

A TRUST EARNED

by

Diana Castilleja

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Chapter One

“He’s beautiful, Delilah,” Brooke said, leaning over the tinted wood crib where her six month-old nephew slept without a care in the world. A disorderly wave of black hair flowed over his head. The baby resembled a sweet cherub in his fluffy white jumper. Brooke’s first thought was looks could be deceiving, knowing what kind of child her older brother had been. All four of the brothers and sisters had some story to scare their mother gray. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here for the big moment.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Delilah replied. Standing several inches shorter than the new mama, Brooke peered up at her sister-in-law. “Roman kept himself together long enough to get me to the hospital. Then,” Delilah said with remembered humor, her eyes twinkling, “he had my permission to fall apart.”

Brooke’s finger drifted to smooth the rich cap of hair covering Adrian’s crown. The sensation reminded her of soft down, silken and delicate. Her brother and his wife were a very lucky and blessed couple. Brooke asked curiously, “There weren’t any problems at the hospital, then?”

Delilah shook her head. “The blood samples didn’t show anything.”

Brooke exhaled in quiet relief. “I’ve always wondered. We were born at home, and needless to say, we stay away from doctors and needles and avid curiosity.”

Sunshine brightened the baby’s room from the large windows flanking the outer wall, washing the room in light and warmth. The room was filled with an impossible-to-miss gentle happiness making Brooke’s own urges seem to be right in front of her.

“From what I can tell, talking to your Dad and Roman, the changes happen after puberty. Isn’t that when you started training for it?”

Brooke stepped back from the crib where she’d been admiring her nephew. Delilah draped a thin blanket over the baby for his nap. “Yeah. It sounds right. I guess we’re a little spoiled with Selene in the family. Our own doctor.”

“Sure doesn’t hurt anything, that’s for sure,” Delilah remarked with an answering smirk. “Speaking of the dynamic duo, are they back yet?” Delilah asked as they left the baby’s room, walking into the living room together.

“No. St. Marten doesn’t have a prayer. Something else I missed while I was in Belgium with Aunt Jerry—their wedding,” Brooke replied with a regretful sigh. “I swear, if she hadn’t needed me so much, I would have been here in a heartbeat. Their wedding and Adrian’s wonderful arrival.”

“I have pictures. Do you want to see them?” Delilah offered.

“I’d love to.”

Brooke was amazed at the woman Roman had found for his wife. Delilah was a gracious, generous woman. She stood inches taller than Brooke and looked fabulous for recently having had a baby. Brooke had noticed her blue eyes first, a shade darker than sky blue. They were beautiful framed by her black hair. What shocked Brooke more was Delilah had taken their family secret and had made it her own.

When Brooke arrived the day before in Oregon, intent on finding her sister, she’d discovered Selene was on her honeymoon. Being out of the country had put Brooke out of contact with the rest of the family, and she’d missed all the good stuff. After calling Morgan and Roman, Brooke came to crash with Roman in Wyoming first. Plus, she got to see her first nephew. Dead asleep, he was a charmer.

"I'm sure once they get back, Selene will be only too happy to tell you about Bram." Delilah turned the photo pages at a slow pace. "He's exactly what that doctor needed," she told Brooke with amusement.

"Is that him?" Brooke asked, examining a picture of a tall man in a tuxedo.

"That's him. Not bad for a doctor," Delilah said smiling in apparent memory of the wedding, her fingers dancing over the various pictures. "Really nice guy too."

"I'm sure he is if Selene found him. She's very gentle," Brooke said.

Delilah's brow flickered in surprise. "Gentle? Her?" She laughed again, but not unkindly. "Your sister will face anything. That doesn't equate to gentle with me."

"Reminds me of someone, but I wonder who?" Roman's teasing bass made the women snap up from the picture album on Delilah's lap. "Hi, Babs." He leaned down and gave Delilah a quick kiss. "Hello, beautiful," Roman purred.

Brooke giggled behind tight lips. It was good seeing her brother so in love. "Hi, Roman. Get everything in town?" Brooke asked as he straightened from kissing Delilah. Married life and fatherhood agreed with him, if his adoring expression was anything to believe.

"Yeah, I'll have Adrian's playground done in no time," he informed them.

Delilah rolled her eyes. "Roman, he can barely roll over."

