But can he protect her from a danger that's much closer than they think...a killer hiding in plain sight who's about to spring a final trap?

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“I can’t get you out of my mind—”

“I know what you’re up to.”

“I doubt that.” Hayes leaned toward her, his hand looping around the back of McKenzie’s neck as he gently drew her to him. “Because if you could see what I was up to, then you’d know I was about to kiss you.”

He brushed his lips over hers, then pulled back to gaze into her eyes. “Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

“You don’t have to treat me as if I’m made out of glass and might break,” she said. “I’m a lot stronger than I look.”

“Is that right?” He looped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him right there in the street between their vehicles. Her full lips parted in surprise. Her sweet, warm breath comingled with his own. She let out a soft moan as he tasted her. Drawing her even closer, he deepened the kiss, demanding more.

Rescue at Cardwell Ranch

BJ Daniels



www.millsandboon.co.uk

New York Times bestselling author **BJ DANIELS** wrote her first book after a career as an award-winning newspaper journalist and author of thirty-seven published short stories. That first book, *Odd Man Out*, received a four-and-a-half-star review from *RT Book Reviews* and went on to be nominated for Best Intrigue that year. Since then, she has won numerous awards, including a career achievement award for romantic suspense and many nominations and awards for best book.

Daniels lives in Montana with her husband, Parker, and two springer spaniels, Spot and Jem. When she isn't writing, she snowboards, camps, boats and plays tennis. Daniels is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, International Thriller Writers, Kiss of Death and Romance Writers of America.

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This one is for David Rummel, who makes me laugh with his stories and his wonderful joy for life. You definitely make our lives more fun.

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Chapter One

From the darkness, he heard the sound of high heels tapping

quickly along the pavement, heading in his direction, and smiled. This could be the one.

If not, he would have to give it up for the night, something he couldn't bear doing. For days his need had been growing. He'd come here tonight because he couldn't put it off any longer—no matter how dangerous it was to hunt this close to home.

Since it had gotten dark, he'd been looking. He hated to think of the women he'd let get away, women in their tight skirts and low-cut blouses, women who'd just been asking for it.

But waiting for the right woman, he'd learned, was the smart thing to do. It took patience. Tonight, though, he found himself running short of it. He'd picked his favorite spot, the favorite spot of men like himself: a grocery-store parking lot at night. Once he'd parked next to her car—he knew it was a woman's car because she'd left her sunglasses on the dash and there was one of those cute air fresheners hanging from the mirror—he'd broken the bright light she'd parked under.

Now the area was cast in dark shadow—just the way he loved it. He doubted she would notice the lack of light—or him with his head down, pretending to be packing his groceries into the trunk of his large, expensive vehicle. Women were less afraid of a man who appeared to have money, he'd discovered.

At the sound of her approaching footfalls, he found it hard not to sneak a peek at her. Patience. This would be the one, he told himself. He already felt as if he knew her and could easily guess her story. She would have worked late, which was why she

was still dressed as she had been this morning, in high heels. She wasn't pushing a cart so she wasn't shopping for her large family.

Instead, he guessed she was single and lived alone, probably in a nice condo since she drove a newer, pricier car—the kind independent, successful single women drove. By the sound of her footfalls, she carried only one small bag of groceries. He could already imagine his hands around her throat.

The footfalls grew closer.

He'd learned a long time ago not to act on impulse. Snatch the first one he saw and bad things happened. He had a scar to prove it. That run-in had almost cost him dearly. Not that she'd gotten away. He'd made sure of that. But she'd wounded him in more ways than one. It was why he'd come up with a set of rigorous guidelines he now followed to the letter. It was the reason, he told himself, that he'd never been caught.

He closed his eyes for a moment, imagining the look in her eyes when she realized she was about to die. This woman had to be the right one because his need had grown to the point of urgency. He went over his guidelines, the memory of his only mistake still haunting him.

He wouldn't let himself be swayed by an alluring whiff of perfume. Nor would he risk a woman carrying anything that could be used as a weapon at a distance like an umbrella.

Then there was her hair and attire. It would surprise most women to know that what made her his target was her hairstyle. There was a reason women with short hair were not common

prey of men like him. Give him a woman with a ponytail—a recent trend that filled him with joy—or a braid or even a bun—anything he could bury his fingers in and hold on for dear life.

Clothing was equally as important. She had to be wearing an outfit that would come off easily and quickly because he often didn't have a lot of time. Of course, he always carried a pair of sharp scissors, but a woman in a blouse and a skirt made his life so much easier, even with a blade handy.

Now as the sound of the high heels grew closer, he readied himself with growing anticipation. He was betting this one was wearing a nice short skirt and a button-up blouse. Tonight, he could even handle a matching jacket with the skirt. No blue jeans, though. They were such a pain to get off.

Her cell phone rang. She stopped walking. He groaned since if she'd been just a little closer, she would have already been in his trunk, her mouth duct taped as well as her wrists and ankles.

He cursed her cell phone even though it often made things easier for him. Women who were distracted—either digging in their purses for their keys or talking on their cell phones or unloading their groceries—were oblivious to the fact that he was already breathing down their necks.

He silently urged her phone call to end. Just a few more steps and he would grab her by the hair, overpower her and have her in the trunk of his car before she even knew what was happening. Once he got her to the place he had picked out down by the river...well, that was when the real fun would begin.

His next victim was still on the phone. She sounded upset, so upset that she'd stopped walking to take the call. She would be thinking about the call—not him right next to her car.

The call ended. She began to walk again, right toward him. He doubted she'd even noticed him bent over his car trunk, pretending to be taking care of his groceries.

He heard her vehicle beep as she unlocked it. Any moment she would walk within a few feet of him on his right. He would have only an instant to make his decision. An instant to see what she had in her hands, what she was wearing, how long her hair was. Even with his meticulous planning, there was always the chance that this could be the one woman who would surprise him. The one who would fight back. The one who would get away and ruin his perfect record.

His heart began to pound with excitement. He loved this part. None had ever gotten away—even the one who'd scarred him. He was too smart for them. They were like sheep coming down a chute to slaughter, he thought, as he looked up and saw her start past him.

Chapter Two

McKenzie Sheldon came out of the grocery store thinking about work. Not work, exactly, but one of the men at her office.

She was going to have to do something about Gus Thompson. The warnings she'd given him had fallen on deaf ears. The man had reached the point where he was daring her to fire him.

Shifting the single bag of groceries to her other arm, she

began to dig for her keys when her cell phone rang. She stopped and pulled out her phone, saw it was her receptionist and said, "What's up, Cynthia?"

"You told me to call you if I was having any more problems."

McKenzie let out an angry breath. "Let me guess. Gus. What has he done now?" she asked with a disgusted sigh.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Sheldon, but he won't leave me alone. If I work late, he works late. He always insists on walking me to my car. I've told him that I'm not interested, but it seems to make him even more determined. I make excuses to avoid him, but—"

"I know. Trust me. It isn't anything you're doing."

