

SENSUAL ROMANCE SERIES

A photograph of a man and a woman embracing in bed. The man is on the left, shirtless, with his arms around the woman. The woman is on the right, wearing a white top, with her arms around the man. They are lying on a white sheet. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white.

White
SNOWBOUND

Anna J. McIntyre

While Snowbound

By Anna J. McIntyre

WHILE SNOWBOUND

Snowbound with the famous rocker might be her best friend's fantasy, but it isn't Ella's. Nor is she impressed with the fact Brady Gates was voted sexiest man of the year – twice. Ella was looking forward to the isolation of her mountain cabin and the peace and quiet she needs to finish writing her book. Rescuing the careless celebrity in the midst of a blizzard and taking him to the safety of her remote cabin was not how she intended to spend her time on the mountain.

Weary of love struck fans climbing into his bed uninvited and the ever present paparazzi, Brady Gates had planned to take an incognito break from his hectic life and spend several weeks alone at a remote mountain cabin.

Finding himself stranded in a blizzard doesn't bother him half as much as the fact the one woman he wants is the one woman who is the least interested in him.

SENSUAL ROMANCE SERIES

After Sundown

While Snowbound

Sugar Rush

THE COULSON SERIES

Coulson's Wife

Coulson's Crucible

Coulson's Lessons

Coulson's Secret

Coulson's Reckoning

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

~~To Elizabeth, for always being my champion. This adventure wouldn't be half as much fun without you by my side. Thank you for the never ending support, beautiful covers that capture the spirit of my stories and for being the best daughter a mother could ever hope for. You make me proud every day.~~

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Chapter One

“GET THAT WOMAN OUT OF MY BED!” BRADY GATES SHOUTED.

Those who knew him and heard the command understood he was pissed. Discovering a nude and shapely blonde sprawled provocatively atop the sheets in his hotel suite did not make Brady happy. The uninvited guest had pulled down the top coverlet of the freshly made bed before climbing in and waiting for his arrival.

Brady’s displeasure did not deter her. Leaning back on the pile of pillows along the headboard she parted her thighs slightly, giving him a clear view of what she offered. Sliding her right hand down her inner thigh, her smile wavered, perplexed at his reaction.

Brady had entered his hotel suite alone, leaving his entourage lingering in the hallway, still engaged in some debate over a recent sports game. Since the band and crew were occupying the entire floor of the hotel, there was no reason to be overly concerned about disturbing other hotel guests.

After entering the suite, he went straight through the living area to the bedroom, en route to the bathroom. Upon entering he left the door leading to the hallway ajar. Brady never shared a hotel room with other members of his band or crew, yet his main bodyguard and personal assistant, Kevin Jones, always stayed in the adjoining room.

How she managed to get into the private hotel suite could be explained by the silly grin now plastered on the bellboy, who was too busy thinking of the recent hand job the hot blonde stranger had given him to focus on the real possibility that he might lose his job over his recent indiscretion.

Her intent was clear. She, like countless women before her, wanted to have sex with the famous rock star. It didn’t matter to her that she had never met Brady Gates, or that they had never exchanged any correspondence. She had every confidence that once Brady found her willing and ready, he would climb on top and give her a ride to remember. After all, she had placed first in several local beauty contests, and just last week, won a hundred bucks in a wet T-shirt contest at her favorite pub.

Kevin, who was still standing in the hallway talking to several band members, responded immediately. After shouting, Brady stepped back into the living area of the suite and watched dispassionately as Kevin and several of the other bodyguards rushed past him and into the bedroom area. While pulling the intruder from the bed, one of the bodyguards ripped the top sheet from the mattress and tossed it around the woman before hauling her from the room.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” she screeched, no longer the coy and accommodating creature who’d been lounging uninvited on the musician’s bed just moments earlier. Brady calmly picked up the telephone in his hotel suite and called downstairs to hotel management as he watched the men evict his uninvited guest. He suspected by the time they reached the elevator they would be greeted by

hotel security.

When Kevin first started working for Brady Gates three years earlier, he had wondered briefly if the rock star was gay. After all, why else would a healthy, heterosexual male have a problem with beautiful women showing up in his dressing room or hotel suite? Of course, not all the women were gorgeous. He had to admit some looked well used, and with those, he understood his employer's objection. Wisely, he chose not to question Brady, especially considering the job paid extremely well. After a few months, Kevin understood the problem: even a seemingly good thing gets tedious and annoying if excessive.

