



I Saw Her Standing There (A Green Mountain Romance Book 3)

By Marie Force

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There's a budding romance on Butler Mountain, but in the hornets' nest known as the Abbott family, keeping a secret is no easy feat...

Colton Abbott and Lucy Mulvaney have a secret. Colton's nosy siblings have begun to put the pieces together, but it's not like Lucy to keep things from those closest to her—especially her best friend, Cameron, who recently moved to Vermont to live with her true love, Will. But Lucy isn't about to tell Cam she's having a fling...*with Will's brother.*

Flitting between New York and Vermont is exhausting, so Lucy is looking forward to a long weekend with Colton at the Abbott family lake house in Burlington. Too bad Will and Cameron have the same idea, and once Colton and Lucy are caught red-handed (and red-faced), will their clandestine romance lose its appeal or will their secret beginnings be the start of something lasting?

Includes a bonus Green Mountain short story!

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Editorial Review

Review

"How can you not love the Abbotts? What an awesome, loving family. I can't wait for the rest of the series! And the gospel according to Elmer Stillman was both hilarious and insightful." -Criminal Minds Romantic Hearts Blog

"Force's **I SAW HER STANDING THERE** is a continuation of a great series by an author that is fast becoming one of my favorites." - 4 Blue Ribbon review from Jo at Romance Junkies

"This opposites attract storyline is a winner for Marie Force and I loved it. The characters have heart and lots of humor. Pure delight to fall under the spell of the Abbott clan, who are a close knit, family who work and play together, and welcome Lucy with open arms and hearts."--by Pat at Fresh Fiction

"The dialogue and repartee between Colton and Lucy was particularly fun. It was witty and sexy with the right amount of bedroom talk."--Shelly's A+ rating on Red Hot Books

"I thoroughly and completely loved this book and look forward to reading more about the Abbott family."--Terri's 5 star review on Night Owl Romance

"...the way Marie Force brings these two characters together is magical."--5 out of 5 apples from Debbie's Book Bag

"Ms. Force has a rare talent; a true artist, she creates a world that pulls the reader right in!"--4.5 star review on Shh Mom's Reading

"I dare you not to completely swoon... Marie Force knows how to write some sizzling scenes!"--by Rachel at Reader's Den posted on Romance at Random

About the Author

Start reading Marie's New York Times Bestselling Gansett Island Series today with Maid for Love, free on Amazon.

Marie Force is the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than 50 contemporary romances, including the Gansett Island Series, which has sold more than 2.3 million books, and the Fatal Series from Harlequin Books, which has sold more than 1.2 million books. In addition, she is the author of the Green Mountain Series as well as the erotic romance Quantum Series, written under the slightly modified name of M.S. Force. All together, her books have sold more than 5 million copies worldwide!

Her goals in life are simple--to finish raising two happy, healthy, productive young adults, to keep writing books for as long as she possibly can and to never be on a flight that makes the news.

Join Marie's mailing list on her website at marieforce.com for news about new books and upcoming appearances in your area. Follow her on Facebook at [Facebook.com/MarieForceAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/MarieForceAuthor), on Twitter @marieforce and on Instagram at [instagram.com/marieforceauthor/](https://www.instagram.com/marieforceauthor/). Contact Marie at

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CHAPTER 1

Sugarmakers in Vermont feel a bit tender about the weather this winter, what with memories of the heat wave in March last year that choked off the sap runs. In response, we decided to start tapping earlier than ever, on February 6. What's two weeks? It sounds insignificant, but it feels akin to moving Christmas Day up to December 11.

—Colton Abbott's sugaring journal, February 11

Colton Abbott had never considered himself a particularly private person—that is, until he had something big to hide from his loving but overly involved family. His six brothers, three sisters, two parents and one grandfather were dying to know how he was spending his weekends lately, and Colton was loving that they had no idea. Not the first clue.

A smile split his face as he drove across Northern Vermont, from his home in the Northeast Kingdom town of Butler to Burlington, where his family owned a lake house and where his “secret” girlfriend would be meeting him in a couple of hours. He wanted to get there early and hit the store for supplies so they could relax and enjoy every minute of their time together.

Colton had big plans for this weekend, the sixth one he'd spent completely alone with her. During that time, they'd talked about nearly every subject known to mankind, they'd kissed a lot, fooled around quite a bit and last weekend, they'd even gone so far as to take each other all the way to blissful fulfillment. But they'd yet to have sex.

He intended to fix that this weekend before he lost his mind from wanting more of her. He'd tried to respect her wishes to “take things slow” so they didn't “get in over their heads” when they lived so far from each other and had so little time to spend together. Of course he'd heard people say for years that long-distance relationships sucked, but until he'd experienced the suckage personally, he'd had no idea just how totally the situation sucked.

It got worse with every weekend they spent together when he was left wanting more and having to wait a full week before he could see her again. They'd been lucky so far. Other than the weekend he'd stayed home for the funeral of his sister Hannah's dog Homer, they'd had six weekends with no other commitments to get in the way of their plans, but he knew reality would interfere eventually. They both had busy lives and families and other obligations that would mess with the idyllic routine they'd slipped into over the last month and a half.

They'd met halfway the other times, and this would be the first time that she'd come to Vermont. Since he wasn't quite ready to expose her to the austere life he led on his mountain, he'd asked his dad for the keys to the lake house.

And what an odd conversation that had been the day before . . . With time to think about it during the two-hour ride across the state, Colton had the uncomfortable suspicion that the one person he wasn't fooling with his secret romance was his dear old dad.

Colton had planned his attack stealthily, coming down off the mountain on a rare Thursday to see his dad at the office. Waiting until most of his siblings had left for lunch—except for Hunter, who never seemed to leave the office for any reason except a fire alarm—Colton had sat in his truck and watched his dad step out

of the diner and head back across the street to the office above the family-owned Green Mountain Country Store in “downtown” Butler, if you could call Elm Street a downtown.

Colton had emerged from his truck and followed Lincoln up the back stairs that led to the offices where he and five of Colton’s siblings ran the store. Colton kept his head down as he walked past Hunter’s office and knocked on his dad’s door.

“Hey,” Lincoln said with obvious pleasure. His father was always happy to see him, which was one of the many things in life Colton could count on. “This is a nice surprise. Come in.”

Colton shook his father’s outstretched hand and took a seat in one of his visitor chairs.

“To what do I owe the honor of a rare midweek visit from the mountain man?”

“I needed a couple of things in town, so I figured I’d stop by.”

“Everything okay up the hill?”

“It’s all good. Quiet and relaxing this time of year, as always.” Colton thought of early summer as the calm that followed the storm of boiling season, during which he produced more than five thousand gallons of the maple syrup that was sold in the store. After nine years of running the family’s sugaring facility, his life had fallen into a predictable pattern governed by twenty-five thousand syrup-producing trees.

“I’m glad you stopped by. I was going to come up to see you today or tomorrow.”

“How come?”

