

the **WANTED**
Bride

Sometimes in order
to find yourself,
you must become
someone else.



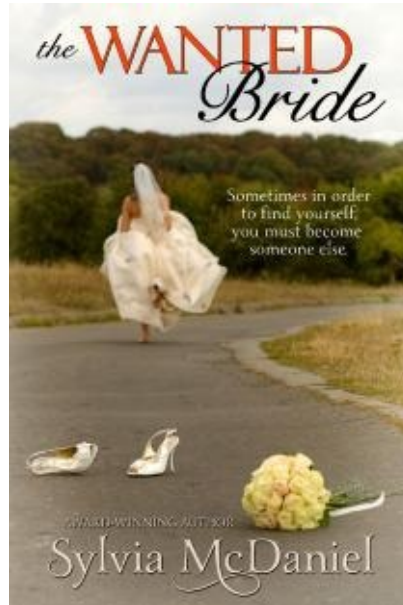
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Sylvia McDaniel

The Wanted Bride

By

Sylvia McDaniel



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Chapter One

“I need a one-way ticket to anywhere,” Valerie Burrows commanded the girl behind the bus counter in downtown Dallas. A charred piece of her wedding veil sagged onto her face. Impatiently, she flipped the singed lace away, her throat closing off the tears that threatened her vision.

On what was supposed to be the happiest day of her life, she reeked of smoke, not flowers, saw red not white, tasted bile not cake.

Glancing up from the counter the clerk’s eyes widened, making Valerie acutely aware of her appearance. On what was supposed to be the happiest day of her life, she felt traumatized, not joyous.

“Where do you want to go?” the clerk stammered.

“Anywhere, as long as I leave in the next five minutes,” Valerie insisted, wishing people would stop staring. So she looked like a crazy woman. After this morning maybe she was a little loco.

“The bus to Amarillo is loading now,” the agent advised, her large brown eyes riveted to Valerie. “I have one seat left. The one-way fare is sixty-five dollars.”

Though she preferred to travel by plane, there was no time or way to get to the airport. She could take the bus or stay and face the consequences of her actions.

Valerie dug the cash out of her Bottega Veneta purse and handed the money to the ticket agent. “I’ll take it.”

Dirty lace from her wedding veil fell onto her face again, so she yanked the offending garment off her head and threw the veil on top of her matching Louis Vuitton luggage.

The beautiful lace of her Vera Wang wedding gown was streaked with gray and black. Burnt streaks made a crazy pattern on the silk that didn’t accessorize the seed pearls.

The heel of one of her Stuart Weitzman pumps had snapped several blocks ago, and her feet were blistered. And yet her heart beat on in spite of her ruined wedding.

The clerk handed her the ticket, sympathy in her dark eyes. “The bus is ready. You’re the last one to board.”

Not even time to change. Head held high, spine locked in place, she limped to the white step carriage, her suitcases trailing behind.

There, she handed her two suitcases to a gawking young man. He opened his mouth to speak, but she held up her hand. “Just load my luggage.”

She glanced up to see faces pressed against the glass windows of the bus, gaping at her like she was a freak show.

Hadn’t these people ever seen a runaway bride in real life before? Julia Roberts may have made the movie, but she didn’t own the copyright to wedding disasters.

With her carry-on bag hanging from her shoulder, Valerie marched up the steps of the waiting bus as if she walked around in a wedding gown every day. The babble of sixty voices ceased as she handed the driver her ticket.

He mumbled, “Lord, I need to retire.”

Her silk dress pressed against her legs and swished as she made her way to the only empty seat on her getaway bus. Thank God she’d ditched the petticoats in the Corvette.

A gray-haired woman glanced at her as she put her luggage in the overhead bin.

“Hm hm hm, I can’t wait to hear this story,” the elderly Hispanic woman said. “Are you a runaway bride?”

Valerie plopped in the seat, her ruined silk gown making a mighty swish. She exhaled loudly, her

heart aching, her eyes blurring with unshed tears. For the last hour she'd been holding her breath while making her escape.

But now, now all the pain she'd carefully controlled broke free and she chuckled. Hysterical laughter rumbled from deep inside her, echoed through the bus. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

"I am now."

#

In forty-eight hours a girl's life could change completely. Valerie stepped off the bus in the small town of Springtown, Colorado. Population 294. *Salute!*

In Amarillo she'd bought a ticket to Denver and pitched her wedding gown in the trash. After sitting beside a drug dealer all the way to Albuquerque, being proposed to by a parolee on the way to Santa Fe, and awakening to an elderly woman riffling through her Louis Vuitton carry-on, it was time to ditch public transportation. She'd take a taxi to the nearest car rental place and continue her journey in her own set of wheels.

The air brakes hissed as the driver released them, and the bus pulled away from the depot, which consisted of a bench in front of a café. The cold wind whipped right through her thin clothes as she stood alone on the street.

She pushed open the door to the small diner. A "Help Wanted" sign banged against the glass. The greasy spoon was filled to capacity in the late evening, but suddenly her stomach growled, reminding her the Snickers bar she'd eaten in Albuquerque was not a five-course meal.

The café grew quiet as Valerie pulled her luggage across the wooden floor, the wheels thump, thump, thumping. She sat down, sighing in relief, and the chatter resumed. She desperately needed a latte grande.

A woman with stained white sneakers and a food splattered dress stopped at her booth.

"What can I get you?" she asked.

"I'd like eggs Benedict with a skim, no whip, pumpkin spice latte. Make it a grande."

The waitress glanced at her matching luggage.

"Honey, I think you must have missed your bus stop. This here is Springtown, not Vail. I'm not Martha Stewart, and I don't do lattes."

Valerie frowned and bit back the quick retort that sprang to her lips. Had the woman never heard of Starbucks?

"What do you have?" she asked, wondering if the bus had dropped her off on Mars, or if she was starring in her own personal *Twilight Zone* episode.

"Did you look at the menu?"

"No."

"I'd suggest you start there," the waitress said.

"Give me two eggs over easy, with coffee." Valerie replied. "Do you have any hazelnut cream to go in the coffee?"

"Here in Springtown our cows don't produce flavors." She pushed her pen back behind her ear. "My name is Fran if you need anything else."

The waitress hurried off. Valerie gazed around the café and noticed the sheriff and a guy whose dark looks would normally have taken her breath away occupied a booth across the room. However, in the last forty-eight hours she'd sworn off men. Today her heart pounded a little harder, but only because the sheriff sat across from the tall, dark, handsome man. Surely two states away no one would be searching for her.

Yet.

With the number of criminals loose in this world, why would law enforcement be interested in a good girl with a temporary case of wedding insanity from Dallas? Her crime was minor compared to the act of her two best friends. Or since they'd betrayed her, were they really her friends?

Lonely and weary and sad, Valerie stared at the menu. Her mind reeled, unable to comprehend the idea that her own father had taken Carter's side. She swallowed hard to keep the tears at bay.

A thousand miles away and still her mind staggered from the pain of their betrayal.

The waitress brought her plate of eggs and set them on the table. Her stomach rolled as the smell of fried bacon smacked her in the face.

"Two eggs over easy with a side of bacon."

"No meat!" Valerie grimaced at the greasy bacon, her stomach clenching a warning signal.

The waitress reached down and with her fingers scooped the bacon off the plate.

Valerie gasped. She wasn't in Dallas anymore.

"Two eggs over easy without bacon. Anything else?"