It became especially sensitive when the overly amorous groupie was underage. This was one reason Brady chose to be surrounded by his trusted entourage, giving any wayward teen little chance to be alone in a compromising situation with the famous star. Brady was determined to avoid the trap of a calculating bitch looking for an opportunity to exploit him for financial gain.

Since obtaining fame, Brady Gates had never engaged in sex with groupies. He frequently enjoyed the company of A-list socialites and stars. His only rule regarding sex—he chose his partners and they weren't random strangers who showed up in his bed or dressing room.

Just twenty-eight years of age, Brady Gates was used to having any woman he wanted. While he never pursued married women, he was confident in his ability to easily bring one into his bed, if that were his desire.

He had never been naïve and was fully aware of the dangers of unprotected sex and sex with multiple partners, so he was discrete, and always wore a condom. Unlike many of his fellow rockers, Brady never experimented with drugs, and while he enjoyed beer, he rarely became intoxicated. His state of constant sobriety prevented him from waking up in some stranger's bed.

Kevin found Brady sitting at the bar in the living room section of the rock star's hotel suite when he returned fifteen minutes later. Brady hadn't changed his clothes and was still wearing black denims with a black silk, long-sleeved shirt tucked into the belted waistband of his tight-fitting pants. He'd kicked off his shoes and socks and sat on a barstool, drinking a bottle of imported beer as he rested his elbows casually against the marble bar top.

Brady was obviously agitated. Unruly fans were a common annoyance, and typically, he brushed off the inconvenience and let his employees handle the situation. The uninvited nude blonde was not the primary source of his dark mood; it was just the incident that sent him over the edge.

"They're sending up housekeeping to change the sheets," Kevin explained as he grabbed a beer from the courtesy bar and sat at the barstool next to his employer.

Brady just nodded in response to the clean sheets. He didn't ask where the rest of the crew were, assuming they had all gone back to their own rooms. He didn't ask what happened to the nude girl. He didn't care.

"I can't work like this, Kev," Brady said, downing the last of his beer. "I need to focus on my

writing, and I can't do that when groupies keep showing up in my bed."

"You want to change hotels?"

"Why? We'll just have the same problem. And no offense, but I want some space. I need to be alone."

"And who'll drag the women from your bed?" Kevin was only half-teasing.

"I need to get away for a while. Alone. But not sure how to do that anymore. I need to find a nice, quiet place, where I can think, work on some songs, and not have to deal with all this bullshit." Brady set his empty bottle on the bar top. Exasperated, he combed his fingers through his dark hair.

The two men sat in silence for a few minutes, each pondering Brady's current dilemma and how it might be resolved.

During the past five years, Brady had been living a nomadic life, moving from one luxury hotel suite to another with his band and crew. He'd considered purchasing a house, so he would have someplace to go when he wanted to be alone, like now. Yet, he never seemed to find the time to shop for real estate or employ a suitable Realtor.

"I've an idea. How about you hide out for a few weeks at a nice, remote mountain cabin. Of course, you'll have to cook for yourself, and you won't have maid service, but I imagine you'd be willing to sacrifice that in exchange for some privacy."

"Where, exactly, do I find such a cabin without tipping off the paparazzi?" Brady stood up and walked around the bar to grab another beer from the small refrigerator.

"I've a cousin who rents out cabins up in Shipley Mountain. There's no snow skiing up there, so renters tend to be summer visitors who take advantage of the lake. During the winter, the lake freezes over and they close up the rentals. But I'm sure she'll agree to rent you one."

"Can we trust her to keep quiet?"

"Yes," Kevin assured him, but decided not to mention that his cousin was a fan and would probably be as goofy as some of Brady's groupies if she wasn't already happily married and six months pregnant. "Of course, you'll need to take a four-wheel drive up there. I don't think they have snow yet, but being November, it can come at any time. You can use my Jeep, if you want."

"I guess the crew can camp out here for a few more days, let people think I'm still at the hotel. Go ahead and make arrangements, but let's keep this between you and me. I'd prefer the crew not know where I'm going, and if possible, I'd like them to assume I'm still here."