Lincoln rooted around on his desk, looking for something in the piles of paper and file folders. “Ah, here it is.” He pulled out a light blue page and handed it over to Colton.

As he scanned the announcement of a trade show in New York City, he skimmed the details until he realized what he was reading. “What the hell, Dad? Pleasure aids and sensual devices? What’s that got to do with me?” He nearly had a heart attack at the thought of his father thinking he needed such things to move the relationship no one was supposed to know about forward.

“I’m considering the line for the store, and I’m looking for someone to send to the show. Since this is your off-season, I thought you might be able to make the trip for us.”

While trying to wrap his mind around the idea of “pleasure aids and sensual devices” on sale at their homespun country store, he tried to keep his expression neutral. Though he was slightly appalled at the reason for the mission, the location appealed to him very much.

In the interest of keeping his big secret a secret, he kept his reaction casual and indifferent. “What do the others have to say about that product line?”

“I haven’t exactly mentioned it to them yet. I figured I’d let you check it out first and see what you think before I bring it to them.”

“Why me?”

“Why not you? Everyone else is up to their eyeballs in work and life stuff, so it seemed to make sense to ask you now that your busy season is over for the time being.” Lincoln shrugged. “But if you’re not up for

going—”

“Never said that.” He’d be a fool to pass up a chance to spend a whole week with her. “I’ll do it, but with the caveat that I think this product line has no business in our store.”

“So noted.”

“And I think you’re in for yet another battle royal with your kids over it.”

“I live for a good row with my kids,” Lincoln said with a grin that made his blue eyes twinkle with mirth.

“Don’t I know it,” Colton muttered. The latest row had involved the website designer Lincoln had hired behind the backs of his children, who’d made it clear they had no interest in taking their store online. Then Cameron Murphy had come to town and won the hearts of the entire Abbott family, especially Colton’s older brother Will, who was now madly in love and living with Cam as she designed the website for the store. Lincoln Abbott had a way of getting what he wanted, and Colton and his siblings had learned to be wary of their father’s motivations.

In this case, however, Colton couldn’t care less about his father’s motivations. Not when he was looking at a full week with his lady.

“Talk to Hunter about getting you registered,” Lincoln said, clearly pleased with Colton’s capitulation.

“I will.” Colton folded the flyer into a square, with the images on the inside, and stashed it in his pocket. “Since you now owe me a favor, I was wondering if I could use the lake house this weekend.” When his father gave him an oddly intuitive look, Colton added, “I feel like doing some fishing.”

Lincoln didn’t move or respond for a long, uncomfortable moment.

Colton had begun to sweat under the steely stare his father directed his way.

“Of course, son,” Lincoln finally said, withdrawing a set of keys from his top desk drawer and handing them over. “You remember the code, right?”

Since the code was his parents’ wedding anniversary and had been for as long as they’d owned the house, Colton nodded and stood. “Thanks.”

“Have a good time.”

“I will.”

“Are you taking the dogs with you?”

“I thought I would if that’s okay.”

As Lincoln Abbott was the biggest “dog person” Colton had ever known, he wasn’t surprised when his dad said, “Of course it is.”

Now as Colton drove to the lake with his dogs, Elmer and Sarah, asleep in the backseat, he pondered the odd look his father had given him when he asked to use the lake house and wondered what it had meant. He thought about the bizarre conversation with his older brother Hunter, who’d questioned what in the hell their father wanted with pleasure aids and sensual devices in the store, before he begrudgingly registered Colton

for the trade show that would take place in New York in two weeks.

Colton had merely shrugged and refused to engage in the war of words that would no doubt take place between his father, the CEO, and his brother, the CFO. Let them duke it out. No way was Colton going to get in the middle of their dispute when he'd been handed a free pass to a week in New York.

He couldn't wait to tell her the good news.

An hour later, he pulled up to the lake house that was one of his favorite places in the world. Made of timber and beam and glass and stone, the house sat on the shores of Lake Champlain, right outside Burlington. His parents had gotten a sweet deal on it about ten years ago when it was sold at auction after the previous owner defaulted on the mortgage. The Abbotts had enjoyed many a good time there in the ensuing years.

In fact, his older sister Hannah would marry her fiancé, Nolan, at the lake house in a few weeks.

The house was stuffy and hot from being closed up, so he walked straight through the massive living room to open the sliding door to let in the breeze coming from the lake. He never tired of that view of the lake with the mountains in the distance. Late on this Friday afternoon, a handful of Jet-Skiers and water-skiers were enjoying the warm sunshine and the all-too-short Vermont summer.

Relieved to be out of the truck after the long ride, Elmer and Sarah ran straight down to the private stretch of beach, where they frolicked in the water.

Colton smiled with pleasure and relief at being here, at having pulled off another escape from Butler and the Abbott family clutches, and at knowing he had four full days to spend at his favorite place with the woman who was quickly becoming his favorite person.

* * *

Three hours later, Colton had been to the grocery and liquor stores to stock up on necessary supplies, and he was beginning to worry.

While he waited, he made dinner—pasta with grilled vegetables, salad and bread, which was now keeping warm on the stove while he paced from one end of the big house to the other, filled with nervous energy.

When he got tired of pacing, he flopped onto the big sectional sofa that faced the two-story stone fireplace.

Sarah came over to give him a lick, which he rewarded with a pat to her soft blonde head.

“Thanks, girl. I know she'll be here soon, and you and your brother are going to love her.” If anyone knew how often he talked to his dogs, he'd be committed. But they were his only companions on the mountain, and he kept up a running dialogue with them during the long days and nights he spent completely alone with them.

For his entire adult life, he'd lived by himself on that mountain, happily content with his no-frills lifestyle. He was the only person he knew who lived without running water, electricity, TV, an Internet connection or any of the modern conveniences most people took for granted.

He'd lived that way since he was seventeen, fresh out of high school and anxious to take over the sugaring facility that had been in their family since his grandparents—the original Sarah and Elmer—had bought the place as newlyweds. His mother had hated the idea of him living up there alone when he was so young, but his dad had encouraged her to let him be, and he'd been there ever since.

Rather than pine for what he didn't have, Colton had preferred to focus on what he did have—a beautiful home in the midst of the majestic Green Mountains, two dogs whose devotion to him was boundless, a job he loved and was good at, a family he adored close enough to see at least once a week and a life that made sense to him.

Until lately.

For the first time in the nine years he'd spent on the mountain, what he didn't have had begun to bother him. For one thing, he wished he had a phone so he could talk to her every day. For another, a computer with an Internet connection would come in handy as he navigated a long-distance relationship.

He was twenty-six years old and forced to use his parents' phone to call her because he didn't own one of his own. That was one thing he planned to do something about soon. His mountain was one of the few places around Butler that had reliable cell service thanks to its clear proximity to the cell towers near St. Johnsbury.