"That's why I'm starting now. I might have it done by the time he graduates," he said, laughing with a rich, happy sound. He ran a hand over his midnight black hair, disturbing the thickness with his absent gesture. "I'll be around back. Just holler if you need me."

"All right," Delilah replied.

Brooke continued to peruse the photos in the packed album. Selene's wedding had been beautiful. Her dress flowed like a mythical creation of satin, lace and sheer gauze that sparkled as though it were sewn from the stars, glinting in the daylight. She had been a stunning bride.

Brooke struggled with her own fears with both her sister's and brother's happiness so right in front of her. *Two down, two to go.*

"She was gorgeous, wasn't she?" Brooke managed to say through a raw throat a moment later.

"Yeah." Delilah sighed. "Your parents have the most incredible house. I wouldn't be surprised to see all of you married there."

Brooke shook her head regretfully. "I doubt it. Morgan probably, he's still gorgeous. Especially with those eyes. Me..." she told her wistfully. "I'm an old maid. Thirty-one sucks."

Side by side, Delilah bumped Brooke's shoulder with her own. "Hey, I hit thirty this year."

"Nice try. You're hitched and a new mom," Brooke pointed out. "But it's not a big deal. I'm not trying. Selene found Bram on the trails by chance when she was studying. That was fate with a capital F. The closest I get to a male form is the checkout boy at my grocery store."

Delilah stared at Brooke, a concerned frown cinching her brow. "Brooke, I haven't known you long, but is there something you want to talk about?"

Brooke covered up her lonely misery with a rush of words. "Just the usual. I'm over thirty. I feel *that* urge. I'm lonely. I'm surrounded by people who've found what I feel I'm missing." Brooke drew a deep, steadying breath. No sense in being maudlin this

early in her visit. “Sorry, I’ve been on a pity party for over a month now. I don’t know why,” she explained sheepishly.

Delilah leaned toward her. “Would you be offended if I looked? Maybe I could see something on the horizon for you.”

Brooke openly studied the guilelessness in the brunette’s blue gaze. “A week ago, I’d have jumped at the chance. For some reason, being home messes with me. Thanks, but no. I’ll take my lumps like a big girl.”

Delilah offered an understanding smile. “I know. It’s hard, and you’ve got a lot to catch up on.” Delilah’s attention shifted toward the nursery when Adrian began to cry. “Here, look some more. Let me go see what the prince is upset about.”

Brooke moved the album over to her lap as Delilah swept from the couch and aimed for her son’s room. There were pictures of her parents and the house where Brooke and the others had been raised. In Brooke’s mind, there was nothing like Northern Minnesota, beautiful with trees and unbelievable snow falls during the cold winters. Christmas times had been a blast with snowball fights and sledding to die for. There were pictures of Roman and Delilah, with Adrian bundled up like a miniature snowman in a cute powder blue outfit in their arms. Delilah appeared almost normal in height compared to Roman, and Roman’s expression was absolutely, gloriously, happy in the picture.

There were more photos of Selene, her blonde hair curled at the ends, standing with people, or standing alone holding a huge bouquet of tiger lilies. Brooke’s finger traced the photo. She flipped the page slowly, regretfully. She was really sorry she had missed it.

The next photo she found was of Selene and Bram. He was a very handsome guy. Thick brown hair and an aura of happiness in every picture. They were a perfect match also. Brooke could almost feel the strength of their bond in the picture at her fingertips. The way he held her close, a possessive and protective hand on her slim waist. There were a few photos of when Delilah had captured him unaware, with an adoring gaze, staring down at her sister. The blatant ease of his emotions brought up that poignant ache in her one more time. Alone, it was harder to dismiss the nagging emptiness to the background of her mind.

Where was her mate? When was she going to find the man who would hold her and cherish her? Brooke felt so old.

The sisters shared the blonde hair, although Brooke’s was a bit darker, more honeyed. It was their most obvious shared gene, from their mother. Selene and Morgan were both born with those incredible storm gray eyes while Brooke and Roman had the near-obsidian black stare of their father. Most people thought she wore contacts because they were so dark. Hers were several shades lighter than true black, but against her blonde hair, they came across much bolder. It was an intimidating combination with Roman’s black hair. Brooke didn’t believe she could say the same. The difference was too startling, too contrasting to be considered beautiful.