The sooner she got out of this one-horse town, the better. "Yes, where is the nearest car rental office?"

The waitress laughed as fear spiraled along Valerie's spine. Somehow this couldn't be good.

"Honey, who are you visiting in town?"

"No one. Why?"

She gazed at Valerie's luggage.

"You just got off that bus, right?"

"Yes."

"Did you know where you were when you got off?"

"Not really. I couldn't take the people on the bus any longer and decided to rent a car."

The waitress shook her head. "Sugar, the nearest car rental place is in Denver, and you're a good two hours from there. The next bus stops here on Wednesday. Until then, you can cool your heels at the Springtown Inn. It's old, but the rooms are clean."

"There's no car rental place in this town?" she asked in disbelief, needing to confirm she'd heard correctly.

The waitress chuckled. "No. We barely have a stop light."

Valerie felt like someone had just kicked her in the shin. She had no choice. She refused to call her father and give him the satisfaction of knowing she'd fallen on her face again. Besides, he was furious with her and would tell Carter her whereabouts. By now they'd probably found Carter's beloved car. Or what was left of it. She was stuck in Nowhereville with no cell phone and no one to call for help. Not even her ex-best friend, Blair.

Valerie practiced her yoga breathing to control the panic rising within her. She was an adult. She had a college education. She could take care of herself. She would get through this.

Maybe being in such a small town wasn't a bad thing after all. Who would search for her here?

A couple of days in a hotel room could be time spent deciding what to do with the rest of her life. She could get a massage, maybe a pedicure. She would survive.

Quickly, she finished her eggs and sipped at the rank coffee that didn't even change color after five creamers. She expected fuzz to appear on her chest at any moment.

The waitress laid the check on her table.

"Hey, sheriff, you want any more coffee?" she yelled across the room.

"No thanks, Fran. I need to get on the road."

"You goin' to chase some dangerous criminals?" the waitress teased.

“Nah, Charlie’s cows are out again,” the man in uniform responded.

“How about you, Matt?” she asked the man sitting across the table, the one who seemed more like a suit and tie kind of guy. His looks were rugged yet refined. “More coffee, or you gotta get back to your lawyering?”

Her last nerve sizzled on high alert.

Another lawyer! Don’t give him a second glance, she thought.

“Not tonight,” he answered. “I spent the day with McKenzie helping her with the kids.”

Was Valerie sick, or did she only appreciate men who were creative with the truth? Was she a lawyer magnet only drawn to cheats and liars? She couldn’t seem to clear their magnetic field.

“I’m sure you spoiled those kids good,” Fran said.

“Every chance I get,” the man replied.

The urge to run all but overwhelmed Valerie. The legal network of lawyers was widespread, and her father well known. He’d find her, and she needed a much deserved break from the drama. She had to leave before she had a panic attack.

She reached into her purse to grab her wallet and pay for her meal.

Her fingers dug to the bottom of her designer purse trying to locate her wallet. Nothing.

She threw back the leather flap, and instead of feeling she started frantically digging, searching for the matching leather wallet that contained her life. The thousand dollars in cash, three credit cards, her driver’s license, her very identity.

Instead she found her Ralph Lauren sunglasses, her Lancôme lipstick, her keys, her Monte Blain pen, and her Estee Lauder perfume.

Everything except her wallet.

Panic squeezed her chest and her breathing became shallow and tight. Oh God, could her life get any worse? The old woman must have done more than rifle through Valerie’s luggage. She must have stolen the wallet.

Stolen just like Blair had taken Carter.

She was stuck in Springtown, Colorado, with no money and no credit cards. She couldn’t even pay the five-dollar check, and a lawyer and the town sheriff sat across the way. She gasped for breath, needing more oxygen.

The waitress looked in her direction and gave her a puzzled frown.

How did one sneak out the door without paying while lugging two big suitcases? Valerie tried to stand, but her legs refused to cooperate. Her heart pounded in her chest, and the edges of her vision darkened like the closing credits of a show. With sickening certainty she knew she was going to faint.

Dear God, she was going to faint right in front of the two people she didn’t want to notice her. With that she crumpled to the floor around her Louis Vuitton luggage.

#

Something was terribly wrong. Excited voices seeped into her mind, and the stringent smell of Pine-Sol stole her breath, leaving her coughing and sputtering.

“Stand back and give her some air,” a vaguely familiar voice said.

“Does she need CPR? I’ve been trained in CPR,” a man said from a distance.

Oh God, it hadn’t been a nightmare. Slowly she opened her eyes and stared into the kind, emerald eyes framed by long dark lashes. Concern reflected from their depths, and she realized her strong arms were wrapped around her. A strange sense of comfort settled over her like a security blanket. For the first time in two days she felt sheltered and safe.

“Don’t move,” he cautioned. “The sheriff is trying to reach Doc Peters.”

The gorgeous, truth-spinning lawyer held her. No! Not another lawyer.

~~The botched wedding, the bus trip, the last forty-eight hours rushed back, the memories weaving icy tendrils of panic through her blood. This attorney probably knew her father's firm. This attorney could send her home, back to the drama she'd escaped.~~

"I'm fine," she blurted, sitting up straight and struggling out of his arms. "I don't need a doctor."

"Honey," the waitress soothed, bending down beside the lawyer, "no one has ever passed out in my restaurant. I think you best let the doctor examine you."

"No, I must have had low blood sugar or something," she said, making a motion to stand.

"It wouldn't hurt to let the doctor check you out," the handsome attorney said calmly. Why was that attorneys never panicked? Never got excited. Why did people listen to and obey them?

Just like she'd believed and listened to Carter.

"I'm fine."

She stood, remembering with clarity that she had no money to pay the bill. No credit cards. No place to stay the night. She had nothing. And she refused to call her father.

She sank onto the chair at the table, needing a moment to think. Her trust held over a million dollars in funds, but a sudden withdrawal would bring the problems she'd run from racing to town.

"Okay, the excitement is over. Everyone back to their tables," Fran commanded, shooing everyone with her hands. "Girl, you sit right here. I'll get you a glass of water."

"Thanks," Valerie said, glancing down at her luggage. The two pieces sat right where she'd fallen beside them. She couldn't help but be a little suspicious of everyone after today.

"Hey, look. It's starting to snow outside," Fran called.

"Snow?"

"Yeah, we've got a big storm moving in tonight," the handsome lawyer replied, standing beside the table, his emerald gaze studying her.

Oh no, where would she go? Deep breaths. She couldn't panic.

"We should have two feet of snow by morning," he said.

"Great," Valerie groaned.

"Where are you staying the night?" he asked.

"Um, the waitress mentioned the Springtown Inn. I'll probably be there."

His eyes raked her clothing. "You're not from around here are you?"

"No," she said quietly, wishing he would go away and leave her alone. Though his dark hair and gentle eyes were handsome enough to arouse even her bruised libido, his profession scared her worse than rattlesnakes.

She needed a quick spray of attorney repellent.

"Did you just get off the bus?" he asked, his voice deep and smooth.

"Yes."

"You're going to need a heavier coat than what you have on. Do you have one?"

God, the man was persistent with the questions. Why wouldn't he just leave?

"Yes," she lied, hoping he would get the hint.

"You're sure you don't need a doctor?" he asked. "It could be altitude sickness. Where did you come from?"

"Phoenix," she fibbed saying the first city that came to mind.