But the rest of it, the electricity, the running water, the Internet connection . . . Those were things he needed to think about. He'd yet to bring her to his home on the mountain, mostly because he was afraid of what she might think of it. She was used to the city where she had everything she wanted or needed at her fingertips.

What did he have to offer someone who was accustomed to so much more when he didn't even have electricity or running water? What modern woman would find his lifestyle attractive? And was he willing to change everything about who and what he was for a woman he'd known for only a couple of months?

Unfortunately, he had no good answers to any of these questions, and the more time he spent with her, the more muddled his thinking became on all of them.

And then there was the fact that she was happy in her life, settled in her work and home, living close to her own family and not at all interested in uprooting her existence. He knew this because she'd told him so. But knowing that hadn't kept him from seeing her almost every weekend lately. It hadn't kept him from wanting more of her every time he had to leave her. It hadn't kept him from lying awake at night and wondering what she was doing and if she missed him between visits the way he missed her.

What if she didn't? What if she never gave him a thought from one weekend to the next? He had no way to know if she did or not because he didn't talk to her very often between visits. That had to change, and getting a cell phone would be the first thing he did after this weekend.

Maybe by then he'd have a better idea of how she really felt about him and what'd been happening between them. He had this niggling fear that for her it was just a fun interlude with someone different from the guys she normally dated, while for him it became something more involved every time he was with her.

He was determined to get some answers this weekend, to figure out what this thing between them was and where it was going. Then the doorbell rang and every thought that wasn't about her finally arriving fled from his brain as he sprinted for the door.

Yeah, he had it bad, and he had a feeling it was about to get a whole lot worse.

CHAPTER 2

Sugar season is an exercise in giving up control, starting with the weather. Above all, sugaring is a privilege.

—Colton Abbott's sugaring journal, February 17

Colton threw open the door and had to hold himself back from grabbing her and dragging her inside so he could kiss her senseless. He forced himself to show some restraint and act like a gentleman when his inner caveman was trying hard to break free.

“You made it.”

“Somehow.” Lucy Mulvaney’s tone was filled with aggravation as she pushed past him into the house, dragging a suitcase behind her.

As she went by, he relieved her of the shoulder bag that was so heavy he assumed it contained her laptop. She’d warned him she would have to do some work while she was there.

“The GPS took me the craziest way. I think I was on forty-seven different roads on the way up here.”

“Well, you made it, and that’s what matters.”

“Yes, it is,” she said with a warm smile for him.

As always when they were first reunited, he sensed her shyness and was grateful for the diversion of the dogs dancing around at their feet, waiting to be noticed by the new arrival. “Lucy, I want you to meet my best friends in the whole world, Sarah and Elmer. Sarah has the pink collar.”

She bent to give the dogs her full attention, which earned her tons of points in his dog-loving heart. “Hi, guys. Aren’t you beautiful? I’ve heard so much about you! Your daddy talks about you all the time.” She let them smell her and kiss her and Elmer even dropped to his back and gave her his belly to rub. Lucy did as directed, laughing at his shameless appeal for attention. “They’re adorable.”

“They’re spoiled rotten, but I love them.”

“This place is incredible.” She rose to take a good look at the house while Colton leaned against the counter and indulged in a long look at her until she brought her gaze back to him.

“Took you too long to get here.” He smiled and held out a hand to her.

She took his hand and let him draw her into his embrace. “You live too far away.”

During the five weekends they’d spent together, he’d learned to go slow at first, to ease her back into their relationship rather than going right to where they’d left off, the way he’d prefer. Haste wasn’t what she needed, and since he wanted her to keep coming back, he aimed to give her what she needed.

Colton couldn’t deny that the two steps forward, one step back approach to dating Lucy was sort of frustrating. He’d found someone he enjoyed being with, and for the first time in his adult life he was interested in a genuine relationship. But he wasn’t sure she wanted the same thing, thus his approach to following her lead when he’d much prefer to take charge and make things happen for them.

“Something smells good,” Lucy said after a long moment of silence as he held her.

“I made dinner.”

“I was talking about you,” she said, looking up at him with big blue eyes.

Without giving much thought to what he was about to do, he bent his head and kissed her. He knew a

moment of pure satisfaction—and relief—when her arms came up to curl around his neck and her mouth opened to welcome his tongue. They didn't normally get right to it like this, preferring to ease into the physical stuff after some food and conversation, but Colton wasn't about to complain.

Things had gotten pretty hot and heavy last weekend, and he was glad to know they might be able to pick up where they'd left off rather than taking the usual step backward. He loved how she felt in his arms, the way her soft curves pressed against him and the taste of her on his tongue. Framing her face with his hands, he focused entirely on the kiss, not touching her anywhere except for the tight press of his body against hers.

By the time they finally came up for air, Colton wanted to drag her to the nearest bedroom and see this through to the conclusion they'd been heading toward for weeks now. But again he chose restraint, afraid to scare her away by showing her how badly he wanted her. He kept his arms around her as he kissed her neck and made her shiver.

“What a long-ass week,” he whispered, breathing in the scent he'd become addicted to.

“Mmm. A very long week.”

“I couldn't wait to see you.” He'd never come right out and said that before, even though he'd certainly felt it.

“Me, too.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

Serving dinner gave him something else to focus on besides how it felt to kiss and hold her, how amazing she smelled, the way her shorts hugged her sexy ass and how great her hair looked.

“What happened to your curls?” he asked as he dished up the pasta, vegetables and bread while she opened the chilled bottle of chardonnay he'd gotten for her.

“They met a straightening iron.”

“I like it, but I like the curls, too.”

“I hate the curls. They make me look like a five-year-old.”

“Not to me they don't.”

Her cute smile exposed the dimples he'd come to adore. “You're racking up all kinds of points, Mr. Abbott. This pasta is amazing.”

“Don't be too impressed. It's about the extent of my culinary expertise.”

“I'm very impressed, and it's very good.”

“I'm glad you like it.”

Over dinner they talked about the week they'd had at work, and Lucy shared some more insight into what it had been like to run her web design company alone since her partner, Cameron, moved to Vermont to live

with Colton's brother Will.

"You know when you blow up a balloon and then let it go and it flies all over the place?"

Nodding, Colton refilled their wineglasses.

"That's me since Cam left. I'm all over the freaking place trying to plug all the holes with only ten fingers." She looked up at him, a faint blush occupying her cheeks. "And that's kind of a gross sentence."

Colton laughed. "Have you talked to Cam about it?"

She shook her head. "What would be the point? She's thrilled with her new life with Will. I'd never do anything to take away from her happiness. God knows, she deserves it."

"What about your happiness? Don't you deserve it, too?"

She propped her chin on her upturned fist and smiled at him. "I'm happy enough. Work is crazy, but we're in transition. I suppose that's to be expected."

"And here I am taking up all your weekends when you've got so much going on."

"The weekends are keeping me sane, so keep them coming."

"How would you feel about a whole week?"

She raised a brow in question.

He told her about the trade show and watched her eyes go wide with surprise and then laughter. "Your dad is seriously considering offering that stuff in the store?"