Brooke hadn’t been blessed with the looks, either. Morgan got that entire gene, the rat. Roman was as tall as could be, and built to tackle a bear. Selene was of medium height but had the smarts.

Brooke, well, was simply Brooke; Babs to her brothers, as in babbling brook. It was meant with love, she knew it, but some days she could just smack them senseless. And since she’d arrived home, she’d been bombarded by this incredible sense of melancholy.

As though something was just out of her reach. Brooke knew she really wasn't *old*, but over barely a year's time, two of her siblings had found their mates. That made her feel old.

Brooke's fingers continued to follow the photos of family and friends. She found one near the bottom of a page of Bram and another man, arms locked around each other in friendship. They wore broad grins, laughter making both attractive. Both men were tall, with solid shoulders and similar expressions. There was something playful about the pair. Maybe they were best friends, she mused. She squinted and leaned in, and found herself giggling at the picture. The other guy was giving Bram rabbit ears! Two fingers poked up over Bram's head and he was completely oblivious to it. She laughed a little harder now, seeing the mischief aside from their joviality. Someone got Bram at his wedding.

"Sorry. He rolled over and couldn't find reverse," Delilah said sitting down next to Brooke once more. "What's so funny?"

"This." Brooke pointed to the picture.

"Oh, that's Mitch. He's a crack up." Delilah squinted too. "I never noticed that before," she said chuckling deeply with Brooke. "That stinker."

"Who's he?" Brooke asked, curious.

"Bram's younger brother. He's a firefighter in St. Louis."

"I should have known," Brooke murmured, noticing the resemblance easily now. Her finger traced the photo with absent sweeps.

"Yeah, he's a great guy too. I guess their family had good male genes or something," Delilah told her. "Their mom is sweet. She married an architect not too long ago she'd been dating, Bram found Selene, and Mitch is single."

"Wow, you keep up on the family pretty well." Brooke turned the page, wondering if she'd find anymore of Mitch. He was cute.

"Between diapers and feedings, I also counsel the Senate and I've developed a new surgery to give men brains," Delilah intoned with an airy toss of her hair.

"In other words, what else is there to do?" Brooke asked, teasing her sister-in-law.

"Something like that," Delilah said, smiling glibly. "I'm not complaining, but it's quiet out here. I've slowed down a lot. I'm glad you came by here first."

"Me too. I love Aunt Jerry, but she's eccentric. She's doing better now with her garden back up to par, but let me tell you, when she became depressed last year, I thought I'd be the one to run her through. I'm glad she pulled out of it. She's a tough woman, hardy." Brooke flipped another page, stopping unconsciously. "I missed talking about normal stuff. I love herbs and flowers, but Aunt Jerry turned it into an extreme sport."

"How?" Delilah asked with a perplexed stare.

"I guess it was how she worked her way out of her depression. She literally started from scratch and renamed everything. And I mean *everything*, from parsley to hummingbirds. At first, I thought she'd gone off the deep end, until I began to recognize a few of the names. She renamed everything to match the old world language forms, before Latin, and then I had to learn them so I knew what *I* was doing. I don't know when I'll ever need it, but if you want archaic language for a witch's brew, I'm your gal."

"Incredible," Delilah murmured. "I had no idea people still... Well, actually that's not true. I guess I did. I mean, look at your family. Look at me for that matter. We're everywhere, aren't we?" Delilah asked, bending closer to keep her voice lowered.

“All over the place,” Brooke agreed. “But we’re outnumbered. I don’t want to recreate the Salem Witch Trials with what I know.”

“Me neither,” came Delilah’s firm agreement.

“Del! Can you give me a hand?”

“He’s going to wake up Adrian! Time to beat him up again.” She rose from her perched seat on the couch, saying, “Stay put. Could you get me if Adrian wakes up?”

“Sure,” Brooke replied, wanting to wander over more of the photos. She listened as Delilah left, muttering under her breath about flipping him again. Brooke didn’t even want to ask.

The album had closed over her hand while she and Delilah had sat talking, but she flipped it open when Delilah left. She found another one of Mitch, standing with an older couple. His mother and her new husband, she guessed. He’d tilted his head toward his mother, who stood probably eight inches shorter than her son. His mother wore an easy smile, a mirror image of her son’s, with her graying hair twisted up in a doubled braid. Brooke wondered where their father was.