"I don't think that'll be a problem. How long do you want me to rent the cabin?"

"I'd like it for the rest of the month. I don't know if I'll stay that long. That gives us December to work on the new songs for the New Year's concert."

"You want to stay through Thanksgiving? Alone?"

"Thanksgiving's just another day for me. Plus, this will give the crew the chance to get home for

the holiday. Let me think about it, how I want to handle this. You go call your cousin, and I'll figure out what to say to everyone."

• • •

"Oh, my gawd! Brady Gates... at one of our cabins!" Amanda fairly squealed into the phone. She closed her eyes and envisioned the famous rock star. Last year, Kevin had given her concert tickets but she was disappointed when he wasn't able to introduce her to Gates.

Brady Gates was not only one of the hottest commodities in the rock world; he had been voted the sexiest man of the year—*twice*. She once asked her cousin if Brady wore tinted contact lenses, since his eyes were such a striking shade of sapphire blue. Kevin only responded with, "Don't be lame. They're just blue eyes." It left her wondering if the photographs of Brady were tinted to bring out the extraordinary color, which would account for her cousin's comment that they were *just blue eyes*. Maybe they were, in person. But since she had never seen him up close, she had no way of knowing.

He was about her cousin's height, standing just under six feet, and appeared very athletic and fit, as if he worked out on a regular basis. She imagined all that dancing around on stage kept him fit. He wasn't scrawny, but neither did he have a bulky physique.

"Well, not if anyone's standing with you in your office and just heard that outburst." Kevin said with mild disgust as he shook his head. Alone in his hotel room, he looked out the window as he spoke to his cousin on the cell phone.

"No, no, I'm alone. But can I tell Chad, please?"

"Do you always tell your husband details about your tenants?"

"No, you know he isn't involved with the rental business."

"Then please, Mandy, this once, don't say anything to Chad until December. Or we won't rent the cabin."

"Gee, you don't trust Chad?" Amanda asked with a pout.

"It's not a matter of trust. But you tell Chad, then he mentions it to someone he thinks he can trust to keep a secret—and then that person does the same, and the next thing we know, we have paparazzi and horny groupies crawling all over the mountain."

"You know, they're predicting snow this week. I imagine it will keep the paparazzi at bay."

"Trust me, cuz, not when Brady Gates is the target. Come on, do we have a deal? Will you rent me a cabin and keep it secret? You can tell the world in December. Of course, if Brady likes the cabin, he might return next winter, if his secret retreat remains a secret."

"Oh, that would be so cool!" Amanda said excitedly. "Yes, Kevin, I promise. I won't say anything to Chad. I'll give you the Cooper Cabin. Unlike some of my owners who use their cabins

during the holidays, I know the Coopers aren't able to come up this winter and will be thrilled to have a renter. They don't have to know who I rented it to. But I'll need to get up there and check on the firewood, and give the cabin a good cleaning."

"If you're going up there anyway, can I get you to stock the place with supplies, groceries?"

"Sure, no problem. I'll even put fresh sheets on the bed and wash the towels, so they aren't a musty."

"You do that for all your guests?" Kevin asked with a laugh.

"No, but we are talking about Brady Gates! Normally, tenants are responsible for putting their own sheets on the bed, and washing linens and towels."

"I'll send you a grocery list, and some money to cover the expenses. Can you get everything done by Friday?"

"No problem. I'll have the cabin in order for your boss before the weekend."

• • •

Kevin's build was similar to the rock star, making it easy for him to purchase clothes for Brady's mountain trip. When asked why he was buying all the winter gear, Kevin fabricated a tale about a Christmas ski trip. Instead of taking the packages directly to Brady, he brought them to his own room and used the interior adjoining door to enter his boss' suite.

Just twenty-four hours had passed since dragging the naked woman from Brady's hotel suite and already Kevin had booked the cabin and purchased clothes for his employer. Brady was anxious to be on his way. The idea of spending the rest of the month at an isolated mountain cabin was very appealing. He could not remember the last time he had been alone, without some bodyguard, roadie or groupie underfoot.

That evening, Brady met with his road crew to make the announcement.