"I'm not really sure what he's up to, and once he said 'a week in New York' I didn't ask a lot of questions. Although now I'm wondering if I should've asked you before I committed. I know how busy you are."

She reached across the counter for his hand. "I'd love to have you in New York for a week. That'd be awesome."

Colton bent his head to kiss the hand she'd wrapped around his. "I'm glad you agree. I thought it sounded pretty damned good, too." He looked over at her and gave her hand a gentle tug, encouraging her to come closer. "You know what else sounds good right now?"

She stepped between his legs and flattened her hands on his chest. "What's that?"

"More of this." He kept his eyes open as he tipped his head and kissed her softly. "And some of this." More kisses to her neck. "And then there's this." He raised his hands from her hips to cup her breasts, running his thumbs over nipples that tightened in response.

Lucy sighed and relaxed against him.

"How does that sound?"

"Really good. Exceptionally good."

"I'm glad you agree." He kissed her again and withdrew from her reluctantly to deal with the dishes as

quickly as he could while she finished her wine.

“I can help, you know.”

“No need. I got it.”

“Good with his hands and good in the kitchen.”

Amused, he waggled his brows at her. “And you haven’t even seen the full extent of my bedroom work yet.”

Lucy’s face turned bright red, forcing her to turn away from him. She wandered to the windows that overlooked the lake.

Regretting that he’d embarrassed her, Colton wiped his hands on a dish towel and went over to her. When he wrapped his arms around her from behind and kissed her neck, he noticed how tense she seemed. “What’s wrong, Luce?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on. I made a joke and you went all tense on me. Talk to me.” He encouraged her to turn and face him and was shocked to see tears in her eyes. “Lucy . . . What’s wrong? I didn’t mean to upset you. I was only joking.”

“I know you were, and you didn’t upset me.”

“Then what is it? And don’t say it’s nothing when I can see it’s something.”

He could also see that she was trying to summon the courage to tell him, and watching her struggle made Colton ache.

“After last weekend, when things got kind of . . . heated . . .” She cleared her throat and looked away.

Hearing her describe the previous weekend as “heated” made him hard as he remembered the feel of her hand stroking him. Shaking his head, he willed those memories from his mind to focus on what was happening right now. “What about it?”

“I’m not very experienced at all of this, Colton. I know I should be at twenty-nine, but I’m not. I’ve had a few boyfriends and done some stuff, but I don’t really know a lot about, you know . . . Any of it.”

His mind raced as he tried to process what she was saying. “By ‘some stuff,’ does that mean you haven’t—”

“I have. A few times with less-than-stellar results.” Her face got even redder, if that was possible. She quickly added, “I’ve been really busy with my work and my family and friends. And I’m shy. Painfully, awkwardly shy. With guys.” She looked up at him, slaying him with the open, innocent look she gave him. “I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“Jesus,” he muttered as he pulled her in tight against him, not caring that she would immediately feel what her sweetness did to him. “You could never disappoint me.”

“Still . . . You probably know more than I do.”

“No one’s keeping score here, Luce. Least of all me. I told you before—we don’t have to do anything. If

you're not ready, you're not ready. I'm not going anywhere, and I'm not looking to pressure you."

"You haven't pressured me. You've been amazing and very patient."

He kissed her forehead and looked out at the lake as he held her. "I hate that you've been stressed out about this. You should've told me."

"It's embarrassing."

"It's endearing."

"It's embarrassing."

"Fine," he said, laughing. "Have it your way, but don't be embarrassed around me. I think you're amazing, and I love being with you."

"I love being with you, too, but . . ." She looked up at him. "Before this goes any further, I feel like I should say again that I'm not going to move, and I understand that you can't either. Just because Cameron did—"

"I get it. What worked for them won't necessarily work for us."

"I don't want anyone to get hurt here, Colton."

"Neither do I. Let's just have fun, like we have been, and not let it get too serious. Okay?"

"All right . . ."

"Why do I hear more questions in there?"

"I just wondered . . . If not getting serious means not getting serious." Her coy smile was positively adorable, and he couldn't refrain from smiling back at her.

"Doesn't that count as fun?"

"I suppose it could. It's never been particularly fun for me."

"Oh, honey, we need to fix that."

"Right now?" she asked hesitantly.

"Whenever you want."

"I'd love to take a shower."

"Follow me." He took her by the hand, picked up her bag and led her to the spacious master bedroom that was located down a short hallway from the kitchen.

"This house is so beautiful. I can see why you love it here."

"We all do. We've had some really fun times here. You'd be surprised how this big house starts to feel awfully small when all the Abbotts are in residence."

"That must be crazy."

“You can’t even imagine.”

“Isn’t this your parents’ room?”

“When they’re here, yeah. But they don’t care if the rest of us use it.” He went ahead of her and flipped on the lights in the bathroom.

“Oh, wow. Is that a hot tub?”

“Sure is. The window above it opens. It’s pretty cool. You want to check it out?”

“Only if you do, too.”

“You’re on.” Colton turned on the water and opened the window to let in the soft evening breeze off the lake. “Go ahead and get changed. I’ll be right back.”

He left her with a kiss and closed the door behind him as he left the room.

CHAPTER 3

After two days of below-20 temps and a nice rest for the crew, tapping resumed today. They tap only when the temp is above 20, to prevent splitting the tree in the brittle cold, and because tubing repair goes along so nicely without stiff hands and tubing. Another day or two and the sugarbush will be tapped out.

—Colton Abbott’s sugaring journal, February 19

After the door clicked shut, Lucy stood in the middle of the huge bathroom and took a moment to calm her frazzled nerves. Sometimes she still wanted to pinch herself because she’d captured the attention of a sweet, funny man who also happened to be so hot he made her blood boil.

When they were together, she tried not to think about the overwhelming issues that hung over their relationship. When they were apart, the issues were all she thought about, especially after last weekend when things had taken a decidedly erotic turn.

All week, those memories had run through her mind when she was trying to concentrate at work, when she was with her friends and family, when she was trying to sleep at night while wishing he was sleeping with her.

From the beginning, she’d told him she had no interest in getting serious with someone who lived in another state. And yet here she was with him for yet another weekend—the sixth she’d spent alone with him. As she looked for the bikini he’d told her to bring for swimming in the lake, she realized her palms were sweaty and her heart was beating fast at the thought of what might transpire between them this weekend.

So much for not getting serious.

“Ugh,” she said as she quickly got changed, folded her clothes and stashed them in her bag.

More than anything, Lucy wished she could call her best friend and hash it all out with Cameron, but at the beginning, she and Colton had agreed to keep their “friendship” private for the time being. As the weeks went by, the big “secret” seemed to grow and take on a life of its own until telling Cameron would also mean confessing to having kept something rather huge from her friend for all this time.