"No wonder you're dressed so lightly. The temperature is going to drop into the single digits tonight. You probably have a touch of altitude sickness. Take it easy the first few days you're here and drink lots of water."

“Absolutely.”

~~“What’s your name?”~~

She swallowed, knowing she had to say something. But what? The police were probably searching for Valerie Burrows. “Valerie.”

“Valerie...” he asked, gazing at her oddly. “Do you have a last name?” He looked at her suitcases. The monogram shined like a beacon. “DVB?”

“Valerie Brown,” she muttered glancing over at his friend’s brown uniform. She gave him her best trusting smile. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest, reminding her she was a terrible liar.

“Brown,” he said sticking out his hand. “I’m Matt Jordan, and the sheriff is Jesse Phillips.”

His grip was strong and his hands were warm. The pleasant woodsy fragrance of his cologne teased her senses.

“I’m sorry I’ve caused you so much trouble tonight.”

Matt smiled. “It was nothing. Kind of nice to have a little excitement for a change. I’m just surprised it wasn’t Fran’s cooking that sent you over the edge.”

“Hey, I heard that. You legal types can forget the free donuts and coffee.”

The sheriff closed his cell phone and strolled to the table. “Doc Peters is unavailable. His nurse said to make sure you had plenty of fluids. She thinks it might be altitude sickness.”

“Really, I’m feeling better,” she lied. Fear pumped through her veins like an adrenaline junkie. She didn’t need a doctor for what ailed her. She didn’t need the sheriff to take her to jail. And she most definitely didn’t need a lawyer to solve her problems. She needed a drama-free zone.

Matt nodded his head. “Ladies, the sheriff and I need to be going. Take it easy, Miss Brown.”

“Thanks.”

“Fran, if you need anything else, call me,” the sheriff said. “Good night, Miss Brown.”

“Night sheriff,” Fran called.

Valerie watched the two men walk out the door of the café into the frosty night. The snow shimmied from the sky leaving a white sheen on the roads.

She had no cash, nothing, with a blizzard blowing outside. She was a trust fund baby, a well-bestowed one, though little good it did her now. How did she get herself out of this situation without calling her daddy for help?

Chapter Two

Thank God, the legal boys were gone. Now she could talk to Fran about the bill. She could ask about a homeless shelter or emergency housing for someone with no money.

How could she have sunk so low as to even consider a homeless shelter? She shivered at the thought.

A tiny voice reminded her she could always call her father. But a stronger one reminded her how he'd taken Carter's side and blamed her for her fiancé's indiscretion. The memory still hurt. She didn't need her father to solve her problems. The bus had dropped her in Springtown, and somehow she'd find a way to continue her journey away from her previous life.

The waitress hurried by, her arms loaded with plates. "Here you go, guys. Eat up. We're closing in thirty minutes, and you boys need to get on home before the roads become impassable."

"Fran, you sound more like my wife than a waitress," a male customer responded.

"No, Jim, if I was your wife, you would be home, serving me."

He laughed.

She swished by the table. "You need anything else, honey?"

Valerie took a deep breath, her pride in her throat. Never before had she been without money. "Yeah, can you sit with me for a moment?"

"Sure, sugar." The waitress sank onto the chair and gazed at Valerie. "You're in some kind of trouble, aren't you?"

"Well..."

"I knew it the moment you fainted. You're pregnant and running away from home."

Valerie wanted to smile, but her lips refused to move. She was running away from a pregnancy just not hers. "No."

"Your boyfriend is hunting you."

Almost. But more like her father and ex-fiancé, but that was too much information. "On the bus someone stole my wallet, and I didn't realize it until just a few minutes ago before I fainted."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well. It had all my money, my credit cards. I have no cash, nothing."

"Who can I call to help you?"

Valerie took a calming deep breath. No telephone calls. Plus her father still had access to all her accounts. She couldn't pull one penny without him knowing her whereabouts. Unless she wanted him and Carter to arrive in Springtown, she had to remain broke.

For the first time in her life, she was penniless, and the realization she was on her own hit home with startling clarity. Yes, she was a twenty-two-year-old pampered trust-fund baby released into the world like a newborn chick without a clue how to survive.

"No one."

"Sweetie, sometimes we get ourselves in predicaments where we have to swallow our pride and call someone to help us. I think you're in that situation."

"No calls." She could hear her father scolding her about getting into trouble again. No, this time she would find her own way.

Valerie glanced at the door and saw the Help Wanted sign. Maybe that was the solution. Stay in this one-horse town, get a job, and work until she earned enough money to continue on her journey to Denver. How long could it take to earn enough money for a bus ticket?

Fran crossed her arms and stared at her. “Okay, what are you going to do? You can’t spend the night out on the streets. I mean, I won’t charge you for the meal, but it’s snowing, and you’ve got to have some place to stay.”

“What about the Help Wanted sign on the door? I want that job.”

The waitress frowned and raised her brows, sizing her up.

“Don’t take offense, sweetie, but you look more like the type of person that hires people to wait on you.”

Valerie sighed. “I need the job.”

“I guess you do.”

“So will you hire me?”

“You sure you know what you’re getting into? I mean, being a waitress is not easy, and these boys delight in being cantankerous.”

“I need the money.”

“All right, you’re hired. Be here at five in the morning and prepared to work until two tomorrow afternoon. If you last the day, I’ll be surprised.”

God, that sounded like forever, but Valerie wouldn’t complain. At least this way she didn’t have to call her father. “Thank you. I can do this.”

“You ever been a waitress before?”

“No, but I’m a fast learner.”

“I sure hope you know what you’re doing.”

Valerie shrugged. Her choices were limited, and her pride refused to make that phone call. “Where’s there a homeless shelter where I can spend the night?”

The waitress leaned back and chuckled aloud. “Honey, we don’t have homeless here in our town. But I know of someone who’s looking to rent a room out. Let me call and see if she’s agreeable to taking you in.”

#

Fran’s car came to a halt in front of a two-story log home that belonged on the front of a Christmas card. Warm light reflected from the windows. Icicles hung from the eaves, and smoke drifted from the rooftop. Valerie imagined a large family gathered in front of a crackling fire, drinking hot chocolate, laughing and enjoying one another. The kind of family she’d often dreamed of but never experienced.

Fran turned the car off, drawing Valerie’s attention to her. “Now, before I introduce you to McKenzie Palmer, there are some things you need to know.”

Foreboding trickled like a river fall through Valerie, and her overloaded sense of protection went on high alert.

“McKenzie’s husband died a year ago of a brain tumor. They diagnosed it, and before they had much time to say good-bye, he was gone. McKenzie’s still learning to cope with the loss of her husband. Not to mention being a single parent with twins.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yeah, well, the worst part is he didn’t have much insurance, and it’s a struggle to keep the house and take care of their twins. So that’s why she needs a boarder.”

“She’s never done this before?”

“Nope. And I trust you not to steal her blind.”

“I have no need to steal...” Valerie stopped. Money was no longer just an ATM transaction away. Money she no longer had access to. Money she’d never done without. Broke, flat broke, and unless she

wanted to crawl back to her father, she would remain broke. "I don't steal."

Fran smiled. "Good." She opened the car door and hurried to the back where Valerie's suitcases were stored. "Come on, this ain't the Hilton and I'm not your bellhop."