The last picture she found of Mitch was his best. By himself, propped on a shoulder against a tree with his arms crossed over his tuxedo covered chest following something out of sight. He wore a relaxed, laughing grin, the sunlight hitting his brown hair through the sifting leaves of the tree. The picture was carefree, innocent. He possessed his own charm in the curve of his mouth, in the coiled lounging of his body.

Yep, he was cute all right.

Brooke continued through the rest of the album, catching flashes of her childhood home. She was extremely happy for both Roman and Selene. She shouldn’t feel so let down because she was alone. When she’d agreed to help Aunt Jerry, she knew it would be a long road for her and a longer one for her Aunt, but she’d missed so much over the last year and a half, like somehow she’d missed her chance. She honestly didn’t know what that chance was, or what she’d missed out on.

If she had a biological clock, it was the equivalent to a ticking time bomb now, but she wasn’t going to have sex, not to have a child. She believed in marriage and love and family. It was probably why there was a tightness in her chest being with her brother. He had what she wanted.

She knew the problems and obstacles she faced when it came to finding the one man who would be everything to her. Somehow Roman and Selene had surpassed them. Somehow their mates had accepted their family’s secret. Her father had always said it was different for everyone, every generation. Brooke didn’t know if she could take the chance to reveal herself. She wasn’t a bountiful beauty to capture a man’s attention. She wasn’t a model of courageous strength to attract a strong mate. She was just herself—a woman who could recite the herb dictionary backwards in two languages. A woman who really wanted children. A woman who was tired of being lonely. Who wanted someone to hold her hand on long walks. Who could hear her in the depths of the wilderness and not be terrified.

She wanted someone she could trust with her secret. She wanted someone to fill the growing void inside her. She wanted to find her mate.

Unconsciously her hand returned to a page of the photo album. Her gaze fell on Mitch, against the tree. If she didn’t have anyone right now, she could dream, and maybe someday she’d find her mate, or he would find her.

She'd told Delilah the truth. She'd been absorbed with Aunt Jerry. Brooke needed time to focus or to let the Fates have their wicked way with her. Digging into the future now wouldn't be productive. She closed the album with a heartfelt sigh. Maybe it was time to start looking around her, though. After all, there were men in Wyoming and Oregon. Maybe one of them was her mate. She couldn't have a family without one. Not the way she wanted one.

She'd been on a few dates, but not with anyone who set her world on fire. No one she felt compelled to include in her circle. No one she wanted to trust with what she was.

She stood, putting the album back on the bookcase from where she'd seen Delilah pull it. Brooke's gaze wandered over photos of Delilah and Roman on their wedding day, others with Adrian.

This was what Brooke wanted. She didn't have any clue how to get it, or if she was going to have to continue to be patient. She was normally very patient, but since her urges had been getting stronger, it made patience a hard-to-find commodity. She could do this, one day at a time.

When she heard Adrian whimper, she strolled to his room. Not every emergency required a mama. Sometimes an aunt could fill the bill, she thought with a smile.

Chapter Two

“Hey Mitch, you still heading out on vacation this week?”

Mitch tipped up from where he and Mack were watching TV on the upper floor of the firehouse, relaxing lazily on the large, abused couch. “Yeah, Bram should be back and I wanted to talk to him about some stuff.” Mitch studied his crew chief as Tory sauntered over and leaned with a thigh against the arm of the couch.

“You’re not thinking about leaving us, are you?” Tory asked in his usual straight forward manner.

“Nah,” Mitch said with an unconcerned shrug. “But there’s some great property up there. I thought I might make an investment for later.”

Tory coughed a laugh. “For retirement?”

“Yeah, sure. I don’t plan on keeping your asses out of trouble for the rest of my life,” he said with a laid-back grin. “When I went up there for those fires a few months ago, before his wedding, the views were incredible. Have you ever flown over Yellowstone or the Tetons?”

Tory scratched his head. “No, can’t say that I have.”

“What about you, Mack? You ever been up there?” Mitch asked, turning the other way.

The muscled blond next to him shook his head. “Nope. Not even close. The farthest west I’ve been is Dallas,” he told them.

“That’s a ripe area for forest fires,” Tory added.

“I know. I can’t help but get kind of nervous because both Bram and his brother-in-law live in a hot zone,” Mitch said running a palm over the back of his neck.

Mack made kissy noises next to him. Mitch pulled back and punched his arm.