She and Cam didn't keep things from each other, especially not potentially life-changing things such as what was beginning to look an awful lot like a legitimate relationship with the brother of her best friend's boyfriend. Lucy sighed, pained by how complicated something supposedly uncomplicated was getting.

"More sighs," Colton said when he came into the bathroom wearing a pair of board shorts that left his incredibly muscular chest, shoulders, arms and belly bare to her hungry gaze. He'd told her before the muscles had resulted from the endless need for split wood to run the sugaring facility. Images of him wielding an axe had fueled many a fantasy since he'd mentioned that.

"You weren't supposed to hear that sigh." She glanced up at his ruggedly handsome face to discover a gaze as hungry as hers taking in the sight of her in a bikini, which naturally made her flush from head to toe. She hated her fair complexion and how it gave away her every thought and emotion.

Thankfully, he chose not to ask about the sigh he'd overheard, preferring to take her hand and lead her into the hot tub.

As she eased into the warm water that circled around her, Lucy sighed for a different reason—pure pleasure. "This feels fantastic."

The steam from the tub made his golden-brown hair curl at the ends. She'd thought he was sexy as hell with the longer hair and furry beard. When she'd expressed an interest in knowing what he looked like without the beard, he'd shaved it off and revealed a stunningly gorgeous face that she never tired of looking at. Looks aside, however, she was even more attracted to his sweetness, irreverent humor and undeniable charm.

"Seriously fantastic," he said of the warm water and pulsating jets. "I've spent all week splitting wood, and I'm sore as hell."

"How can you be sore when you do so much of that?"

"I overdid it the last few days so I could take some time off."

She realized he'd done that so he could spend more time with her. "I don't want you to get hurt on my behalf."

"I didn't get hurt, and it was well worth the extra hours so I could relax this weekend and stay on schedule, too." He glanced at her, the picture of innocence. "But I wouldn't say no to a massage of my aching muscles."

She rolled her eyes. "A little transparent much?"

Now he batted his long eyelashes, which made him even harder to resist. "I'm a hard-working guy looking for some TLC from his lady."

"Actually, you're a schemer trying to get my hands on you."

"And that's different how, exactly?"

"Come over here."

"Oh yay!" He was like a delighted little boy who'd gotten his way, which made him downright irresistible.

She'd found him difficult to resist from the very beginning. He'd walked into the conference room at his

family's store the day Cameron was presenting the first cut of the website they'd done for the store, and Lucy had noticed him immediately. She'd never been drawn to the rugged-brawny type until she'd taken one look at Colton Abbott, and all her girl parts stood up to take notice, which had never happened before.

Then his parents invited her to join them for dinner, and he'd tagged along. Her fascination had only grown over dinner at the Abbotts' favorite Italian restaurant, where Colton had eaten enough for two grown men. She'd begun to wonder over dinner what he'd look like under the beard that hid what appeared to be an exceptionally handsome face. She hadn't been wrong about that.

"What're you thinking about?" he asked as he settled between her legs and leaned back against her, sighing with pleasure as she began to knead his shoulder muscles.

"The day we met."

"What about it?"

"I wondered what you'd look like without the beard."

"As I recall, you said as much to me a couple of weeks later, and I ended up shaving it off."

"After you went out to get a pair of hedge clippers."

His laughter echoed through the spacious bathroom. "For your information, they were not hedge clippers. And P.S., that was a critical mistake in our attempt to keep our 'friendship' a secret. Everyone was suspicious after I got rid of the beard I've had since high school."

"I'm not sorry. I was right about what was under all that hair."

"Oh do tell. What was under there?"

"An exceptionally handsome face."

"I was quite surprised by that myself. I hadn't seen it in years."

Laughing, Lucy poked him in the ribs. "You're so full of yourself."

"Hey, Luce?"

"Yeah?" she asked, immediately unnerved by the serious way he said her name.

"Tell me again why we thought it was such a great idea to keep this a big secret from everyone."

"You know why."

"Tell me anyway. I keep forgetting."

"Since I don't believe that for a minute, are you asking me because you want to change our status?"

He ran his hand back and forth through the water, sending waves across the wide tub. "Maybe."

Lucy swallowed hard. "We kept it a secret because we didn't want everyone involved in it. And because Cameron and Will had just gotten together, and we didn't want to steal their spotlight."

“Will and Cameron have been together for months now.”

“I know.”

“So how long are we going to continue to sneak around? I can’t even remember anymore why we’re doing that.”

“Because,” Lucy said, feeling more anxious by the second. “We’re just having fun. We aren’t like them, so we don’t need to involve everyone. It’s just us, and we like it that way.” After a long pause, she said, “Don’t we?”

“Sure.” He linked their fingers under the water and turned to face her, floating in front of her. “Well, no. I don’t think I like it that way. Not anymore.”

“Colton—”

“Hear me out, honey.”

He made her feel swoony when he called her that.

“I’ll admit that I’ve enjoyed the fact that everyone in my life wants to know what I’m up to and who I’m up to it with, but underneath it all, I’m not much of a mystery man. I’m more of a what-you-see-is-what-you-get sort of guy. And I want to share this, what we have together, with the people I love. I want to bring you to my home on the mountain, to my parents’ home for Sunday dinner, to my siblings’ homes. I want you to come to my sister’s wedding with me. I want us to be a real couple.”

Lucy was taken by surprise when she realized how badly she wanted all the things he wanted. Except none of it was feasible. “We agreed. At the beginning. We set rules.”

“Screw the rules, Lucy. That was back when we thought we might hang out for a while and it wouldn’t go anywhere. Six weekends later, it’s gone somewhere, and I want it to continue to go places. Don’t you?”

“Where can it go?” she asked softly.

“I don’t know. But don’t you want to find out?”

“I don’t know. I’m afraid.”

“What’re you afraid of?”

He looked up at her with clear blue eyes and an open, honest expression that made it easier for her to confess her fears. “Of getting in too deep and not being able to get out. Of getting hurt.”

“Aw, Lucy. I’m not asking for a lifetime commitment.” He brought her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss over her knuckles. “I’d just like to be able to tell my family about you.”

She bit her lip as she thought about that. “If you tell your family, I’d have to tell Cameron.”

“And that would be bad?”

“No. Of course it wouldn’t. I’m just . . . I don’t think I’m ready to go public.” She couldn’t bear the disappointment she saw on his face. “That doesn’t mean I’ll never be ready. I’m just not there yet. Is that

okay?"

"Sure. Whatever you want. Are you starting to get wrinkly?"

"A little."

"Let's get out of here and move on to the next part of tonight's program."

"There's a program?"

"Damn straight there is. Next up is ice cream in bed."

"Oh, I like ice cream in bed."

"Excellent." He helped her out of the tub, kissed her nose and then her lips and wrapped a towel around her. "I'll bring it in."

When he left the room, Lucy let out a deep breath and leaned her hands on the countertop, trying to get her emotions under control. She'd never in her life felt as much for any guy as she did for him. And it had been immediate. She couldn't deny that, as much as she'd tried. That immediate attraction was what had her spending six weekends with him. She didn't do things like that, well . . . ever.