"He scares me," she said, her voice breaking. "Tonight I looked out and he was waiting by my car. I'm afraid to try to go home."

She started to tell Cynthia that she didn't think Gus was dangerous, but what did she know? "Is he still out there?"

"I don't know." Her receptionist sounded close to tears.

"Call the police. Or if you want to wait, I can swing by—"

"I don't want you to have to do that. I'll call the police. I wanted to talk to you first. I didn't want to make any trouble."

"Don't worry about that. Gus is the one making the trouble. I promise you I'll take care of this tomorrow." She heard her receptionist make a scared sound. "Don't worry. I won't mention your name." She thought of the night she'd looked out her window at her condo. Gus had been sitting in his car across the street. He'd seen her and sped off, but she'd wondered how many

other nights he'd been out there watching her house. "I should have fired him a long time ago."

"But he's your best salesman."

McKenzie let out a humorless laugh. "Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Still, I wouldn't want to be blamed for him losing his job."

"You won't. Trust me. I have my own issues with him." She snapped the phone shut, angry with herself for letting things go on this long.

She had talked to Gus after that incident outside her house. He'd shrugged it off, made an excuse and she hadn't seen him again near her place. But that didn't mean he hadn't been more careful the next time. There was just no reining Gus in, she thought as she found her keys and started toward her car.

She wasn't looking forward to tomorrow. Gus wouldn't take being fired well. There would be a scene. She really hated scenes. But this was her responsibility as the owner of the agency. Maybe she should call him tonight and hire security until she could get Gus Thompson's desk cleaned out and the locks changed on the doors at the agency.

With a sigh, she hit the door lock on her key fob. The door on her SUV beeped. Out of the corner of her eye, she barely noticed the man parked next to her, loading his groceries. His back to her, he bent over the bags of groceries he'd put in his trunk as she walked past him.

She was thinking about Gus Thompson when the man grabbed

her ponytail and jerked her off her feet. Shocked, she didn't make a sound. She didn't even drop her groceries as his arm clamped around her throat. Her only thought was: this isn't happening.

* * *

HAYES CARDWELL FELT his stomach growl as he walked down the grocery-store aisle. The place was empty at this hour of the night with just one clerk at the front, who'd barely noticed him when he walked in. The grocery was out of the way and it was late enough that most people had done their shopping, cooking and eating by now.

His plane had been delayed in Denver, putting him down in the Gallatin Valley much later than he'd hoped—and without any food for hours. He still had the drive to Big Sky tonight, one he wasn't looking forward to since he didn't know the highway.

Being from Texas, he wasn't used to mountains—let alone mountain roads. He was debating calling his brother Tag and telling him he would just get a motel tonight down here in the valley and drive up tomorrow in the daylight.

He snagged a bottle of wine to take to his cousin Dana Savage tomorrow and debated what he could grab to eat. The thought of going to a restaurant at this hour—and eating alone—had no appeal.

In the back of the store, he found a deli with premade items, picked himself up a sandwich and headed for the checkout. His Western boot soles echoed through the empty store. He couldn't imagine a grocery being this empty any hour of the day where

he lived in Houston.

The checker was an elderly woman who looked as tired as he felt. He gave her a smile and two twenties. Her return smile was weak as she handed him his change.

“Have a nice night,” she said in a monotone.

“Is there a motel close around here?”

She pointed down the highway to the south. “There’s several.” She named off some familiar chains.

He smiled, thanked her and started for the door.

* * *

MCKENZIE HAD TAKEN a self-defense class years ago. Living in Montana, she’d thought she would never need the training. A friend had talked her into it. The highlight of the course was that they’d always gone out afterward for hot-fudge sundaes.

That’s all she remembered in the split second the man grabbed her.

He tightened his viselike grip on her, lifting her off her feet as he dragged her backward toward the trunk of his car. The man had one hand buried in her hair, his arm clamped around her throat. He was so much taller, she dangled like a rag doll from the hold he had on her. She felt one shoe drop to the pavement as she tried to make sense of what was happening.

Her mind seemed to have gone numb with her thoughts ricocheting back and forth from sheer panic to disbelief. Everything was happening too fast. She opened her mouth and

tried to scream, but little sound came out with his arm pressed against her throat. Who would hear, anyway? There was no one.

Realization hit her like a lightning bolt. The parking lot was empty with only one other car at the opposite end of the lot. With such an empty lot, the man who'd grabbed her had parked right next to her. Also the light she'd parked under was now out. Why hadn't she noticed? Because she'd been thinking about Gus Thompson.

She saw out of the corner of her eye that the man had moved his few bags of groceries to one side of the trunk, making room for her. The realization that he'd been planning this sent a rush of adrenaline through her.

If there was one thing she remembered from the defense class it was: never let anyone take you to a second location.

McKenzie drove an elbow into the man's side. She heard the air rush out of him. He bent forward, letting her feet touch the ground. She teetered on her one high heel for a moment then dropped to her bare foot to kick back and drive her shoe heel into his instep.

He let out a curse and, his hand still buried in her long hair, slammed her head into the side of his car. The blow nearly knocked her out. Tiny lights danced before her eyes. If she'd had any doubt before, she now knew that she was fighting for her life.

She swung the bag of groceries, glad she'd decided to cook from scratch rather than buy something quick. Sweet-and-sour chicken, her favorite from her mother's recipe, called for a large

can of pineapple. It struck him in the side of the head. She heard the impact and the man's cry of pain and surprise. His arm around her neck loosened just enough that she could turn partway around.

McKenzie swung again, but this time, he let go of her hair long enough to block the blow with his arm. She went for his fingers, blindly grabbing two and bending them back as hard as she could.

The man let out a howl behind her, both of them stumbling forward. As she fell against the side of his car, she tried to turn and go for his groin. She still hadn't seen his face. Maybe if she saw his face, he would take off. Or would he feel he had to kill her?

But as she turned all she saw was the top of his baseball cap before he punched her. His fist connected with her temple. She felt herself sway then the grocery-store parking lot was coming up fast. She heard the twenty-ounce pineapple can hit and roll an instant before she joined it on the pavement.

From the moment he'd grabbed her, it had all happened in only a matter of seconds.

* * *

HAYES STEPPED OUT into the cool night air and took a deep breath of Montana. The night was dark and yet he could still see the outline of the mountains that surrounded the valley.

Maybe he would drive on up the canyon tonight, after all, he thought. It was such a beautiful June night and he didn't feel as

tired as he had earlier. He'd eat the sandwich on his way and—

As he started toward his rented SUV parked by itself in the large lot, he saw a man toss what looked like a bright-colored shoe into his trunk before struggling to pick up a woman from the pavement between a large, dark car and a lighter-colored SUV. Both were parked some distance away from his vehicle in an unlit part of the lot.

Had the woman fallen? Was she hurt?

As the man lifted the woman, Hayes realized that the man was about to put her into the trunk of the car.

What the hell?

“Hey!” he yelled.

The man turned in surprise. Hayes only got a fleeting impression of the man since he was wearing a baseball cap pulled low and his face was in shadow in the dark part of the lot.