“Knock it off,” Tory said gruffly, but Mitch couldn’t miss the weight of Tory’s watchful gaze on him. “Come to the office, Mitch.”

“Mitch is in trouble,” Mack sang in a high falsetto.

“You’re next, Branson,” Tory growled. Mack shut up and started watching TV again.

Mitch followed Tory downstairs wondering what was going on. His vacation had been pre-approved over two months ago, not long after those corridor fires he’d been sent to do the flyovers on. He loved what he did, and he wasn’t contemplating any intention of bailing on his crew. His other family: Tory, Mack, Eli, Big and himself.

Tory was their leader. Mitch respected him after serving with him for more than nine years at the same house on the same trucks. Mack Branson was similar to Mitch, well trained, calm and collected. Eli worked the water and Big did anything needing strength: wall bashing, door crashing and ladder. They’d worked out their system over the years and performed with precision when called into service. Mitch knew of no reason to want to change it.

He entered the Commander’s office behind Tory, hearing a terse, “Shut the door.”

Tory was a little older than the rest of the crew, around forty, but he was as fit as a man of twenty-five. He issued the orders but he worked as hard as any man on his team. No man was an island on his crew. That was one of the things Mitch really respected about his crew chief.

Tory gave Mitch a signal to sit down. “I won’t bust your balls over this, Mitch. I know you’ve been restless since you were called out to do the flying drops. I guess what

I'm saying here," Tory coughed, glancing down then raised his knowing gaze once more, not hiding his concern, "is, if you decide you're leaving, don't leave me hanging."

Mitch sat in stunned quiet. One leg was propped over a knee, but it dropped with a rather shocked slap. "I'm not going anywhere, Tory. I went, I liked what I saw. I can be close to my brother if I do get something out that way. That's it."

Tory leaned back, giving Mitch an assessing stare. "What about your mother?"

Mitch met his gaze unflinchingly. "She's in good hands. Harold treats her damned well," he remarked. "Look, Tory, if you have something to say, just spill it."

Tory didn't blink an eye. "All right. I believe you." Mitch noticed as tension seemed to disappear from Tory's shoulders as he relaxed beneath his uniform-blue t-shirt. "I guess I'm concerned. You're like a son to me, Mitch. You've been here the longest and I got to watch you take your training. You love to fly, and you've been scratching your ass since you got back trying to figure out how to make it all work."

He'd been that obvious? "Yeah, I guess I have, but I'm not leaving. I haven't been on a real vacation since I came on board. Bram's wedding doesn't count. I was gone for three whole days."

Tory leaped to his feet unexpectedly and thrust out his hand. "Enjoy your time, Benedetti. Be back in two weeks, or I'll come looking for you."

Mitch smiled, clasping his chief's hand in a firm grip. "I will, and you won't have to."

* * *

Mitch couldn't restrain the relaxed smile he wore as he drove from the Bend Airport to Bram and Selene's cottage. With his window rolled down, he inhaled a deep draught of the clean air. Nothing like it in St. Louis, anywhere. In that, he could agree completely with his older brother.

Bram was the co-director at Bend Medical Center along with his now wife, Selene. They were a remarkable team, and absolutely, completely made for one another.

He couldn't grasp how his brother, Bram the solid and quiet, became tied up in a kidnapping and shootout. As he'd heard it, Selene and her brother Morgan had been trying to expose a poacher but it had turned into a huge fiasco with the police department.

The poacher turned out to be one of the deputies. He, in turn, had kidnapped Rebecca, Bram's ex-wife. She had made an unannounced visit, trying to play her guilt card with Bram over their divorce. The whole situation turned weird after that. The deputy who had kidnapped Rebecca wanted to trade for Selene, which made no sense to Mitch about what the man had wanted with his sister-in-law. Bram had been shot during the rescue. Rebecca claimed she'd been led from the camp where the poacher had hidden her, saved by a dark wolf.

Mitch snorted in definite disbelief. Wolves didn't live out here. Even he knew that. He knew most of the wild ones he'd heard reported were near the Yellowstone protected lands. The wolves couldn't understand what being on protected lands meant to them, but it did mean they weren't living this far west. It had probably been nothing but a large German shepherd or some other type of rescue dog. It had been raining in thick sheets and dark as black ink from the stories Mitch had heard about the whole episode.