Lucy Mulvaney didn't do serious. It wasn't in her DNA. Or it never had been until Colton Abbott walked into a conference room and put her DNA into a blender and mixed it all up. The result had been someone all new, someone she barely recognized, someone who drove six hours to spend four days with a guy she couldn't stop thinking about between visits. And now he wanted to go public. He wanted to tell people about them. He wanted to change their status.

As long as no one knew, Lucy could delude herself into believing that what was happening between them wasn't serious. It was a weekend fling. If people knew, then it wouldn't be just a fling anymore. It would be a thing. And Lucy didn't do things. She dated. Here and there. She'd had more first dates than anyone she knew. Her friends teased her about her first-date track record, which Lucy embraced. It kept her from having to deal with things she didn't seem equipped to handle the way other women did.

Sometimes she thought there was something missing in her because she didn't want the same things most people did. She didn't dream of the big white wedding, the house in the burbs, the kids, the dogs. She couldn't picture that life for herself no matter how hard she tried. Work made sense to her, or it had until Cameron left and everything changed.

Now nothing made sense, and she found herself floundering at work like a ship that'd come loose from its anchor, not to mention she was embroiled in a thing with Colton Abbott, who lived six hours from her.

How had she let that happen?

"I thought you were going to meet me in bed," Colton said from the doorway, where he stood holding a pint of Ben & Jerry's and a spoon and wearing a smile that made her want to give him anything he wanted. That smile was one of many reasons she was embroiled in the thing.

"What kind is that?"

"Coffee Toffee."

“My favorite.”

“I know. You told me.” He scooped a spoonful and offered it to her.

Lucy put the towel on the counter and went to him. He’d changed out of the wet bathing suit into basketball shorts that clung to his narrow hips. He sure was beautiful to look at. Placing her hands on his chest, she opened her mouth to let him feed her a bite. As the flavor of the ice cream exploded on her tongue, she couldn’t look away from him.

He leaned in to kiss her, his cold lips sending a shiver through her that had more to do with heat than it did with cold. “Why don’t you get out of that wet suit and come help me eat the rest of this?”

“Okay.”

Kissing her again, he said, “You’d better hurry up. I can eat a pint of Ben & Jerry’s in about five minutes by myself.”

“You’d better not eat it all!”

“Then you’d better put a move on.” He closed the door as he left the bathroom.

After having witnessed how quickly he could consume anything edible, Lucy rushed to change. A fierce debate ran through her mind as she decided whether she should go for sexy or casual, which reminded her once again that she was simply no good at these things. She felt like a bull in the relationship china shop, second-guessing her every move. It was exhausting trying to figure out this increasingly complicated situation, and she was making it worse by dithering over what to freaking wear to bed.

It’s not like she hadn’t slept with him before. They’d slept next to each other every night they’d spent together since the day they met. But somehow tonight felt different. Tonight felt more important, and if she took this next step with him, she understood that she’d probably be committing to much more than a night of what promised to be amazing sex.

She grabbed the tank and boxers she slept in at home and shoved the sexier, slinkier option to the bottom of the bag. That had been bought in an impulsive moment on her lunch hour the week before, but it would send the wrong message.

No, the message she wanted to send was fun and temporary. This was not going to get serious. Not on her watch.

CHAPTER 4

Only 370 taps to go. Lucky for the crew, it was too cold today, so they took to their skis.

—Colton Abbott’s sugaring journal, February 21

Propped on a pile of pillows, Colton watched her come out of the bathroom. Everything about her was tentative and hesitant. He was disappointed in her reaction to his suggestion that they take their relationship public, but he knew if he pushed her, he’d end up pushing her away. Since that was the last thing he wanted, he decided to use his friends Ben and Jerry to smooth things over.

He scooped out another spoonful and held it out her. “Supplies are getting low. Better get over here and get

yours before it's gone." She didn't need to know he'd bought three pints of her favorite flavor to get them through the weekend.

She crawled onto the bed and made a beeline for the ice cream.

Colton fed her a bite and took another for himself as she settled into the pillows next to him. He let his gaze take a leisurely trip from her toenails, which were painted purple, up smooth legs and a flat belly to breasts that were unencumbered under the tank that molded to her body. Remembering the sweet taste of her nipples had Colton shifting to hide his immediate reaction to her nearness.

Another bad thing about the long-distance relationship, he'd discovered, was too much time in between to think and reconsider and replay what'd happened the last time, which meant they had to start from scratch again every time they reunited.

The stopping and starting could give a guy whiplash if he let it. As much as that frustrated him, he was determined to be patient with her. The last thing he wanted was for her to say she couldn't do this anymore.

He was dying to talk to someone about how he felt about her. Under normal circumstances, he'd seek out one of his older brothers—probably Will. Hunter was more closed off and remote. Will was always more accessible, and he'd have good advice to give, having recently gone through a similar situation with Cameron. But because he'd promised Lucy not to tell anyone, especially Will, that they were seeing each other, he'd kept his mouth shut and respected her wishes.

He would continue to do so for as long as she felt it was necessary, but he hoped it wouldn't be much longer.

"That is so good," she said after most of the ice cream had been consumed. "One of my favorite treats." She turned her head to face him. "Thank you."

Colton placed the empty container and spoon on the bedside table. "My pleasure."

She continued to look at him as if she were making a major decision of some sort. In that moment, he'd give anything to be able to read her mind. After she stared at him for a full minute, he said, "What?"

"I like to look at you."

"I like when you look at me." His suggestive tone made her flush from head to toe, which she'd told him she hated. He quite liked it. "Why are you way over there when I'm way over here?" In truth there was only a foot between them, but that was far too much space for what he had in mind.

She scooted closer to him, and he met her halfway.

"Hey," he said when her lips were only an inch away from his.

"Hey."

"What's up?"

"I don't know," she said with a nervous laugh. "What's up with you?"

"You really want to know?"

"Um, I don't know. Do I?"

“I think you do. I think you really want to know, and you really want to be here with me this way, but you need to give yourself permission to stop worrying about what happens next and just enjoy right now. Can you do that?”

“I can try.”

“Then I’ll show you what’s up.” He cupped her shoulder, slid his fingers down her arm and wrapped his hand around hers. Once he had a firm grip on her hand, he placed it over the erection that pulsed between them.

Lucy gasped at his audacity but didn’t withdraw her hand. Instead she pressed against him and made his eyes roll back in his head. “Where did that come from?”

“You did that.”

“How did I do it?”

“You walked in here looking all sorts of hot and adorable.”

She tried to pull her hand back, but he held her in place with his hand on top of hers.

“Don’t. Don’t pull away from me.”

“I’m not hot, Colton. I don’t know why you’d say that.”

“Are you serious? You’ve got your hand on the evidence to the contrary, babe.” He curled his legs around hers, pulling her even closer to him. “You’re extremely hot.”