“Hey!” Hayes yelled again as he dropped his groceries. The wine hit the pavement and exploded, but Hayes paid no attention as he raced toward the man.

The man seemed to panic, stumbling over a bag of groceries on the ground under him. He fell to one knee and dropped the woman again to the pavement. Struggling to his feet, he left the woman where she was and rushed around to the driver's side of the car.

As Hayes sprinted toward the injured woman, the man leaped behind the wheel, started the car and sped off.

Hayes tried to get a license plate but it was too dark. He

rushed to the woman on the ground. She hadn't moved. As he dropped to his knees next to her, the car roared out of the grocery parking lot and disappeared down the highway. He'd only gotten an impression of the make of the vehicle and even less of a description of the man.

As dark as it was, though, he could see that the woman was bleeding from a cut on the side of her face. He felt for a pulse, then dug out his cell phone and called for the police and an ambulance.

Waiting for 911 to answer, he noticed that the woman was missing one of her bright red high-heeled shoes. The operator answered and he quickly gave her the information. As he disconnected he looked down to see that the woman's eyes had opened. A sea of blue-green peered up at him. He felt a small chill ripple through him before he found his voice. "You're going to be all right. You're safe now."

The eyes blinked then closed.

Chapter Three

McKenzie's head ached. She gingerly touched the bandage and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry I can't provide you with a description of the man. I never saw his face." She'd tried to remember, but everything felt fuzzy and out of focus. She'd never felt so shaken or so unsure.

"Is the light bothering you?" the policewoman asked.

She opened her eyes as the woman rose to adjust the blinds on the hospital-room window. The room darkened, but it did

nothing to alleviate the pain in her head. “It all happened so fast.” Her voice broke as she remembered the gaping open trunk and the man’s arm at her throat as she was lifted off her feet.

“You said the man was big.”

She nodded, remembering how her feet had dangled above the ground. She was five feet six so he must have been over six feet. “He was...strong, too, muscular.” She shuddered at the memory.

“You said he was wearing a baseball cap. Do you remember what might have been printed on it?”

“It was too dark.” She saw again in her memory the pitch-black parking lot. “He must have broken the light because I would have remembered parking in such a dark part of the lot.”

“Did he say anything?”

McKenzie shook her head.

“What about cologne?”

“I didn’t smell anything.” Except her own terror.

“The car, you said it was large and dark. Have you remembered anything else about it?”

“No.” She hadn’t been paying any attention to the car or the man and now wondered how she could have been so foolish.

The policewoman studied her for a moment. “We received a call last night from your receptionist about a man named Gus Thompson.”

McKenzie felt her heart begin to pound. “Gus works for me. You aren’t suggesting—”

“Is it possible the man who grabbed you was Gus Thompson?”

McKenzie couldn't speak for a moment. Gus was big. He also had to know, after numerous warnings, that she was ready to fire him. Or at least, he should have known. Could it have been him? Was it possible he hated her enough to want to hurt her? "I don't know."

"We found a car registered to him, a large, dark-colored Cadillac. Did you know he had this car?"

"No. But his mother recently died. I think he mentioned she'd left him a car."

"He never drove it to work?"

"No, not that I know of." Again, she hadn't been paying attention. She knew little about Gus Thompson because she'd chosen not to know any more than she had to. "I saw him parked outside my house one night. I spoke to him about it and I never saw him again, but I can't be sure he didn't follow me sometimes." She thought of one instance when she'd noticed him driving a few cars behind her. But Bozeman was small enough that it hadn't seemed all that odd at the time.

The policewoman raised a brow. "You never reported this?"

McKenzie tried to explain it to herself and failed. "I guess I thought he was annoying but harmless."

"Did you ever date him?"

"Good heavens, no."

"But Gus Thompson probably knows your habits, where you go after work, where you shop?"

She nodded numbly. Gus could have followed her many times

and she wouldn't even have noticed. She'd been so caught up in making her business a success....

The policewoman closed her notebook. "We'll have a chat with Mr. Thompson and see where he was last night at the time of your attack."

"He wasn't at the office last night when you sent a patrolman over there?" she asked.

The policewoman shook her head. "He'd already left. Your receptionist was unsure when."

McKenzie felt a shiver, her mind racing. Could it have been Gus who'd attacked her? She swallowed, her throat raw and bruised from last night. Gus was big and strong and she knew he resented her. To think she'd almost reassured Cynthia that Gus wasn't dangerous. He could be more dangerous than she would have imagined.

"I used to work with his mother when she owned the agency," she said. "I inherited Gus. He is my best salesman, but I know he felt his mother should have left him the business and not sold it to me."

The policewoman nodded. "This could have been building for some time. We'll see what he has to say."

She had a thought. "I hit the man last night several times, but I'm not sure I did enough damage that it would even show." She described the ways she'd hit him.

"Don't worry. We'll check it out. In the meantime, you'll be safe here."

As the policewoman started to leave the room, McKenzie said, "The man who saved me last night..." She had a sudden flash. You're safe now. She blinked. "I'd like to get his name so I can thank him."

"He asked that his name be kept out of it."

She blinked. "Why?"

"There actually are people who don't want the notoriety. I can contact him if you like and see if he might have changed his mind. What I can tell you is that he just happened to fly in last night and stop at that grocery store on his way to see family. Fortunately for you."

"Yes. Fortunate." She had another flash of memory. Warm brown eyes filled with concern. You're safe now.

"The doctor said they're releasing you this afternoon. We're going to be talking to Mr. Thompson as soon as we can find him. Maybe going to the office isn't the best idea."

"I have to go into work. I was planning to fire Gus Thompson today. Even if he wasn't the man in the parking lot last night, I can't have him working for me any longer."

"Why don't you let us handle Mr. Thompson. We have your cell phone number. I'll call you when he and his personal items are out of your business. In the meantime, I would suggest getting new locks for your office and a restraining order for both yourself and your business."

She must have looked worried because the officer added, "You might want to stay with friends or relatives for a while."

"I have a client I need to see tomorrow south of here. I could go down there tonight and stay in a motel."

"I think that is a good idea," the policewoman said.

* * *

"LOOK WHAT THE cat dragged in," Tag Cardwell said as Hayes walked into the kitchen on the Cardwell Ranch. "We were getting ready to send the hounds out to track you down."

"Hey, cuz," Dana said as she got up from the table to give him a hug and offer him coffee. It was his first time meeting his cousin. She was pretty and dark like the rest of the Cardwells. As Tag had predicted, he liked her immediately. "We thought you'd be in last night."

"Ran into a little trouble," Hayes said and gladly took the large mug of coffee Dana handed him.

"That's Texas-speak for he met a woman," his brother joked.

Hayes told them what had happened and how it was after daylight before he left the police station. He didn't mention the strange feeling he'd had when the woman had opened her eyes.

"Is she all right?" Dana asked, clearly shocked.

For months, Tag had been talking up Montana and its low crime rate among all of its other amazing wonders.