Rebecca had obviously suffered during her ordeal. The deputy had held her for more than two and a half days at a minimal survival camp out in the wilderness. It was sheer luck Bram had found her and was then able to stop the poacher before anyone was killed.

There had been some very deep concern for his brother for a while, though. Bram had spiked a fever during his recovery from the bullet he'd "stepped in front of". It had been touch-and-go for a couple of days, but he was completely recovered now and going full steam ahead. If Mitch's notes were right, they should have returned from St. Marten last week. He guessed that should have been enough time before showing up on their doorstep. That's what family did, and he was talented at being a nuisance. He grinned with devilish enjoyment at seeing his brother again.

Yet, even with the anticipation of seeing them, as much as he hated to admit it, Tory was right. He had been feeling restless, but it wasn't a reason for him to bail on the firehouse or the crew. Yes, he liked flying. Nothing compared to the adrenaline rush of meeting the fire head-on, flying over it and using the best of his abilities and training to serve that purpose: to make a mark, to hit the fire where it would do the most good. To save the forests, the wildlife, and the people. That was what he had trained for, but there wasn't one thing on his horizon to make him not want to return home. The firehouse was his home, the crew, his family. Mitch wasn't about to give any of it up.

With, at most, half of his attention on where he was going, he traveled the highway ahead to the first turn he needed when his thoughts derailed. Mitch slowed his rented Jeep as he focused into the tree line with a dread-filled stare. Accidents were not uncommon in St. Louis. The oddity of what he found was he was nowhere near St. Louis. He pulled up behind the wrecked car, buried windshield deep into the trees. He parked a safe distance away, automatically reaching for his phone on his belt, but remembered he'd packed it. Damn airline regulations!

"Hello?" he called out as he cautiously hurried to the driver side. He couldn't smell any gas, which by the car's condition was a miracle. The car was an average sized, dark blue sedan and as he neared, he discovered the top of a blonde head. "Hey, can you hear me?"

The air bag had deflated and she appeared unconscious, slumped against the steering wheel. He jerked on the door, metal grinding with the tugging pressure of the fender being shoved up against the door. "Can you hear me?" he asked again as he searched for a pulse. He found it, strongly thrumming beneath pale skin. Relief was a quickly controlled emotion. He did a quick inventory and noted her legs, jammed tight under the wheel and dash. "Damn it!"

Mitch raced for his Jeep. Tearing through his luggage, he yanked out his phone and turned it on. Calling for help as he neared the car again, she moaned. The woman's voice was thin, pained. He knelt down. "Can you talk? I'm going to call the hospital and get you some help." He pushed her hair out of the way, searching for signs of distress. Except for her pulse throbbing in the column of her neck, he couldn't discern anything more yet.

He was shocked to hear her argue. "No. Hospital," she gasped on a low moan. "Call. Selene. Sister," she said, sounding stronger than he would have thought possible, even if she was dazed and uncomfortable.

"You've got to be kidding." This woman needed a hospital. He had no way of knowing if she had internal injuries or something more than he could find on his own without removing her from the wreckage, and that had to be done carefully because of the collapsed dash. Her head lolled in his direction and her eyes opened. Not gray like his sister-in-law's, not even blue for being a blonde, but the deepest coffee black eyes he'd ever encountered.

She licked her lips. "Call Selene. No hospital." She gave him the number on pain-filled, breathy bursts, stunned she'd managed it at all before her eyes slid shut to pass out once more. He would call Selene. She was only a few miles further up the road. Mitch knew she'd want to know what had happened if this was her sister. Then he would call the hospital.

She answered right away. "Selene, this is Mitch," he rattled off hurriedly. "I know you weren't expecting me, but I found your sister, or she says she's your sister."

"Brooke?" she cried, immediately worried. "What happened? Where is she? She was supposed to be here almost an hour ago."

Mitch explained what he had found and her sister's condition to Selene. "I was going to call the hospital next. She may need x-rays."

"No, don't call anyone. I'll come and get her." Selene hung up before Mitch could argue. He held his phone out and stared at it. *Don't call anyone?* Were they all nuts? Brooke groaned next to him and he shifted on his haunches to see her better, forgetting everything else but trying to help her.