Valerie opened the car door and stepped outside. The icy wind tore right through her thin jacket to settle into her bones. What had possessed her to come to Colorado in winter without a coat? Her suitcase was packed with her new Caribbean honeymoon wardrobe. The three bikinis she'd packed were as useless as a parka in the Sahara.

Fran handed her one of the two suitcases, and Valerie carried her luggage through several inches of snow.

Gingerly, they made their way through the wet white ice particles and clambered up the wooden porch. While they were kicking the snow off their shoes, the door burst open, and a beautiful young blond woman with two blue-eyed twin toddlers wrapped around her legs.

"Hi, Fran," she said, as she stared at Valerie.

Sad brown eyes stared at Valerie, and for a moment she forgot about the misadventure that had landed her in Colorado. Raw pain reflected from the young woman's gaze.

Valerie held out her hand. "I'm Valerie Brown."

"McKenzie Palmer," she replied, taking her hand. "And these are my twins, Austin and Ashley."

"Hello." Valerie smiled at the children. They gazed at her with a curious expression.

McKenzie held open the door. "Come in where it's warm."

The two women carried in the suitcases and dropped them to the floor.

"Fran said you would rent me a room for one hundred dollars a week?" Valerie asked.

"Yes, plus any long distance charges on the phone."

"Okay."

"You're awfully young," the woman said, her gaze questioning. "Just so you know, I don't allow any men in the room."

"I don't know anyone in town, so that's not a problem."

"Good. Follow me and I'll show you where you'll be staying."

The three women and two children climbed the stairs to a bedroom situated at the rear of the house. McKenzie led her into a soft yellow room with flowered wallpaper. A small bathroom was tucked into the eaves of the house.

"Nice," Valerie commented, thinking that her room at home was twice this big with a Jacuzzi tub and separate shower. But that was a former life, and she was determined to live on her own terms, at least until the fiasco of her doomed wedding faded from the spotlight. A spotlight she'd never enjoyed.

"My mother-in-law used this room," McKenzie said. "Six months ago she remarried and has her own home now."

"Oh."

"Girls, I hate to break up this tea party, but I got to get home and rest. Four o'clock comes awfully early." Fran gave McKenzie a hug. "Things are going to be fine."

"Yes, they are."

"Missy, I will pick you up at four thirty sharp. Don't make me honk the horn or pound on the door. Be ready and waiting."

Panic seized Valerie as the one person who'd helped her was about to walk out the door and leave her alone. This all seemed so very strange. She swallowed to keep the panic at bay. "Thanks, Fran. How should I dress?"

The older woman chuckled. "Wear something you don't mind getting stained. Food just seems to have a way of jumping onto your clothes during the day."

McKenzie stood at the door to the bedroom. "I'll see Fran to the door while you unpack. You can use the chest to put your belongings in, or the closet."

"Thanks." Valerie stopped for a moment and remembered, she didn't have a cell phone. "Do you offer a wake-up call in the morning, or is there a service I can use?"

Fran burst out laughing. "Yeah, it's called an alarm clock. Set it correctly."

McKenzie shifted from the door to face Valerie, a small smile on her lips. "I have a spare one you can use."

"Thanks." Valerie realized with startling clarity that there were so many things about her old life that she took for granted.

#

Valerie would never be rude to another waitress again for the rest of her life. Her feet and arms ached. Her mouth felt tight from smiling, and she reeked of greasy fried foods. She felt like a smiling soggy, french fry.

"Honey, table one is waving at you. They need something," Fran prompted, a coffee pot dangling from her hand.

"A good lesson in manners," Valerie grumbled, thinking she'd never worked harder for so little money. No wonder Fran thought she'd quit before the end of the day. But the image of Carter's car kept her feet moving.

"They need a smile and more coffee. Watch and learn."

Fran grinned brightly as she approached the table. "You boys need a refill?"

"Fran, my eggs are not cooked enough, and my bacon is tough."

He needed some cheese to go with that whine or maybe even a waa-ambulance.

Valerie observed Fran frown at the older man who had complained nonstop since she'd waited on their table. He looked like Santa Claus with horns, only he'd lost his way back to the North Pole. She'd gladly find him directions if it would send him on his way.

"Now, Charlie," Fran said gently, "if you've got a gripe with the cook, you need to talk to Todd. She filled the coffee cups at the table. "You've been coming here long enough to know that, so why are you harassing my new girl?"

"Ah, Fran, we're just trying to break her in right."

"Well, if you don't stop your whining, the next time you come in your eggs will have a new spice sprinkled on them. Arsenic."

He laughed good-naturedly. "You wouldn't do that."

She raised her brows. "If you run off my help, I may just go a little postal, and I won't be responsible for my actions. Now, do you boys need anything else? Do you want me to return your eggs to the cook?"

"My eggs are fine. I just wanted to rile that cute little miss."

"Be nice, Charlie." She whirled around and strode directly to Valerie.

"They're just a bunch of good ole boys who know you're new in town. Don't let them get away with anything. Always turn the complaint back on them in a good-natured way. They just want someone to make them feel important."

"Thanks Fran," Valerie said.

"Don't worry, honey. Soon they'll find someone else to pick on. If not, come get me, and I'll make the curve in the crack of their backsides jagged."

So far this job had made Valerie feel even more disjointed than the rest of her life. Yet, in less than a minute Fran had managed to disarm the situation. She could charm the socks off a terrorist and sweet talk him into jail. A lesson Valerie desperately needed. "Thanks, Fran."

"Hang in there, kid. You're doing okay. Being a waitress ain't the easiest job in the world."

A surge of pride gave Valerie a boost of much-needed energy. Fran said she was doing a good job! Other than the temp job in her father's law practice, this was her first real employment. And her father liked to regale his cronies with stories of her screwups in the office.

The bell above the door dinged, announcing a new customer. Valerie turned, ready to seat the latest arrival. She stopped in her food-stained sneakers at the sight of the one person in town she could have gone all day without seeing. Attorney Matt Jordan.

Her lawyer magnet clicked on and a tingle of awareness danced along her spine. No! With only seventy-two hours since her last relationship disaster, she mentally switched off the magnet. No more men. No more lawyers.

Still, he could have graced the cover of *GQ* or *The American Lawyer*.

Her heart danced a little mambo when he smiled at her and seated himself. Why couldn't he be some ugly, slimy nerd she could easily ignore?

She strolled over to him. "What can I get you, Mr. Jordan?"

His green eyes reflected surprise, and her radar went on high alert. "Aren't you the girl who fainted last night?"

"Yeah," she acknowledged, her order pad in hand, he would just tell her what he wanted and forget the small talk.

"You feel better?"

"Much."

"So why are you here? Last night you seemed determined to rent a car and drive to Denver. What made you decide to stay in town?" he asked casually.

He'd overheard her say she intended to rent a car? She didn't know how to respond. Her pride refused to publicly acknowledge her financial situation. With only ten dollars in tips to her name, it was difficult to discuss money.

"I decided to try the small-town life for a while."

He grinned. "Why would a big-city girl like you decide Springtown was someplace you wanted to stay? And being a waitress? You don't seem the type."

Sometimes it was hard to resist the urge to answer stupid questions with an equally dim-witted response. So she didn't.

"It's my first stop as Miss America. I'm here to promote world peace."

He stared at her as if she'd lost her mind, and then he laughed. "I guess that means it's none of my business. I'll take coffee."

"Cream or sugar?"

"Just black." He glanced at her shoes. "At least you traded in your heels for something a little more sensible."