"She regained consciousness in the ambulance. Last I heard she was going to be fine—at least physically. I'm not sure what a close call like that does to a person."

"Have the police found the man?" Dana asked, and hugged herself as if feeling a chill. Hayes thought about what his

cousin had been through. She had personal experience with a psychopath who wanted to harm her.

“Unfortunately, the police don’t have any leads. I wasn’t able to get a license plate or even the model or make of the car the man was driving.” He felt exhausted and stifled a yawn. He’d been going on nothing but adrenaline and caffeine since last night. “Hopefully, the woman will be able to give the cops a description so they can get the bastard.”

“You look exhausted,” Dana said. “I’ll make you breakfast, then Tag will show you to your cabin. You two don’t have anything planned until late afternoon, right?”

“Right,” Tag said. “I’m taking my brother to see the restaurant space I found.”

“Then get some rest, Hayes. We’re having a steak fry tonight. Our fathers have said they are going to try to make it.”

“That sounds great.” He wasn’t sure he was up to seeing his father. Harlan Cardwell had only been a passing figure in his life. Tag, who was the oldest, remembered him more than the other four of them. Harlan had come to Texas a few times, but his visits had been quick. Being the second to the youngest, Hayes didn’t even remember his uncle Angus.

Hayes felt emotionally spent, sickened by what he’d witnessed last night and worried about the woman. He kept seeing her staring up at him with those eyes. He mentally shook himself as Dana put a plate of silver-dollar-sized pancakes with chokecherry syrup in front of him, along with a side of venison

sausage and two sunny-side-up eggs.

He ate as if he hadn't eaten in days. As it was, he'd never gotten around to eating that sandwich he'd purchased at the grocery store last night. After he'd been plied with even more of Dana's amazing buttermilk pancakes, his brother walked him out to his rental SUV.

"So how are the wedding plans coming along?" he asked Tag as they got his gear and walked up a path behind the barn into the pines to his cabin.

He'd flown in a month early to talk his brother out of opening a Texas Boys Barbecue joint at Big Sky. The five brothers had started their first restaurant in a small old house in Houston. The business had grown by leaps and bounds and was now a multimillion-dollar corporation.

All five of them had agreed that they would keep the restaurants in Texas. But in December, Tag had come to Montana to spend Christmas with their father and had fallen in love with both Montana and Lily McCabe. Nothing like a woman and a little wilderness to mess with the best-laid plans.

It was now up to Hayes, as a spokesman for the other three brothers, to put Tag's feet firmly back on the ground and nip this problem in the bud.

"It's going to be an old-fashioned Western wedding," Tag was saying, his voice filled with excitement. "I can't wait for you to meet Lily. She's like no woman I have ever known."

Hayes didn't doubt it. He'd never seen his brother so happy.

All of the brothers had the Cardwell dark good looks. Add to that their success, and women were often throwing themselves at one of them or another. Except for Jackson, none of them had found a woman they wanted to date more than a few times. They'd all become gun-shy after Jackson had bitten the bullet and gotten married—and quickly divorced after he found out his wife wanted nothing to do with their newborn son.

Hayes couldn't wait to meet this Lily McCabe to find out what kind of spell she'd cast over his brother—and possibly try to break it before the wedding.

* * *

GUS THOMPSON HAD never been so angry. The bitch had called the cops on him. He glanced toward the empty receptionist's desk at the front of the real-estate office. It didn't surprise him that Cynthia hadn't come in today. Stupid woman. Did she really think he would blame her?

No, he knew Cynthia didn't do anything without checking with her boss.

So where the hell was McKenzie Sheldon? No matter what was going on, she was usually at work before him every morning. She must have had a rough night, he thought with a smirk.

Where was everyone else? he wondered as he checked his watch. Had they heard about the police coming by his house last night?

When the front door opened, he turned in his office chair, the smirk still on his face since he'd been expecting McKenzie. He

felt it fall away as he saw the cops. Hadn't it been enough that an officer had shown up at his door last night, questioning him about stalking the receptionist at the office? Now what?

"Mr. Thompson?" the policewoman asked. Her name tag read P. Donovan.

"Yes?" he asked, getting to his feet. He saw them look around the empty office.

"Are you here alone?"

"Everyone seems to be running late this morning," he said, and wondered why that was. Because they'd all been given a heads-up? Gus noticed the way both cops were looking at him, scrutinizing him as if he had horns growing out of his head.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions," the woman cop said. "Ms. Sheldon has asked us to first see that you remove your belongings from the premises."

"What?" he demanded. "The bitch is firing me? Has she lost her mind?"

P. Donovan's eyes went hard and cold at the word bitch. The word had just slipped out. He'd known McKenzie had it in for him, but he'd never dreamed she'd fire him.

"I'm her biggest-earning salesman," he said as if there had been a mistake made and he hadn't made it. Neither responded. Instead, he saw the male cop looking around. "What?"

"Are there some boxes in the office you can put your belongings into?" the cop asked.

Hadn't either of them been listening? "She can't do this." Gus

heard the hopelessness in his voice. He hated nothing worse than the feeling that came with it. He wanted to break something. Tear the place up. Then find McKenzie Sheldon and punch her in the face.

The male cop had gone into a storage room. He came back with two boxes. "Please take only those items belonging to you personally. We'll watch so we can tell Ms. Sheldon."

Gus gritted his teeth. McKenzie didn't even have the guts to face him. Well, this wasn't the last she'd see of him. He'd catch her in a dark alley. He started to shovel the top of the desk off into one of the boxes, but the male cop stopped him. T. Bradley, the name tag read.

"Leave any inventory you've been working on."

He grabbed up his coffee mug and threw it into the box. The couple of tablespoons of coffee left in the cup made a dark stain across the bottom. The same way McKenzie's blood was going to stain the spot where they met up again, he told himself.

His personal belongings barely filled one box. That realization made him sad and even angrier. This business should have been his. When he was a boy, he used to sleep on the floor of the main office when his mother had to work late. This place had been more like home than home during those years when she'd been growing the business.

"Is that everything?" P. Donovan asked.

He didn't bother to answer as T. Bradley asked for his key to the building.

"Ms. Sheldon has taken out a restraining order against you," the cop said. "Are you familiar with the way they work?"

He looked at the cop. "Seriously? Do I look like someone who is familiar with restraining orders?"

"You are required to stay away from Ms. Sheldon and this building. If you harass her—"

"I get it," he snapped, and handed over his key. As he started toward the door, T. Bradley blocked his way.

"We're going to need you to come down to the police station with us to answer a few more questions."

"About what?" The receptionist, bloody hell. "Look, I haven't done anything that any red-blooded American male doesn't do. I like women." He realized they were staring at him. "Come on. She liked it or she wouldn't have led me on."

"Whom are you referring to?" P. Donovan asked.

He frowned. "Cynthia. The receptionist. She was threatening to call the cops last night, but I didn't really think she'd do it. Why would you ask me that? Who else called the cops on me?"