"Hang in there. I'm going to sit you up," he explained, keeping his tone low and soothing. He leaned across her slack form to undo her seatbelt. He ran trained hands over her body, searching. He didn't feel any prominent breaks in her upper body, but he couldn't reach her legs buried under the frame of the car. No telling if she needed help there. He found bruises on her arms where the bag had ruptured the plastic of the wheel compartment. She had a solid bruise on her forehead but that was all he was able to find.

He heard Selene's Cherokee pull up with a sliding grind of roadside then her fast running steps. "Let me take a look," she ordered quickly. Mitch stepped back as Selene did an educated run down on her sister's vitals. "Thank God. Nothing serious."

"What about her legs? We need a lift to pull the dash off of her," he pointed out.

"Brooke, Babs honey, can you hear me?" Selene said next to her sister's ear. Brooke moaned incoherently. "Can you feel your legs? Can you move them?"

Mitch watched her lips move but couldn't hear her himself while standing over Selene's shoulder.

"Good. Mitch could you get my medical bag? It's on the back seat," she said with a calm assurance, motioning with a toss of her chin toward her vehicle. Mitch was impressed as he turned at a run. If she was this composed with her own sister, her patients would have a doctor of steel.

When he returned, he stopped behind her, shocked to find Brooke lying on the ground before Selene next to the car door. "How did she get out?" Selene crouched on the ground next to her running her palms over Brooke's legs.

"I helped her twist," came the emotionless reply. "But she's out again. Can you hold her? I'll take her back to the cabin and she can rest there."

"Selene, doesn't she need to go to the hospital?" He knew he sounded as bewildered as he felt.

"No, she'll be fine. After she wakes she can tell us what happened." Selene accepted her bag and took Brooke's blood pressure, swabbing an antiseptic wipe to clean the bruise on her forehead. A small break in the skin seemed to be the worse of the damage. "At least she doesn't need any stitches."

"But what if something's broken?" he asked her.

“There isn’t,” Selene reassured him. “Pick her up and I’ll call Bram in a few minutes. He was due off this afternoon anyway.”

“Will my Jeep be all right?” He tossed a meaningful glance at the red 4x4 he’d rented.

“Yeah, Bram and you can pick it up in an hour or so when he comes home. We don’t have strippers out here,” she told him.

He shook his head as he knelt, gathering Brooke’s limp form. “How does a country girl know chop shop lingo?” He cradled her petite form in his hold, standing straight. “What does she weigh? She’s light.”

“Probably one-twenty. You’re just strong,” she teased even as she kept a sharp eye on her sister. “And I lived in California when I studied. You learn all kinds of things that aren’t educational on campus.” He hefted himself up into her vehicle, careful of Brooke in his arms.

Selene made the drive as fast as the road seemed to allow, without too many bumps. She opened his door, then the front door of the house. “Take her to the guest room. I’m going to call Bram and let him know you’re both here.”

Mitch did as she asked. No hospital, but if Selene, the doctor, knew it wasn’t necessary, then there wasn’t anyone better.

Mitch made Brooke comfortable, taking off her sandals and tossing a blanket over legs of creamy, pale skin in peach colored shorts. She looked restful, fairly pretty, even with an egg-sized bruise on her forehead.

He left her sleeping on the bed to join Selene in the kitchen at the front of the cabin. “I wonder what happened.”

“I have no idea. Brooke is a very careful driver.” Selene offered him a drink, sipping at her own tea. “The car is history.”

“She must have been going fast, but that was the turn,” he said, worry behind the wreck dimming the relaxed pleasure he’d been enjoying on the drive. “I guess we’ll have to be patient.”

“I’m not well-known for patience either,” she agreed with a commiserating smile. “Bram will be here in about twenty minutes. Are you hungry?”

Mitch rubbed his stomach. “I could eat.”

“Yeah, let me twist your arm,” she retorted with an easy, short laugh. Mitch offered his help but she pushed him out. “Go stare at a wall somewhere.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a wink. Mitch ambled back down the hall to wash his hands and decided to slip a peeked glance into the spare room to check on the woman resting on the bed. Well, that’s what he gets for showing up unannounced, he thought. He’d have to get a hotel room. Not a problem. He didn’t stay long when he found her unmoved from where he’d left her.

He strolled to the living room, deciding to hang out until his brother showed up, then he’d get his Jeep and return to town to check-in to a hotel somewhere.