She lowered her order pad and looked down at the sneakers she had on. "Yeah, I didn't want to stain my heels with food. My Jimmy Choo's would not have lasted the first hour."

"I have a shoe-aholic sister."

"Really. Your sister likes shoes? I need to meet this woman."

Valerie heard her rowdy table calling her and wanted to flip them the finger, but she wanted to eat more. "What can I get you, Mr. Jordan? I've got to wait on my other table."

The attorney gave the other table a stern gaze. "Charlie, give the girl a minute to take my order."

~~"You've had her for more than a minute already," the man taunted.~~

Matt grinned. "I can't help it if she's attracted to my charm."

Valerie shook her head. If she didn't need the job, she would have told them both to kiss off. She was immune to Matt Jordan's charms. He was a man. An arrogant lawyer. She didn't need the aggravation and refused to respond to the comments from either table.

In a firm voice she asked, "I have your drink order. What else?"

Matt gave her his order and then watched as she hurried to the kitchen counter. She picked up the coffee pot, went to the table of rambunctious forestry workers, filled their cups, and smiled. They melted under the voltage of her curved lips. Her smile packed a thousand watts of pure charm, and every man at that table was affected.

What was this girl doing in Springtown? He could see her in Los Angeles or New York, but not in this small mountain village on the edge of the Rockies.

She moved through the restaurant, the label on her snug Yanuk jeans that hugged her hips and legs riding low on her waist. There was a classiness about her that seemed out of place in a small town café. An air of worldliness and wealth that he guessed no university could teach.

And Yanuk jeans were not cheap.

So, why had she decided to stay? And why had she arrived on the bus? She appeared more than a BMW convertible type than someone who used public transportation.

Fran stopped at his table. "Why aren't you in the big city defending some criminal?"

"I'm not a criminal lawyer. And I don't have to travel to Denver until next week," Matt responded.

"Well, aren't I just lucky that you came by then?"

"Yep, I see your rot-gut food didn't kill our out-of-town guest." He watched Valerie carrying plates of food. "So what made you decide to hire her?"

"I needed a waitress and she needed a job. Simple case of supply and demand."

"She doesn't look like the kind of woman who works as a waitress," he commented, staring at her as she moved efficiently through the restaurant, her arms loaded with dirty dishes.

"Even city girls have to eat."

"I thought she was headed out of town," he asked, trying to understand what had happened between the time Valerie fainted and when he left the café.

"She changed her mind," Fran responded. "A woman has that right."

"It just seems odd. She gets off the bus, faints, and now she's working in your café."

"Leave it alone, Jordan. I've got a new employee."

Matt couldn't get enough of the young woman. God, she was nice to look at. Her full lips and high cheekbones were model worthy. His gaze swept down past her neck to her high breasts, and the stirring he'd ignored for the past year sprang to life.

"Matthew Jordan, don't ogle my hired help. It's not polite," Fran reminded him.

He smiled at the lady he'd grown fond of. "It may not be polite, but she's a damn pretty sight."

"That she is, and I'm a mite protective of her. She doesn't seem to have anyone looking after her." Fran crossed her arms over her chest and stared down at him. "Back off. I think she's a little fragile right now."

"If that's fragile, I'd hate to see her at full strength."

"Some people can hide their emotions well."

"What makes you think she's fragile?" he questioned, wondering if that was the reason she

fainted.

~~“Woman’s intuition, I guess. She almost seems afraid.”~~

He gazed at the young woman carrying a plate to a customer and sighed. “I can only handle one emotional woman at a time.”

“Speaking of McKenzie, have you spoken to her today?”

“Briefly. Austin’s sick. I’m on my way over there to stay with Ashley while McKenzie takes Austin to the doctor.”

“Did she tell you about—”

“Fran, I need you in the kitchen!” the cook yelled from the back.

The waitress dropped her arms and spun towards the kitchen. “Gotta run.”

As Fran hurried away, Matt watched the new pretty waitress. Valerie Brown’s looks had his male hormones spiking his libido into overdrive. Yesterday in his arms she’d felt soft and vulnerable. Yet today she appeared determined to tackle the world and any hungry customer who ventured in the Mountain Chalet Café.

Why Fran thought Valerie was fragile, he didn’t know, but he didn’t have the time to investigate. The welfare of his sister, niece, and nephew were his top priority.

Chapter Three

Matt opened the door to his sister's house, and Mrs. Graham, her neighbor, held a finger to her mouth. "Ashley's asleep in the playpen."

"Where's McKenzie?"

"The doctor's office called and said they had a cancellation, so she left earlier than expected."

"She should have called me. I could have come immediately."

The elderly woman smiled. "I was here when they called, so I told her I would stay with Ashley until you arrived. It's been less than an hour ago. I expect her back anytime now."

"Thanks, Mrs. Graham, I can take it from here."

"Yes, I should be going. If you need me, I'm right across the road."

"Be careful walking home."

"Bye, dear."

Matt watched her leave and then sank down into a chair. He hated just sitting. He checked Ashley, who lay curled on her side, sleeping, unaware that her Mommy had left.

Every time one of the kids got the sniffles, Matt worried. What if Austin was coming down with something serious? He'd promised his brother-in-law, John, he would protect McKenzie and the family. And though his promise seemed easy at the time of John's death, Matt worried about McKenzie and the children.

His sister was a strong, vibrant, tough woman. But sometimes the sadness etched on her face left him aching for her. She missed John.

In the few short years they were married, John had made McKenzie happy, and for the first time since their parents' messy divorce, Matt began to believe in marriage once again.

Watching the love between John and McKenzie had made him realize the depths of his own loneliness and for the first time reconsider bachelorhood.

Now when he was ready to experience for himself a loving relationship, it wasn't forthcoming. There wasn't even a blip on his radar of finding someone to share his life with. He had the time, the money, and he hoped the skills needed to provide his wife a good home. But no matter how much he searched for the perfect woman, she was as elusive as an insurance company admitting guilt.

Unable to sit any longer, he tucked the blanket around Ashley and ran his hand over her smooth skin. She looked so sweet and innocent, and he loved both of the twins more than he thought possible. He grabbed the baby monitor. He'd feed the horses and make sure they had plenty of water while Ashley slept. If she awoke, he could hear her on the radio.

Safely tucked in her crib, Ashley would be all right until he returned.

#

After a long day at the café, Valerie wanted nothing more than to return to the house, peel off her clothes, and crawl into bed. She had a new appreciation for working women and longed to soak in the hot tub. But before she could reach the door, the sound of a child's cries echoed from the house.

She swung open the back door and ran through the mudroom only to find Ashley standing in the playpen, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her cries were loud enough to wake the dead two counties over. Valerie hurried to the crib. Why hadn't McKenzie responded to the child's tears?

"Hey, sweetheart, what's wrong?" she asked as Ashley sobbed. No one responded to Valerie's voice, and Ashley continued to exercise her lungs.

Why is the baby alone?

“McKenzie?”

~~Silence greeted her. Valerie reached into the playpen to pick Ashley up to comfort her and encountered one of the child’s problems. The toddler was soaked.~~

“Baby, I’d cry, too. Come on, I’ll change you, and we’ll go find your mommy.”

She lifted Ashley out of the crib and carried the baby upstairs to the nursery, where she placed her on the changing table. Though she’d never been around children much, she knew enough to change a diaper. The toddler’s cries slowed, though small hiccups emitted from her.