"Didn't she ask you to leave her alone?" the woman cop asked.

He shrugged. "I thought she was just playing hard to get."

"What about Ms. Sheldon? Did you also think she was just playing hard to get?" T. Bradley asked.

Gus closed his eyes and sighed. So she'd told them about that time she'd caught him in her neighborhood. "There's no law against sitting in your car on a public street. I didn't even realize she lived in the area. I was looking at the house down the block,

okay?” Not even he could make the lie sound convincing.

“Let’s go,” P. Donovan said and led him out of the building as if he were a criminal. In the small parking lot, he saw his colleagues waiting in their vehicles for the police to take him away.

He wanted to kill McKenzie.

“Please open the trunk of your car, Mr. Thompson,” T. Bradley said as Gus started to put the box in the backseat.

“Why?” he demanded.

“Just please open it,” P. Donovan said.

He thought they probably needed a warrant or something, but he didn’t feel like making things any worse. He cursed under his breath as he moved to the back of the vehicle and, using his key, opened the trunk. It was empty, so he put the box in it. “Satisfied?”

It wasn’t until T. Bradley rode with him to the police station and they had him inside in an interrogation room that they demanded to know where he’d been last night after he’d left the office.

“We know you didn’t go straight home,” P. Donovan said. “Where did you go?”

So much for being Mr. Nice Guy. Through gritted teeth, Gus said, “I want to speak with my attorney. Now.”

Chapter Four

He’d failed.

Failed.

The word knocked around in his mind, hammering at him until he could barely think.

You got too cocky last night, you and your perfect record.

It wasn't his fault. It was the woman's. The fool woman's and that cowboy with the Southern accent who'd rescued her.

That rationale didn't make him feel any better. He'd had one woman who'd fought back before, he thought, tracing a finger across the scar on his neck. But he hadn't let her get away and she'd definitely paid for what she'd done to him.

The possibility of not only failure, but getting caught was what made it so exciting. He loved the rush. But he also loved outsmarting everyone and getting away with it. Last night should have gone off without a hitch. The woman was the perfect choice. He'd done everything right. If he hadn't had to knock her out... Even so, a few more seconds and he would have had her in the trunk. Then it was a short drive to the isolated spot he'd found by the river.

His blood throbbed, running hot through his veins, at the thought of what he would have done to her before he dumped her body in the Gallatin River. He had to kill them for his own protection. If he were ever a suspect, there couldn't be any eyewitnesses.

Except last night he'd left behind two eyewitnesses—the woman and the cowboy. Had either of them gotten a good look at him or his vehicle? He didn't know.

A costly mistake. He mentally beat himself for not waiting

until he could leave town before grabbing another one. The northwest was like a huge marketplace, every small town had perfect spots for the abduction and the dumping of the bodies. Small-town sheriff's offices were short on manpower. Women weren't careful because people felt safe in small towns.

Also, he had the perfect job. He traveled, putting a lot of miles on the road every year with different vehicles at his disposal. He saw a lot of towns, learned their secrets at the cafés and bars, felt almost at home in the places where he'd taken women.

But last night, after a few weeks unable to travel, he'd been restless. The ache in him had reached a pitch. His need had been too strong. He'd never taken a woman in his hometown. One wouldn't hurt, he'd thought. No, he hadn't been thinking at all. He'd taken a terrible chance and look what had happened.

He gingerly touched the side of his head where she'd hit him with whatever canned good had been in her grocery bag. Fortunately, other than being painful, the bruise didn't show through his thick hair. His shin was only slightly skinned from where she'd nailed him with her high heel and his fingers ached. No real visible signs of what she'd done to him. Not that he didn't feel it all and hate her for hurting him.

It could have been so much worse. He tried to console himself with that, but it wasn't working. The woman had made a fool out of him. It didn't make any difference that he shouldn't have gone for so long since the last one. But it had begun to wear on him. Otherwise, he would never have taken one this close to home. He

would never have taken the chance.

The television flickered. He glanced up as the news came on. This was why he couldn't let them live, he thought, as he watched the story about a botched abduction at the small, out-of-the-way grocery store the night before. He waited for the newsman to mention the woman's name and put her on camera to tell of her heroic rescue by the cowboy. He wanted to see the fear in her eyes—but more than anything, he needed her name.

The news station didn't put her on air. Nor did they give her name or the cowboy's who'd rescued her.

Furious, he tried several other stations. He'd gotten a good look at her last night after he'd punched her and had her on the ground.

But he foolishly hadn't bothered to take down her car license number or grab her purse. He hadn't cared who the woman was. She'd been nobody to him. But now he was desperate to know everything about her. All the others, he'd learned about them after their bodies were found. It had never mattered who they were. They'd already served their purpose. Now it was inconceivable that he didn't know the name of the only woman who'd ever gotten away.

Without her name, he wouldn't be able to find her and finish what he'd started.

* * *

STANDING IN THE hospital room half-dressed, McKenzie tried to still her trembling fingers. The morning sun was blinding.

Her head still ached, but she'd kept that from the doctor. After the police had left, he'd made her spend the night in the hospital for observation. Today, though, she had to get back to work. It was the only thing that could keep her mind off what had happened. Worse, what could have happened if someone hadn't stopped the man.

"Let me," her sister said and stepped to her to button the blouse.

She stood still, letting her big sister dress her—just as she had as a child. "Thank you. I wouldn't have called but I needed a change of clothing before I could leave the hospital."

Shawna shook her head. She was the oldest of nine and had practically raised them all since her mother had been deathly ill with each pregnancy, especially with her last baby—McKenzie.

"Mac, I would expect you to call because I'm your sister and, after what you've been through, you need your family."

She didn't like needing anyone, especially her big sister. "I didn't want to be any trouble."

Her sister laughed. "You have always been like this." She straightened McKenzie's collar. "You've never wanted to be any trouble. So independent. And stubborn. There. You look fine."

She didn't feel fine. From an early age, just as her sister had said, she had been fiercely independent, determined to a fault, wanting to do everything herself and driven to succeed at whatever she did. She was still that way. Nothing had changed—and yet, after last night, everything felt as if it had.

It was as if the earth was no longer solid under her feet. She felt off-balance, unsure—worse, afraid.

“Are you sure you’re ready to leave the hospital?” Shawna asked, studying her.

“The doctor says my head will hurt for a while, but that I should be fine. I need to get to the office and reassure everyone. I had to fire one of my employees today.” She swallowed, her sore throat again reminding her of the man’s arm around her neck. Had it been Gus Thompson? The thought made her blood run cold. “I’m sure everyone is upset.”

“You can’t worry about them right now. You need to think about yourself. Just go home and rest. I can stop by your office —”

“No, this is something I need to do myself.” She saw her sister’s disappointment. Shawna lived to serve. “But thank you so much for bringing me a change of clothes.”

“What do you want me to do with the clothes you were wearing?” she asked, picking up the bag. Her pretty new suit was blood-splattered from the now bandaged head wound. So was the blouse she’d been wearing.