The paintings on the wall above and around the fireplace were awe-inspiring. He couldn’t help but study them. Their detail was no less than museum quality. Several were wolves in striking oil colors and elegant scrollwork frames. One of the paintings depicted a whole pack, six all together. There were others, a beautiful pale one standing alone, another which was as dark as a sooty night. There were others placed along the wall. Tilting in his study, he realized it almost came across like a wall of family. He

shook away the musing. Selene had said she had a thing for the wolf and her father was a talented artist. Mitch wouldn't argue the talent, so why not show them, and him, off?

He'd visited the cabin once or twice before. That was when he'd been in Bend flying over the neighboring mountains fighting the forest fires. He remembered he'd been impressed by the paintings then when he'd dropped in to see his recuperating brother and Selene. On a cornering wall were the family pictures and photos, one of them being a large print of Bram and Selene from their wedding. A beautiful day for a wedding. Sunshine and cool Minnesota weather. Her family owned the most amazing house. It resembled an old castle in design, but it didn't feel like one. There'd been warmth, a home where love and laughter had been raised. He raised a hand in salute to the picture of the couple. They had a wonderful thing going for them.

Mitch didn't moon over his own state of bachelorhood, not after Janice. She'd almost made him reconsider his life. Almost. Until he'd realized what a mistake it would have been. Until he realized he'd be doing no less than chopping off an arm to satisfy her. No one was worth it. He couldn't change who he was, no sooner than he could change the fact that he lived for what he did—fight fires. And the danger element had frightened Janice to the point where she'd expected him to quit. Mitch couldn't, and thankfully realized it before he'd made the biggest mistake of his life.

Bram was lucky. Selene and he were on the same page. Selene was nothing like Rebecca, Bram's ex-wife. Selene wasn't the center of her own universe for one thing, and she adored Bram. It was in her gaze, apparent in each of the pictures on the wall.

"When I said go stare at a wall, I wasn't serious," Selene observed from behind him, her humor winding over him.

"I always get stuck admiring the paintings," he admitted with a sheepish glance over his shoulder. "Does anyone besides your father paint?"

"Brooke can, but she's the nature girl." Selene stepped forward and he noticed a sincere gaze of adoration as she perused the paintings. "She's all into flowers and herbs. That's why she wasn't here for the wedding. She was in Belgium helping Aunt Jerry with a problem. They are two of a kind. Brooke helped keep her steady until she was stronger."

"I remember you mentioning her once before."

She chuckled at his side, her expression telling him she remembered exactly the "mentioning" he meant. "Don't worry, I'm not going to play cupid. I was teasing with Bram. He had awakened right before you came into the room and seeing him smiling, knowing he was recovering, was such a relief."

Mitch remembered those moments. His brother's injury was the only reason he'd been given a break from the fire lines. "That was some story, too. Rebecca swears it was a wolf, at least the last time I saw her she did. It's been a while, but she hasn't changed her story."

"No, no wolves. Just Bram and my brother. I was hiding." Selene shivered. Mitch knew from his brother exactly how close it had been for all of them. "I was the bait to draw Markson out of the shadows where he'd been hiding. He'd given us an exchange location, but he wanted me first. Bram took advantage and located the camp, allowing Rebecca to escape. No one had any idea it was him until we managed to do at least that. He'd been successful for two years trapping small game and tanning the pelts, selling them on the black market. A lot of the wildlife he'd been trapping was protected. I hate to say it, but I don't look anything like what he'd been catching."

“No, you’re prettier,” Bram said from the doorway, bringing Mitch’s attention to the front of the cabin. “Hey, Mitch. Surprise visit?” Bram closed the door behind him, hanging his keys on the wood pegs by the door.

“My vacation, but with Brooke here, I’ll crash in town.” Mitch’s brow furrowed. “But why would he want you if he was poaching?”

“Because we were getting close to finding him out. Morgan is an excellent tracker and it came down to who would get caught first,” Selene explained with utter unconcern. “His plan was to stop us either with blackmail or by threatening back once he had me. It didn’t work out the way he’d planned. The police made the news and not in a good way because of their lackadaisical approach to our requests for searches to be done when we turned in proof of the traps. It turned out the reports were taken by Markson, the man we were after. No police department stays sparkly when they’re harboring the enemy.”

Mitch shook his head. “No, I imagine not.”

“Why don’t we go get your Jeep? I saw it on the road,” Bram said. Mitch nodded and followed his brother out the door.

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