“Momma?” she asked.

“We’ll find her,” Valerie promised, trying to soothe Ashley’s fears. One wrong move and the child’s lungs and Valerie’s ears would get another workout.

Quickly, she removed the soaked diaper, swiped Ashley with a wipe, powdered her, and put on a fresh diaper. Curiosity darkened the depths of the baby’s big blue eyes.

“Now you’re all set. Let’s go find your mommy. She can’t be far.”

The back door opened, and a loud male voice cursed. “Ashley!”

Valerie stepped to the nursery door at the top of the stairs to see Matt frantically searching the living room. “Mr. Jordan?”

He gazed up at her, an odd expression on his face. “What are you doing with Ashley?”

Valerie walked down the stairs. “She was crying, so I changed her.”

Ashley held out her arms to him, and he took the baby from Valerie. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Maybe I should ask you the same question. What are you doing here?” she asked, trying to keep the defensive tone from her voice. She was dead-dog tired, and here was the one man she wanted to avoid at all costs.

“This is my sister’s home and I’m babysitting.”

“McKenzie is your sister?” she asked, shocked.

“Yes.”

“And you left your niece alone?”

“I was gone five minutes to the barn to feed McKenzie’s horses and make sure everything was okay while Ashley slept. I took the baby monitor.”

“Did you turn it on?” she questioned, her voice stern.

He glanced at the monitor in his hands. “Ah, let me see.” He hit the switch and they could hear the sound of their breathing on the device in his hand.

“It’s useless without power,” Valerie said, her voice echoing in the radio.

“Well, I meant to,” he responded, his gaze flickering to the child. “Why are you here?”

Valerie gazed at the big man holding Ashley and bouncing the child in his arms.

“McKenzie didn’t tell you?” Valerie asked.

“Tell me what?”

“I’m her new roommate.”

His forehead creased in a frown, and his brows drew together. For a moment he didn’t say anything. “She would have told me if she had let you move in.”

“It was late last night.”

“She would have said something today.”

“Well, where is she? Why don’t you ask her why she didn’t tell you I was living with her now.”

“She had to take Austin to the doctor.”

“Obviously, she had more important things on her mind than telling you I had moved in.”

He glanced at her empty hands. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to change the baby’s diaper and steal McKenzie’s jewels,” Valerie all but snapped.
“I didn’t accuse you.”

“You didn’t have to. I could see what you were thinking. The trashy waitress is going to steal your sister blind.” She clenched her jaw to hold back the retort she so wanted to fling at him. She had enough money in her trust fund to take care of anything she needed. But he’d never believe her. “You’re holding her most prized possession!”

“That’s not what I was thinking! I was concerned about my niece,” he said, his voice rising.

“Check out the guest room. You’ll find I’ve moved in.” Valerie was too tired. Her feet hurt, her back ached, and she felt numb from the week’s events. Her nerves were stretched, screaming for release, and another lawyer was giving her crap. Screaming might just be the release she needed if he didn’t back off.

“Again, I didn’t say anything about you stealing. You’re the one who brought up the subject. It surprised me to find a stranger in McKenzie’s home holding her child.”

Valerie strode to Matt and poked him in the chest with her finger. “No one should go off and leave a baby alone, even when she’s asleep. You should be a little more responsible.”

“I...I was gone for five minutes,” he said defensively. “I went to the barn to take care of the horses. I was trying to help.”

“Well, in less than five minutes Ashley woke up and was crying. What if the house had caught on fire?”

For a moment he stared at her as if she were a green goblin. Ashley pushed against his chest, wanting down. He set her on the floor, and when he stood, Valerie could see the wheels in his brain turning from the expression on his face.

“Wait a minute. You’ve switched the conversation. You tell me you’re living here, yet McKenzie hasn’t confirmed that information. I don’t know who the hell you are.”

“Watch your language, Mr. Hotshot Attorney. There’s a child present,” Valerie said quietly, her voice calm.

All attorneys should be loaded into a boat and dumped in the ocean. They were all jerks! Even her father, and most especially Carter.

Ashley stared at the adults, her face screwed up, and she began to wail.

“Now you’ve done it. You made her cry,” Valerie said. She leaned down and picked the child up and sank into a nearby rocker, where she soothed the toddler.

“There, there, baby, it’s okay,” she said patting her back.

Matt opened his mouth to speak but only stared at her, frustration evident in his posture. God, it felt good to make an attorney speechless. Even if he was the wrong one.

A car pulled into the driveway and saved her from his response. “McKenzie’s here, and she can confirm that I now occupy the upstairs bedroom her mother-in-law once occupied. Should I tell her how you left Ashley alone?”

“No! Don’t give her anything else to worry about. She’s got enough to deal with,” he said, his voice stern.

Well, she’d certainly found a subject the lawyer was touchy about. Ashley snuggled in close and Valerie rocked her, her sweet baby smell oddly soothing.

McKenzie struggled through the door, her arms loaded with a sleeping Austin. She glanced around the room. “Hi. I see you two have met.”

Ashley squealed with delight at the sight of her mother. She hopped off Valerie’s lap to run to McKenzie. “Just a minute, baby. Let me get your brother in bed. Go see Uncle Matt.”

The little girl glanced at her uncle and proceeded to climb onto Valerie's lap.

~~“Hey, I'm the uncle,” he exclaimed to Ashley, who turned and buried her head against Valerie's chest, ignoring him.~~

McKenzie hurried up the stairs with Austin.

Matt moved across the room and rested his arm against the fireplace mantel, tension evident in the way he stood. Valerie ignored him as she rocked and crooned to Ashley. A grandfather clock ticked the seconds like a time bomb echoing in the room. A time bomb with Valerie as the fuse.

Ten minutes later a tired, worried-looking McKenzie came downstairs, obviously not needing confrontation.

“Anyone want a cup of tea?” she asked, walking into the kitchen, where she filled a kettle with water.

“No. How's Austin?” Matt asked, his voice sharp.

“He has an ear infection. But the doctor said we caught it early.”

“Poor little guy,” Matt replied. “How can I help you?”

McKenzie glanced between the two of them, sensing the obvious strain. “Staying with Ashley was a huge relief. She would have been a handful in the waiting room.”

He tilted his head toward Valerie, and his forehead drew into a frown. “Did you rent a bedroom for her?”

“Yes,” she responded nonchalantly as she placed the kettle on the stove.

Matt strode over to his sister and said quietly, “I told you I would help you. If you need money let me know.”

McKenzie sighed and gazed at her brother. “Thank you for the offer, but I can't spend the rest of my life depending on you.”

Appearing to dismiss him, she turned to the cabinet and pulled out cups and bags of tea.

“But you know nothing about her. You could be putting yourself or the kids in danger,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

“This is why I hadn't told you,” McKenzie said.

Valerie wanted to throw something at the attorney. She snapped, “Yeah, I'm definitely the criminal type. I wear Jimmy Choo shoes, have a Rolex watch, used to drive a Corvette—”

He whirled around to face Valerie, frustration evident on his handsome face. “You said the key phrase there. Used to. So what happened? Too much cocaine, or did you spend all of Daddy's money and now you're on the run?”

Valerie bit back the response she wanted to shout at him. For the first time in her life, words slapped her with the truth. Oh, she'd never done drugs, but Daddy's money had always supported her. And now she was on the run, but that didn't make her a criminal did it? Well...technically...