“I’m cute. I’ll give you that.”

“That, too. But please don’t tell me there’s something wrong with my eyes or anything equally ridiculous. I think you’re hot, and clearly I’m hot for you.” He moved his hand from on top of hers and put his arm around her. “Do you know when the last time I spent an entire weekend with a woman was? Before I met you, I mean.”

She shook her head.

“Never. I’ve never done this because I never wanted to spend that much time alone with anyone.”

“Colton—”

He had no idea what she planned to say because he never gave her the chance to say it. A week’s worth of desire and frustration poured forth in a kiss that only made him want her more than he already did, if that was possible. He didn’t want to hear any more about why this was a bad idea or how it had the potential to be a disaster.

No, all he wanted right then was to show her all the reasons it was an excellent idea—possibly the best idea he’d ever had.

She opened her mouth to his tongue and teased him with hers, which only fueled the fire that burned inside him. As he kissed her, he worked a hand under her top and cupped her breast, pinching her nipple between his fingers.

“Colton,” she said as she broke the kiss and arched into his embrace.

He pulled her top up and over her head, revealing the plump, full breasts that had starred in all his fantasies over the last week. Kissing his way from her lips to her neck to her nipples, he told himself to go slow, to be patient, to give her time to catch up.

But he’d gone slow. He’d been patient. He’d given her weeks to catch up. He drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked hard, loving the way her body molded to his and her fingers grasped his hair in a tight grip. Colton never would’ve described himself as a breast man before he caught sight of Lucy Mulvaney’s gorgeous breasts last weekend, and now they were all he could think about. He’d always been more of a leg and ass guy, but she’d changed him in more ways than one.

Speaking of her pert ass and smooth legs . . . He cupped a supple cheek and squeezed, making her squirm and moan. “I want you, Lucy. I’ve wanted you since the first time I saw you standing there next to Cameron in our conference room.”

“I’m afraid that we keep getting in deeper.” Realizing what she’d said, she squeezed his lips together before he could make a predictable comment. However, even the tight pinch of her fingers couldn’t keep the smile from occupying the rest of his face. “You are such a little boy.”

He nibbled her fingers until she let go. “That is not true, and I can prove it.”

“Yes, it really is true,” she said with a sigh.

“I hear what you’re saying, Luce, and I get it. Believe me, I do, and I’m worried about a lot of the same things you are. But I absolutely refuse to ruin today by worrying about what might happen tomorrow or the next day.” He met her gaze and kissed her softly. “After I lost my twenty-eight-year-old brother-in-law, I promised myself I’d honor his memory by living my life to the absolute fullest extent possible. No regrets, no worries, no fears. That’s what I’ve tried to do ever since.”

Colton brushed his lips over her knuckles. “He was two years older than I am now when he died. This was all he got, and he had so much more to give.” He closed his eyes when the sadness threatened to derail him. When he’d gotten himself together, he opened them and looked directly at her. “I’m not trying to be dramatic or anything. But that changed me. It changed all of us. It made me realize this is all we’ve got. Right now. Today. And right now, today, I want to make love with you because that’s almost all I’ve thought about since the first time I kissed you.”

Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. “The first time you kissed me was the night we met.”

He shrugged. “That’s how long I’ve wanted you.” Why mince words? At this point, either she was in this thing or she wasn’t, but he was no longer interested in hiding how he felt about her. Under his watchful gaze, she processed what he’d said, all the while looking at him with those big blue eyes that gave away her every emotion. Did she think he couldn’t see how badly she wanted the same thing he did? Now it was only a matter of whether she would give herself permission to take what she wanted.

“I won’t hurt you, Luce. As long as you’re mine, I’ll take good care of whatever you choose to give me.”

A big tear rolled down her cheek, and he brushed it away. She caressed his face, and her touch electrified him the way it always did. “You are extremely irresistible, but of course you already know that.”

“No one has ever said that to me before, so I didn’t know. Not until you told me.” He held his breath, waiting

to see what she would do next.

She flattened her hand on his chest and leaned in to kiss him, her lips soft but persuasive. Then the tip of her tongue began to trace the outline of his mouth, and he had to hold himself back from the need to absolutely devour her.

“Lucy,” he said in a strangled tone. “Tell me what you want.”

“You. I want you, as much as you want me.”

“And the rest of it?”

“I suppose we’ll figure it out. Eventually.”

As his mental traffic light switched from caution to green, he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her in tight against him. He nearly forgot how to breathe when her breasts pressed against his chest. Because he didn’t want to miss a thing, he kept his eyes open and focused on her as he lost himself in a deep, sensual kiss full of passion and promise.

He could feel her capitulation, her surrender to the inevitable pull they’d experienced from the first day they met. They’d been drawn to each other before they’d even been properly introduced, and had been heading for this moment ever since. Now that she’d confessed to wanting the same things he did, he was determined to make it unforgettable for her.

With that in mind, he broke the kiss and moved his attention to her neck and throat, nibbling and kissing her soft skin while breathing in the fragrance he’d come to know as hers. It wasn’t perfume or soap or anything easily identified. It was her, uniquely her.

“Relax, honey.” He left a trail of kisses along her collarbone. “Just relax and let me love you.”

Her arms curled over her head as she released a deep breath.

Sensing her complete surrender made him harder than he’d ever been in his life, but he refused to rush. Not after they’d waited so long to get here. He worshiped each breast with his lips and mouth and teeth while she writhed under him, arching against him until he was cross-eyed with lust. But still he didn’t rush. Rather, he took his time and didn’t move farther down until each nipple was standing at attention and her entire body was trembling in response to him.

Her belly quaked under his lips and her legs shook as he removed her shorts, leaving her covered only in a scrap of see-through lace. He bit his lip to keep from groaning out loud when his own needs threatened to trump hers. But this time was all about her, and he wanted to make sure her faith in him was amply rewarded.

With his palms flat against her knees, he encouraged her to open to him.

Her movements were tentative and almost uncertain.

Colton looked up to find her watching him intently. “Let me in, honey.” His voice sounded rough, even to his own ears. He moved his hands from her knees to her inner thighs, hoping he was encouraging her as he went.

She reached for him, but he shook his head. If she touched him now, he’d lose his composure.

“Hands above your head. Grab the slats if you need something to hold on to.”

“I want to hold on to you.”

“You can. Later.”

Lucy did as he asked, wrapping her hands around the wooden slats in the headboard. Her trust overwhelmed him and fired his desire to give her everything.

He ran his hands over her incredibly soft skin as he continued to ease her legs farther apart.

“Colton,” she whispered, lifting her hips off the bed.

“Hmm?”

“You’re making me nuts, and you know it.”

“Now how could I possibly know that?” He smiled as he replaced his hands with his lips, kissing from her right knee, up her thigh and stopping at the place where her leg met her body.

“Colton!”

“Is this what you want?” He pressed his mouth against her core, tonguing her through the lace that covered her.