“Throw them away. I don’t want them.”

She felt her older sister’s gaze on her. “There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with the suit or the blouse. Once I get them clean... It seems a shame—”

“Then drop them off at Goodwill.”

Her sister nodded. “Are the police giving you protection?”

“They really can’t do that. Anyway, there’s no need. If it was someone I know, then they don’t believe he’ll try anything again with them involved. And if it was random...then the man could be miles from here by now.”

Shawna didn’t look any more convinced than McKenzie felt. “I guess they know best.”

“I’m going to stay in Big Sky tonight. I have a client I need to see up there this afternoon so I’ll spend the night and come back tomorrow.”

“Do you want me to go home with you to your condo and wait while you pack?”

She thought of her empty condo. “No. That’s not necessary.” But even as she said it, she was already dreading facing it alone. “I know you need to get back to your job.” She stepped to her sister and hugged her. Shawna had never married. But she kept busy with three jobs as if needing to fill every hour of her day doing for others.

“You’ve done enough,” McKenzie said. Her big sister had always been there for her from as far back as she could remember. It made her feel guilty because she felt her sister had been robbed of her childhood. Shawna had been too busy raising their mother’s babies.

“If you need anything...”

“I know.” Sometimes she felt as if Shawna had made a life in Montana so she could watch over her. All the other siblings had left, stretching far and wide around the world. Only she and

Shawna had stayed in the Gallatin Valley after their parents had passed.

But her big sister couldn't always protect her. Before last night, McKenzie would have said she could protect herself. Last night had proved how wrong she was about that.

* * *

GUS THOMPSON WOULD never forget the humiliation he'd been put through at the police department. "Don't you know who I am?" he'd finally demanded.

They had looked at him blankly.

"My photo is all over town on real-estate signs. I am number one in this valley. I sell more property than any of the hundreds of agents out there. I'm somebody and I don't have to put up with this ridiculous questioning."

"You still haven't told us where you were last night." The woman cop was starting to really tick him off.

He looked to his attorney, who leaned toward him and whispered that he should just tell them since it would be better than their finding out later. "I went for a drive. I do that sometimes to relax."

"Did you happen to drive by the River Street Market?"

"I don't remember. I was just driving."

"We searched your car... Actually, the car that is still registered to your mother, and we found a gas receipt." The woman cop again. "You were within a quarter mile of the grocery last night only forty-two minutes before the incident involving

Ms. Sheldon.”

“So what?” he snapped. “Aren’t you required to tell me what I’m being accused of? Someone steal McKenzie’s groceries?”

“Someone attacked and attempted to abduct Ms. Sheldon.”

“Trust me. The guy would have brought her back quick enough.” Neither cop smiled, let alone laughed. He raked a hand through his hair. “Why would I try something like that in a grocery-store parking lot when I could have abducted McKenzie Sheldon any night right at the office?”

His attorney groaned and the two cops exchanged a look.

“Come on,” Gus said. “I didn’t do anything to her. I swear.” But he sure wanted to now. Wasn’t it enough that she’d fired him? Apparently not. She wanted to destroy him. Something like this could hang over his head for years—unless they caught the guy who really attacked her. What was the chance of that happening? Next to none when they weren’t even out looking for him.

He pointed this out to the cops. “Get out there and find this guy. It’s the only way I can prove to you that I’m innocent.”

They both looked at him as if they suspected he was far from innocent. But they finally let him go.

Once outside the police station, Gus realized he didn’t know what he was going to do now. Of course, another Realtor would hire him. The top salesman in Gallatin Valley? Who wouldn’t?

Unless word got around about Sheldon’s attack—and his firing. Everyone would think it was because he was the one who’d attacked McKenzie. How long would it take before everyone

knew? He groaned. Gossip moved faster than an underpriced house, especially among Realtors.

McKenzie Sheldon better hope she hadn't just destroyed his reputation—and his career.

* * *

"I'M ANXIOUS FOR you to see the building I found for the very first Big Sky Texas Boys Barbecue," Tag said later that afternoon. "The Realtor is going to meet us there in a few minutes."

Hayes had taken a long nap after the breakfast Dana had made for him. He'd awakened to the dinner bell. Dana was one heck of a cook. Lunch included chicken-fried elk steaks, hash browns, carrots from the garden and biscuits with sausage gravy.

"This is the woman who should be opening a restaurant," Hayes said to his cousin.

"Thanks, but no, thanks," Dana said. "I have plenty to do with four small children." As if summoning them, the four came racing into the kitchen along with their father, Hud, the local marshal. The kids climbed all over their father as Dana got him a plate. It amazed him how much noise kids seven to two could make.

Tag's fiancée, Lily McCabe, came in looking as if she was already family. She declined lunch, saying she'd already eaten, but she pulled up a chair. Introductions were made and five minutes later, Hayes could see why his brother had fallen in love with the beautiful and smart brunette.

“We’d better get going,” Tag said, checking his watch. He gave Lily a kiss then ruffled each child’s hair as he headed for the door. Hayes followed, even though there was no purpose in seeing this building his brother had found for the restaurant.

They weren’t opening a barbecue place in Big Sky. He wasn’t sure how he was going to break it to his brother, though.

The road from the ranch crossed a bridge over the Gallatin River. This morning it ran crystal clear, colorful rocks gleaming invitingly from the bottom. Hayes watched the river sweep past, the banks dotted with pines and cottonwoods, and wished they were going fishing, instead.

At Highway 191, Tag turned toward Big Sky and Hayes got his first good look at Lone Mountain. The spectacular peak glistened in the sun. A patch of snow was still visible toward the top where it hadn’t yet melted. This morning, when he’d driven to the ranch, the top of the peak had been shrouded in clouds.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Tag said.

“It is.” All of the Montana he’d seen so far was beautiful. He could understand why his brother had fallen in love with the place. And with Lily McCabe.

“Lily was nervous about meeting you earlier,” Tag said now, as if reading his mind. He turned toward Lone Mountain and what made up the incorporated town of Big Sky.

Hayes could see buildings scattered across a large meadow, broken only by pines and a golf course. “Why would she be nervous?”

“She was afraid my brothers wouldn’t like her.”

“What is the chance of that?” Hayes said. He had to admit that Lily hadn’t been what he’d expected. She was clearly smart, confident and nice. He hadn’t found any fault with her. In fact, it was blatantly clear why Tag was head over heels in love with the woman.

But Lily had reason to be nervous. She was backing Tag on the restaurant idea. A math professor at Montana State University in Bozeman, she didn’t want to move to Texas with her future husband. A lot was riding on what Tag’s brothers decided. Their not wanting a Montana barbecue place had nothing to do with liking or disliking Lily.

“Is she going to meet us at the restaurant building site?” Hayes asked, wondering how involved the bride-to-be was planning to be in the barbecue business. After the fiasco with Jackson’s wife, the brothers had decided no wives would ever own interest in the corporation. They couldn’t chance another ugly divorce that could destroy Texas Boys Barbecue. Or a marriage that would threaten the business, for that matter.