“Look, your sister needs help, and I needed a place to stay. We worked out a deal. I could never hurt or harm anyone intentionally.”

Yet she had hurt her fiancé or at least his prized possession. But he'd deserved what she'd done. Now...well, maybe it hadn't been her most rational moment. A simple case of temporary insanity brought on by extreme emotional distress. A simple case of temporary insanity brought on by a cheating groom and her best friend.

Matt stared at her as if he were looking deep in her soul, and while normally she would have met his gaze head-on, she somehow felt a little ashamed of her actions. She didn't regret them, but more definitely she'd missed the high road and taken the revenge bypass. Sooner or later she would have to confront her actions, but not yet. She needed time to gain some perspective and to let her wounds heal.

before dealing with Carter.

~~“Matt, we’ll be fine. You have no reason to worry,” McKenzie said to her brother. “You’ve helped me more in the last year than any sister has the right to expect.”~~

He ignored McKenzie, his eyes riveted on Valerie. “Tell me why you decided to stay in Springtown when I overheard you say in the café last night that you were headed to Denver.”

She returned his stare. “Simple. Snow. Last night you said it yourself—the weather was going to get bad. It did and I stayed.”

“It’s okay, Matt,” McKenzie repeated to her brother, this time a little stronger.

“The storm has passed, and yet here you are working in the café. Why?”

“The storm passed and I liked this town so much I decided to just hang out for a while.”

His emerald gaze pierced her for a few moments, silently contemplating her. Giving her probably one of his best lawyer faces, only he didn’t realize she was immune to the authoritative expression. Immune to the prosecution and the defense manipulation of her emotions. They no longer fazed her, she’d grown up with them.

“You’re lying. I don’t know why, but I’m not buying your answers.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” she admitted, refusing to back down, not offering any additional information. It was none of his business, and indifference had always driven her daddy crazy.

His emerald eyes sparkled in the silent test of wills.

McKenzie walked over and laid her hand on her brother’s arm. “Matt, Valerie is not going to hurt us. I’m letting her stay.”

He turned on his sister, his voice clipped. “If you want a stranger staying in your home at least draw up a lease. I can print one off and bring it by.”

“A lease isn’t necessary. Valerie doesn’t know how long she’ll be here, so we’re taking it one day at a time,” she assured him.

With a sigh, he turned his gaze to Valerie. “For now, I have no choice but to let this go. I don’t condone liars. In fact, I detest liars with a passion. If one hair is harmed on my family, anything, your new accommodations will be the Springtown jail. Your Jimmy Choo shoes won’t look too good with an orange jumpsuit.”

Her father had every employee's background verified. Matt could do the same. Valerie felt certain he would use his connections to do a background check on Valerie Brown. Just how long she had before he came back and started asking more questions, she didn’t know, but for tonight she would still sleep under a roof.

She shouldn’t have goaded him quite so much, but somehow he represented every stinking lawyer in her life, and since the people who hurt her weren’t there to express her anger to, he was a good substitute. A substitute who might not have deserved her frustration, but one she’d enjoyed sparring with just the same.

“Sorry, Matt,” she said sarcastically. “I’m sure the accommodations at the Springtown jail are not up to my standards. McKenzie and I will be just fine. Now don’t you have some briefs or something that need writing? Your sister and I have some serious shoe talk to get to.”

Chapter Four

Valerie watched as Matt's green eyes darkened with anger. His mouth had a determined set, yet he pivoted on his heel and retreated without saying a word. For a moment Valerie feared she'd said too much, but when she glanced over at McKenzie, the woman was smiling.

The door slammed shut as Matt made his exit. The two roommates looked at one another and burst out laughing.

"No one has ever gotten to my stubborn brother like that before. That was priceless." She sighed. "Matt means well, but since John died, he's suffocated me with his protection."

Valerie sank onto an overstuffed chair that faced McKenzie. "Don't apologize for Matt. It's really sweet that he's watching out for you."

"Yes, it is. I'm lucky to have him."

Ashley crawled onto McKenzie's lap and snuggled against her mother. An odd sensation warmed Valerie's chest as she realized this child would never know her father. For just a moment, she missed her own dad, but then she remembered how he'd taken Carter's side. No, she refused to think about Carter or her father for a while. She needed a mental break from the pain of their betrayal.

"I meant what I said. I would never intentionally harm you or the children." She paused, her fists clenching to restrain the pain, wondering how much she should tell McKenzie. "My life is in shambles right now. I need somewhere to stay until I make some decisions. I could be here a week or maybe several months. I don't know."

McKenzie nodded. "I appreciate your honesty. But you wouldn't be here if I was the least bit concerned. My brother will come around. Eventually he'll realize that I'm not going to accept his financial help and he's not going to dictate how I live my life." She sighed. "John's death really affected him. I think he's realized his own mortality. For the first time, he's talking kids and marriage. After our parents' divorce, he swore he would never marry."

She gazed at Valerie. "How about you?" she teased. "You certainly aren't afraid to take on 'The Crusher.'"

"The Crusher?" A chill went down Valerie's spine. She'd heard the name mentioned in her father's law office.

"Yeah, Matt's won more legal liability cases than anyone else in the state. He's known as the Colorado Crusher."

Valerie's insides twisted into a knot and her breath caught. Of all the towns where she could have gotten off that bus, she had to stop in the city where Colorado's most successful liability lawyer lived. She knew from her father that Matt was not some private, two or three cases a year attorney. He was known for his toughness and his ability to sway a jury. His reputation was to crush the opposition and win.

And to make things worse, he wanted to get married. The urge to run was almost overwhelming. She didn't want to be around anyone determined to be married. She didn't want to be around another successful attorney. She didn't want to be around a man with a smile that was tempting. Not now.

"Well, I'm taking a sabbatical from men right now." She wanted McKenzie to know up front that she was not interested in being involved with anyone.

But most especially lawyers.

Something in her voice must have given her away, as McKenzie stopped running her fingers through her daughter's hair and studied her closely.

“Is that why you came to Springtown? To get away from a man?” McKenzie asked.

~~Valerie genuinely liked McKenzie, but she couldn't respond. In the last few days she'd managed to shore up the dam that held the reservoir of her feelings for her disastrous wedding. She wasn't ready to let that river flow again. Not yet. “Right now, I need to stay focused on me.”~~

“He must have hurt you pretty bad.”

Valerie sat there, surprised. “Who?”

“The man you're running from.”

Great! She didn't need anyone speculating about her and a man, even if it was true. The conversation was at an end.

“Show me the shoes you have. I'd really like to see them.”

McKenzie smiled knowingly and stood. “Come on. I'll even let you try them on if they fit.”

#

Matt stared at the blinking cursor, anger smoldering within. A stack of paperwork piled in front of him, the phone rang constantly, the fax ran 24/7, and he wished a magic fairy would appear and cancel the filing.

The blinking cursor's image took shape in his mind. Five feet ten inches with sapphire eyes and a smart mouth. Tonight his mind refused to focus on his job. Instead, he obsessed on the blonde beauty that had practically kicked him out of his sister's house. The woman who'd stepped off a bus, created a scene by fainting, and then never left. The woman he felt both attracted to and repelled by.

The woman had nerve. She waltzed into town, charmed Fran into giving her a job, and cast a spell over McKenzie, who let her move in.

Valerie Brown was a very determined, beautiful woman who could charm a snake handler.