“Yes! God, yes. There. Don’t stop.”

He kept up the steady pressure of his tongue, while watching the full-body blush that he’d grown to love so much color her soft pale skin. More than anything, he loved that he could do that to her. When he was certain she was past the point of paying attention, he pushed her panties aside and resumed his efforts with nothing between his tongue and her pleasure. They’d never done this before, and the flavor of her on his tongue was like the sweetest honey he’d ever tasted. One taste, and he was already addicted.

She screamed from the new sensations.

He slid two fingers into her and sucked on the heart of her desire, tripping her release, which was about the sexiest thing he’d ever experienced. How in the world could she say she wasn’t hot?

While she came down from the release, he removed her panties, leaving her completely naked before him for the first time. The hair that covered her mound was a darker shade of red than the hair on her head. When she saw him taking a greedy look at her, she tried to cover herself.

He took her hands and pinned them to the mattress next to her hips. “Don’t hide from me. I love looking at you.”

“Colton,” she whispered. “I want to touch you.”

“In a minute.” He bent to kiss her belly. “Do we need protection?”

She shook her head. “I’m on long-term birth control.”

“I had a physical a month ago. I’m clean, and I can prove it if you want me to.”

“I believe you.” She tugged her hands free from his hold and held out her arms to him.

He took a second to remove his shorts before he stretched out on top of her. “God, you feel so good, Luce. Nothing has ever felt this good.”

“For me either. I had no idea it could be like this.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet,” he said with a grin, hoping to get rid of the line of tension that had formed between her brows.

She smiled up at him. “Show me what you’ve got.”

Never one to back away from a challenge, he took himself in hand and pressed into her, slowing when she gasped. “Does it hurt?”

“No. I’m just . . . sensitive. And it’s been a while. A long while.”

“Mmm,” he said, his lips pressed against her neck. “We’ll have to take it slow then.” Taking it slow would surely kill him, but he’d do it for her.

“Not too slow, I hope.” To make her point, she lifted her hips, taking more of him. “God, you’re big all over, aren’t you?”

That made him laugh, which caused his control to falter, leading to a stronger thrust than he’d intended.

She gasped again and pressed her fingertips into the muscles on his back. Other women had done that, but never before had such an insignificant thing set off an almost electrical current of desire in him. Everything about this—about her—was different and had been from the beginning.

“Luce,” he said on a long deep breath. “I can’t . . .”

“What?”

“I can’t hold back anymore.”

“Don’t. Don’t hold back.”

When he heard the desire in her voice, something inside him snapped, shredding what was left of his control. As it was happening, he knew in the back of his mind that he might regret later that he had failed to be gentle, that he’d failed to show restraint or finesse, but in the moment, he could only take and take and take what she gave so willingly.

Her legs curled around his back, her arms encircled his neck and her tongue tangled with his as she took him somewhere he’d never been before. Her shout of pleasure finished him off, and he collapsed into her embrace in a trembling mass of limbs and sweat.

Jesus, he thought. What the hell just happened? As the haze of desire lifted, he winced at how rough he’d been with her. He was almost afraid to look at her for fear of seeing shock or horror. Marshaling the courage, he raised his head off her chest and looked down to find her eyes closed and her lips curved into a satisfied little smile. She didn’t look the slightest bit shocked or horrified.

“Are you okay?” he asked. His throat was dry, and his lips were sore.

She kept her eyes closed. “Mmm. Hmmm.”

“Sorry . . . I was rough. I didn’t mean to be.”

Her arm encircled his neck, drawing him into a kiss. “You were amazing.” She kissed him again. “I get it now.”

“What do you get?”

Lucy opened her eyes and looked up at him. “If that’s how it is for Cameron with Will, I get now why she ditched her whole life to be with him.”

Colton curled up his lip with disgust. “I don’t want to talk about how it is for Cameron with Will, if you don’t mind.”

She laughed until she had tears in her eyes, which made her tighten around his hardening cock.

“You know,” he said as he rolled her earlobe between his teeth, “we might need to do it again, just to make sure that wasn’t a one-off.”

“I think we owe it to ourselves to find out.”

“I really do like how you think.”

CHAPTER 5

Overcast, temps just above freezing. No sap. Worked on main lines, setting up the vacuum pump and scouring sap tanks with wet snow.

—Colton Abbott’s sugaring journal, February 24

Waking early on Saturday morning, Will Abbott took advantage of the opportunity to watch Cameron sleep. Since she was almost always awake before him, he rarely had the chance to study her in all her gorgeousness without her knowing he was looking.

He focused on the dark circles that had formed under her eyes as she worked long, grueling hours on the website for the store all the while helping Hannah with her plan to turn her home into a bed-and-breakfast for women who’d lost spouses to war. On top of all of that, Hannah had asked Cameron to be a bridesmaid in her wedding to Nolan later this summer.

Unable to resist touching her, Will stroked her fine blonde hair and let the silky strands slide through his fingers. In the weeks that she’d been living with him in his cabin in the woods, she’d also taken to life among the Abbotts like a bee to the sweetest of honey. She’d flitted from one family obligation to another until his parents and siblings were almost as in love with her as he was.

The bruised circles under her eyes told the true story though. She was wearing herself out. He hadn’t yet asked what she had planned for the weekend, but inevitably she would work for much of it.

She needed some time away from the computer, and he needed some time completely alone with her. The idea took root as he watched her sleep. He got out of bed slowly so he wouldn’t wake her. After letting the dogs out, he filled their bowls with food and then headed for the shower. By the time he was dressed, the

dogs were scratching at the door to get in. He wrote Cameron a note to let her know he'd gone to do a quick errand but would be right back and left it on his pillow so she'd see it the minute she woke up.

Will whispered to the dogs to take care of Cameron and he'd be right back. Sensing they weren't invited to join him, Trevor and Tanner went to the bedroom and got in bed with Cam.

He drove his truck into town and across the one-lane covered bridge that led to his parents' home on Hells Peak Road. They still lived in the converted red barn in which they'd raised ten children, who loved to tell outsiders they'd been raised in a barn. His brother Landon liked to add that their upbringing explained their bad behavior. Except none of them were all that badly behaved. Their parents wouldn't have stood for it then, and they certainly wouldn't stand for it now that all ten of their children were adults.

Even Max, the youngest of them, was now officially an adult and had the first Abbott grandchild on the way. Months after hearing that Max and his girlfriend, Chloe, were expecting a baby together, Will was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that the youngest of them would be the first to become a parent.

They'd all expected Hannah to be the first parent as she'd married Caleb right after college. But they'd yet to have children when Caleb died six years later in Iraq. The rest of them were late bloomers in the marriage and family department. Since he'd met Cameron, Will had begun to think more about the next steps for them. As eager as he was to spend forever with her, they weren't in any rush. Still, it was on his mind.

Will entered the mudroom at his parents' house and was greeted by their yellow labs, George the third and Ringo the third, named for members of his father's favorite band of all time.

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