“No, she’s doing wedding planning stuff,” Tag said. “Who knew all the things that are involved in getting married?”

“Yes, who knew,” Hayes agreed as his brother turned into a small, narrow complex. He saw the For Sale sign on a cute Western building stuck back in some pine trees and knew it must be the one his brother had picked out.

“Good, McKenzie is already here,” Tag said just an instant

before Hayes saw her.

He stared in shock at the woman he'd seen the night before. Only last night McKenzie had been lying at his feet outside a grocery store as her would-be abductor sped away.

Chapter Five

"Hayes, meet McKenzie Sheldon, Realtor extraordinaire," Tag said. "McKenzie, this is my brother Hayes."

McKenzie smiled, but she wasn't sure how convincing it was. Her sister had tried to talk her into moving this meeting to another day. Maybe she should have listened. She hadn't felt like herself all day.

While she'd tried to put what had happened last night out of her mind, she kept reliving it. Now she felt jumpy and realized it had been a mistake to take the attitude "business as usual" today.

But she couldn't bear the thought of hanging out at the condo all day when she knew nothing could take her mind off last night in that case. Her first stop had been the office where she'd assured everyone that Gus Thompson would no longer be a problem. While she was there, the locksmith came and changed all the locks, which seemed to reassure some and make others at the office even more nervous since Gus hadn't gotten along with any of his coworkers.

Then she'd gone to her condo, packed quickly for overnight and driven to Big Sky to meet her client. She'd worn a plain suit with a scarf to cover the bruises on her neck, but the gash on her temple where the man had slugged her still required a bandage

if she hoped to hide the stitches.

As she caught her reflection in the empty building window, she saw with a start that she looked worse than she'd thought. How else could she explain Hayes Cardwell's reaction to her? His eyes had widened in alarm as he put out his hand.

He looked like a man who'd just seen a ghost. He'd recognized her. How was that possible when he'd only flown in yesterday?

"Pleased to meet you, Ms. Sheldon."

Tag had told her that his brothers shared more than a love of barbecue. The resemblance was amazing. Like Tag, Hayes Cardwell had the dark hair and eyes, had the wonderful Southern accent and was handsome as sin.

She thought of Ted Bundy as she took Hayes Cardwell's large hand, hers disappearing inside it, and saw his dark gaze go to the bandage on her head. "I had a little accident last night."

"You're all right, though?" He still held her hand. She could feel herself trembling and feared he could, too.

She put on her best smile. "Fine." Then she finally met his gaze.

His eyes were a deep brown and so familiar that it sent a shudder through her. Even though she'd told her sister that there was nothing to worry about, she was well aware that the man who'd attacked her last night could be closer than she thought.

* * *

HE'D STAYED HOME from work saying he didn't feel well, even though he knew that might look suspicious if he was ever a

suspect. But he was too anxious and upset over last night to go to work today.

There'd been nothing of use in the morning paper, only a short few paragraphs.

Police say a man tried to abduct a 28-year-old woman about 10:35 p.m. last night in the River Street Market parking lot.

The man attacked the woman as she came out of the market and attempted to put her into the trunk of his vehicle. He is described as over six feet with a muscular build. He was wearing a dark-colored baseball cap and driving a newer-model large car, also dark in color.

If anyone has information, they should contact the local police department.

He knew he should be glad that the information was just as useless to the police. She hadn't gotten a good look at him, which was great unless they had some reason to withhold that information. That aside, nothing in the news was helping him find the woman.

Too restless to stay in the house, he decided to go for a walk in his northside neighborhood to clear his head. The houses were smaller on this side of town, many of them having been remodeled when the boom in housing came through years before.

House prices had dropped with the mortgage fiasco, but so many people wanted to live in his valley that prices had never

reached the lows they had elsewhere. He was glad he hadn't been tricked into selling his house for top dollar. He could have found himself in a house he couldn't afford. Instead, his small, comfortable home was paid for since he lived conservatively.

Everything about his lifestyle looked normal on paper. He'd attended Montana State University right there in Bozeman. He'd bought a house after he graduated with a degree in marketing and had gone to work for a local company. He was an exemplary employee, a good neighbor, a man who flew under the radar. If caught, everyone who knew him would be shocked and say they never would have suspected him of all people.

As he walked around his neighborhood, he saw that more houses were for sale. It made him upset to think that his older neighbors were dying off because more college students would be moving in. Constant temptation, he thought with a groan.

He promised himself the next time he took a woman it would be in another town. Even better, another state. He couldn't take the chance so close to home ever again. If there was another time. Last night's botched abduction had left him shaken. She'd jinxed things for him. If he didn't find the woman and fix this—

At a corner he hadn't walked past in some time, he saw that another house had gone on the market. But that wasn't what made him stumble to a stop next to the strip of freshly mown lawn.

There she was! He could never forget that face and now there she was. Right there on the real-estate sign in the yard, smiling up at him as if daring him to come after her.

McKenzie Sheldon of M.K. Sheldon Realty.

* * *

“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?”

McKenzie nodded, even though she was far from all right. Did she really think she recognized this man? She hadn't seen the face of the man who'd tried to abduct her so she couldn't have seen his eyes. This man's eyes were...familiar and yet she'd never met him before, had she? Would she look at every man she met and think he was the one who'd attacked her?

Hayes Cardwell was staring at her with concern and something else in his expression. Compassion?

It was the very last thing she needed right now. Tears welled in her eyes. She felt lightheaded and groped for the wall behind her for support.

“If you'd prefer to do this some other time,” Hayes said.

She shook her head. “No, I'm fine. It must have been something I ate.” In truth, she hadn't eaten anything since the day before. No wonder she felt lightheaded. But she'd toughened it out through worse, she told herself, remembering when she'd taken on the agency.

Tag Cardwell hadn't seemed to notice her no doubt odd behavior. He was busy looking in the windows of the building, anxious to get inside and show his brother the space.

“I think you're going to like this location for your restaurant,” she said, turning away from Hayes Cardwell's dark, intent gaze and what she saw there. “Let me show you. It's perfect for what

you have in mind.”

Her fingers shook so hard, she didn’t think she was going to be able to put the key in the lock. A large, sun-tanned hand reached around her and gently took the keys from her.

“Let me do that,” Hayes said. His voice was soft, his Southern accent comforting and almost familiar.

She was going mad. She could smell his male scent along with the soap he’d used to shower that morning. He was a big man—like the man last night who’d attacked her. She touched her bruised throat and closed her eyes against the terrifying memory.

He opened the door and she stumbled in and away from him. Her cell phone rang and she was startled to see that it was the police department.

“I need to take this. Please have a look around.” She scooted past Hayes and back outside, leaving the two men alone inside what had been a restaurant only months ago. Her phone rang again. She sucked in a deep breath of the June mountain air and, letting it out, took the call. As she did, she prayed the man had been caught. She couldn’t keep living like this.

“Ms. Sheldon?” the policewoman asked.

“Yes?”