Well, she didn't intimidate him. He'd just do a little research to find out what kind of person she was and maybe in the process learn why she remained in Springtown, Colorado. No one came to this small town by chance and decided to stay. After all, industry was nil and job prospects were few.

At first Matt had remained here only because of McKenzie and his niece and nephew.

In the beginning he'd resented the fact that McKenzie wouldn't move back to Denver. No matter how much he pleaded with her, she refused to give up the home she'd built with her late husband. McKenzie insisted her children would be reared in a small town, and until the day her bank account ran dry, she refused to move. Often McKenzie reminded him this was her life, not his, and he was free to go.

But he couldn't leave. And he didn't want to go. After his promise to John, Matt felt obligated to stay and help her with the twins. Six months passed, and the town had grown on him. Sure he missed fancy dining, Broncos games, and concerts, but something about the orange glow of the setting sun against the Rockies, the fresh pine scent, and the lack of traffic jams had a way of easing the tension from his bones. And nothing compared to the whisper of the Aspens rustling through an open window.

He loved the area so much he bought five acres close to McKenzie's property and was building his own log home.

The only thing missing was someone to decorate the house and sit on the covered porch with him in the evening. He wanted a wife, someone to be the mother of his children.

Before the move, his job had kept him so busy that he hadn't had time for a relationship, but now that he worked at a slower pace, he'd had time to notice his loneliness.

The romantic pickings in Springtown were slim, or so he believed. Certainly, Valerie Brown's pert breasts, long legs, and curvaceous hips caught and held his interest. But he needed more than just breasts to keep him interested in a woman. He needed a quick mind to challenge him and a woman who

children would be proud to call Mother.

~~Valerie Brown was a mystery woman. A woman he knew nothing about except that she had expensive clothes, no money, and apparently had moved in with his sister.~~

He wasn't a snob. Though Cinderella's chariot was strictly coach, her makeup, manicure, and haircut spoke of high-dollar salons. How could he be attracted and yet wary at the same time? Valerie was different from the women he found himself normally attracted to. She was mouthier and more demanding. But the bus thing bothered him the most. Why didn't she have a car?

Unable to stop himself, he went to Google and searched Valerie Brown. A beautiful African American singer's picture popped up. Not the right Valerie Brown. A list blinked onto the monitor. A woman supervisor in Los Angeles County, a married woman, and then a doctor, but none were the Valerie Brown living in his sister's home.

He went to Facebook and did a random search. Several Valerie's were listed, but none that had long blonde hair or sparkling blue eyes. Not one had ripe lips full of attitude that begged to be kissed.

So he'd found nothing on the spunky waitress.

Still, he could ask Jesse to run a background check on the mysterious Valerie. He paused for a moment. Was he overreacting? The image of his niece snuggled trustfully against the woman's breast came to mind, and he realized the stakes were way too high.

He'd do anything to protect his sister and her children, even if it meant prying into the life of the mysterious transient woman who made his pulse quicken.

Who was he kidding? He wanted to know who Valerie Brown was.

#

The next day Matt slid into the booth at the café where he met Jesse at least two or three times a week. He'd called and told his friend to meet him for lunch. Valerie hadn't seen him when he walked in, so he had seated himself.

He watched Jesse stroll in, and Valerie waved to him with her free hand.

"Go ahead and take a seat. I'll be right there to get your drink order," she called.

"Sure, Valerie," Jesse said. "I'm going to join Matt."

She froze and slowly her head turned to glance over her shoulder at him. Her brows drew together in a frown, and she lowered them in obvious disapproval before she returned to her customers.

He gazed at her as she poured coffee, handed out menus, and talked casually with a group of forestry workers. Her blue jeans fit snug across her shapely rear, and her short-cropped sweatshirt occasionally gave a glimpse of her smooth skin. He took a deep breath and tried to still his racing pulse.

What was it about this girl that made him want to stare like a college kid? What about her had attracted him and repelled him at the same time? It would be a miracle if she had a high school education. Yet something about her had him wanting to throw her over his shoulder and walk out the door. He'd kiss her until she told him what he wanted to know.

Only then would he feel safe with her staying at his sister's home.

"Fran's new waitress definitely gives an air of improvement to this place, doesn't she?" Jesse commented as he slid into the booth across from him.

Matt jerked his attention to his friend. "Hi."

"Now you notice me."

"Shut up!" Matt said, half-teasing, half-serious. "I saw you walk in the door. I was counting the number of boys from the forestry service that seem to have time for lunch these days."

"You are busted, my friend. You were checking out the fit of her jeans," Jesse said, scanning the

specials scrawled on a chalkboard at the front of the cafe.

“Come on,” Matt said good-naturedly, knowing he’d been caught.

“Fran’s business is seeing a lot more male customers since Valerie came to work for her,” Jesse commented without glancing up from the menu. “Just look around.”

The café did seem to have more customers. The biggest percentage of them worked for the county road department.

“Most of these guys are married,” Matt declared, trying to contain his annoyance, knowing he enjoyed every second of watching the way she moved.

How was it possible she both infuriated him and attracted him at the same time?

“Never hurts to look.”

“We don’t know anything about this girl.”

“Do you really think these guys want to sit down and have a conversation with her?” Jesse said, glancing from his menu to laugh at his friend.

“No,” Matt replied, strangely angry. “So they came here to gawk at her?”

“Pretty, new girl in town. She’s a novelty.”

“That’s what concerns me,” Matt acknowledged.

“Why? Why are you acting so strange about this girl? Just because she came from the big city doesn’t mean she’s a criminal,” Jesse pointed out.

“In case you haven’t heard, she’s moved in with McKenzie,” Matt hissed with frustration. “My sister has gone through enough. She doesn’t need some girl robbing her blind.”

Jesse frowned at Matt and turned his gaze upon Valerie. When he glanced back at Matt, there was a teasing glint in his eyes. “I don’t normally arrest people because they look suspicious and arrive in town on the bus. I think she’s okay.”

Matt leaned closer to Jesse. “Spoken like a small-town sheriff who’s not read about the woman who came home to find her house and bank account cleaned out by her roommate.”

Jesse shook his head. “McKenzie has a good head on her shoulders. I don’t think she would have let Valerie move in if she thought there could be a problem.”

“How would she know? Valerie’s been in town forty-eight hours. There was no background check or even a lease signed.”

“Spoken like a lawyer. People do still help one another without formal leases.”

Jesse cleared his throat loudly and nudged him beneath the table.

“What do we know about this girl,” Matt exclaimed trying to curtail the frustrated tone of his voice, not understanding Jesse’s signal until it was too late.

“We know she’s five feet ten inches, weighs approximately one hundred and twenty pounds of trouble, and she’s standing right behind you. Good afternoon, gentlemen,” Valerie said. “Could interest you in the special of the day? Beef stew with homemade cornbread and a slice of banana cream pie?”

Jesse laughed nervously. “You are so busted, man.”

Her voice was too nice. She’d heard him.

“Busted as in, yes, I heard everything,” she said icily.

Jesse closed the menu. “I’ll take the special.”

“And for you, Mr. Jordan?” She asked, her voice too polite. “How about a serving of humble pie? I’m sure I can convince Todd to fix some for you.”

Her comment stunned him for about thirty seconds. Her sapphire eyes glistened with irritation.

“I don’t see humble pie on the menu,” he challenged, surprised at her spunk. He knew she was

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