“I spoke to the man who intervened last night during your attack. He still would prefer to remain anonymous.”

“You’re sure he wasn’t involved?”

“Involved? No. The clerk at the store was a witness. He was leaving the store when he saw the abductor trying to lift you into

the trunk of his car. The man saved your life.”

“So why is this so-called hero so determined to remain anonymous?”

“As I told you, he’s in town visiting relatives. He doesn’t want the notoriety. But I can assure you, we checked him out. He just happened to be in the right place at the right time last night.”

McKenzie felt as if she could breathe a little easier. “I’m sorry he won’t let me thank him, but I certainly appreciate what he did. Is there any word on...?”

“No, but we are looking at Gus Thompson. We brought him in. He doesn’t have an alibi for last night.”

“You really think it was him?” She shuddered, remembering. He was about the right size and he had acted more than a little creepy in the past.

Behind her, the door opened. She heard Tag and his brother come out.

“Thank you for letting me know,” she said to the patrolwoman and disconnected. “So what do you think?” she asked, but one look at their faces and she knew Hayes hadn’t liked the place.

Tag had been so excited about the building. She could get it for him at a good price since the owner was anxious to sell. But she could see that Hayes was far from sold.

“We can’t really make a decision until all my brothers see the place,” Tag said. Hayes said nothing.

She could feel the tension between the two men. “Well, let me know. This property won’t stay on the market long. I’ll lock up.”

She moved past Hayes to turn out the light and lock the door.

When she came back out, the brothers were leaving. She shivered as she felt someone watching her. Her gaze shot to Hayes, but he was looking off toward the mountains and his brother was busy driving.

I'm losing my mind. Hayes Cardwell wasn't her attacker. So why, when she thought of his brown eyes, did some memory try to fight to surface?

* * *

GUS THOMPSON WAS going to see McKenzie no matter what anyone said. When he'd come out of the police station and climbed into his vehicle, he hadn't known where to go or what to do. He had to save his career, and McKenzie was the only one who could do that.

Restraining order or not, he would see her.

He had racked his brain, trying to remember where she said she had a showing today. Something about a listing in Big Sky. A former restaurant. He'd quickly checked to see what commercial restaurant space was under the multiple listings at Big Sky and laughed out loud when he'd found the restaurant with ease.

It didn't take much to find out what time she was showing the place. He'd called the office, changed his voice and pretended to be the person she was showing the restaurant to. Within minutes, he'd found out that McKenzie would be at the restaurant this afternoon at two to meet the Cardwells.

For a few minutes after he'd hung up, he'd tried to talk himself

out of driving up to Big Sky. The last thing he needed was for her to call the police before she heard him out. It appalled him that she thought she could just fire him and he'd go away. Well, she was dead wrong about that.

Unfortunately, the forty-mile drive had taken longer than he'd expected. Summer traffic. He'd forgotten about the damned tourists so he hadn't been able to beat McKenzie to the restaurant—which had been his intent.

Fifty minutes later, he'd parked next to a small grocery in a space where he had a good view of the restaurant with the M.K. Realty sign out front. He'd arrived in time to see two men pull up in an SUV only moments after McKenzie.

He'd been forced to wait, telling himself it might work out better. He would grab her after her showing. He could get a lay of the land before he did anything stupid. More stupid, he thought, thinking of Cynthia, the receptionist. She wasn't even that cute.

While he had no patience for waiting, he was surprised when the showing only took a matter of minutes. He had to laugh. Boy, had that not gone well. And now McKenzie had just lost her best salesman. She would definitely regret firing him, probably already did.

He saw his chance when the two men McKenzie had shown the property to got into their SUV and drove away. The restaurant location was somewhat secluded, separated from the other businesses by pine trees.

Once he got her alone, she'd be forced to listen to what he

had to say.

As he started his vehicle, planning to park behind her car so she couldn't get away, he saw her looking around. Was she worried he might show up? Or was she looking for the man who'd attacked her last night? Her gaze skimmed over him in his vehicle where he still sat, motor running. He looked away, glad he'd driven his silver SUV that looked like everyone else's around here.

When he'd dared take a peek again, she was headed for her car. He couldn't let her just drive away. His best chance of talking to her was here rather than back in Bozeman.

Gus shifted the SUV into gear. He told himself all he wanted to do was tell her what he thought of her firing him, of accusing him of attacking her, of treating him like an employee rather than appreciating what he did for M.K. Realty.

He just needed to have his say. He wasn't stupid enough to touch her. Or threaten her. He had the right to have the last word. She couldn't just get rid of him in such a humiliating way and think he was going to let it pass.

But as he'd started to drive up the road to the empty restaurant, another vehicle pulled in and parked next to her car. Annoyed, he saw that he would have to wait again. He hadn't come all this way to give up. He killed his engine with a curse. If he couldn't get to her now, then soon. She would hear him out, one way or another.

* * *

MCKENZIE HATED THE scared feeling she had as she

hurried to her car. Her gaze took in the activity lower on the hillside. She told herself she'd just imagined someone watching her. Down the road, there were families in vans with laughing and screaming children, older people trying to park in front of one of the small businesses that dotted the meadow, a young couple heading into the grocery store.

Everywhere she looked there were people busy with their own lives. It was June in Montana, a time when in Big Sky, it seemed everyone was on vacation. No one had any reason to be watching her.

Still, she gripped her keys in her fist until her hand ached as she neared her car. She wanted to run but she was afraid that like a mad dog, the person watching her would give chase. She couldn't see anyone watching her and yet the hair rose on the back of her neck. The afternoon sun had sunk behind Lone Mountain. Shadows moved on the restless breeze through the pines next to the building.

Fear was making her paranoid, but she couldn't shake off the feeling that the man from last night hadn't left town. Nor had he forgotten about her.

She reached the car, opened the door and climbed in, fumbling in a panic to get the door locked. The moment she did, she realized she hadn't looked in the backseat. Her gaze shot to the rearview mirror. She swiveled around. The backseat was empty.

Hot tears burned down her cheeks. She began to shake

uncontrollably.

At the sound of a vehicle approaching, she brushed at her tears and tried to pull herself together. She was trying to put the key into the ignition, when the tap on her side window made her jump.

Her head swung around and she found herself looking up at Hayes Cardwell. She cursed herself. He would see that she'd been crying. She felt a wave of embarrassment and anger at herself.

"Are you all right?" Hayes mouthed.

She lowered the window a few inches. "I—"

"I know. That's why I came back. There's something I need to tell you."

"If it's about the restaurant space—"

"The police called me and asked me again if I would mind if they told you that I was the man who found you last night at the grocery store."

She felt her eyes widen in alarm. "You—" The brown eyes. A flicker of memory. You're safe now.

"I can't imagine what you're going through, that's all I wanted to say. I was worried about you. But I didn't want you thinking..."

She nodded, unable to speak around the lump in her throat. He'd seen her reaction to him. It was the reason he'd decided to tell her. He didn't want her thinking he was the one who'd hurt her. Her eyes burned again with tears.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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