"I need to focus on my writing, and I'm having a difficult time doing it with all the distractions. I need to finish before December if we're going to introduce the songs at the New Year concert." Brady explained. "I don't want to be disturbed. Kevin will be bringing me meals over the next few weeks. I don't want any of you to freak if I don't leave my room for the rest of the month. All I ask is that you keep the damn groupies away from me, and help Kevin do his job. I see no reason why most of you can't take some time off now and visit your families. Kevin has already agreed to help me out, so you guys coordinate this with him. Since I plan to stay close to my room, I don't see security as a significant issue."

Chapter Two

“I have to tell you a secret, or I’m going to burst!” Amanda said excitedly the moment Ella Lewis walked into the rental office.

“Well, we wouldn’t want you to burst. That would be messy.” Ella chuckled. She gave her friend a welcoming hug after closing the door behind her, shutting out the frigid November day. The two friends stood in the middle of the office as Amanda hopped up and down excitedly, reminding Ella of a child who needed to visit the bathroom. Considering Amanda’s state of pregnancy, it was entirely possible that was the reason for her hopping about.

The rental office was situated at the base of Shipley Mountain in the quaint village with the same name. It was a traditional log cabin, not a pre-fab structure, and well over fifty years old. Braided throw rugs covered its wood floors, and a raging fire in the stone fireplace along the far wall provided heat. Although it was clean and dust free, it had never been updated or refurbished. The office furniture consisted of an oak roll top desk - a reproduction - and three oak file cabinets pushed along one wall, also reproductions. A vintage brass coat rack stood near the door, and a couch faced the fireplace.

“But you must promise not to tell anyone!” Amanda insisted, still hopping a bit. Ella pulled off her gloves and stuffed them in her coat pocket. She then removed the coat and hung it on the brass rack before turning to face her friend.

“You know, the best way to keep a secret is to not share it,” Ella reminded Amanda, her eyes twinkling. She knew full well Amanda would probably burst if she refused to listen.

“I can’t tell Chad, but I will absolutely die if I don’t tell someone! And I know I can trust you. You never tell secrets!”

“You’re keeping something from Chad? My, this is starting to sound interesting,” Ella said as she sat on the small couch, enjoying the warmth emanating from the fireplace. Instead of joining her friend on the sofa, Amanda stood before the fireplace and faced Ella. Both young women were dressed similarly, clad in denims, boots, and bulky pullover sweaters. Amanda’s prominent baby bump pushed out the front of her sweater.

Amanda’s hazel eyes swept over her friend’s face. Ella’s clear complexion was slightly flushed from the brisk November air, and it looked as if the only makeup she wore was a light pink gloss on her full lips. Blessed with naturally dark and curly lashes, there was no reason for Ella to wear mascara. Her hair fell just past her shoulders and flipped up at the ends. Naturally mousy brown, she had added blonde highlights that complimented her complexion. While she didn’t use an eyebrow pencil, her beautician shaped her brows, so they arched gracefully over her large blue-green eyes.

“I promised my cousin I wouldn’t tell Chad. Actually, I’m not supposed to tell anyone.” Amanda admitted, no longer hopping about excitedly.

“Okay, I won’t tell anyone,” Ella vowed, waiting to hear what her friend had to say.

“I’ve rented out one of the cabins for the rest of November.”

“I sure hope it isn’t mine! You knew I was coming to pick up the keys.” Ella frowned. “I didn’t think you normally did winter rentals.”

“No, it isn’t yours. I’ve rented out the Cooper Cabin. I already cleared it with them.”

“Then why do you say it’s some secret? Obviously the Coopers know.”

“The secret isn’t that I rented a cabin for November, but who I rented it to!”

“Okay, who is the renter?”

“Brady Gates!” Amanda excitedly exclaimed, then remained quiet, waiting for her friend’s reaction. Instead of showing any emotion, Ella just frowned.

“Brady Gates? Am I supposed to know who that is?”

“Oh, come on Ella, Brady Gates! You have to know who that is!” Amanda stomped one foot impatiently, waiting for her friend to show a proper response. Ella thought a moment and then shook her head.

“Sorry, I haven’t a clue.”

“Aw, come on Ella, everyone on this planet knows who Brady Gates is! He was voted sexiest man of the year! Twice!”

Ella shook her head. “Sorry, I never pay attention to that kinda stuff. Is he an actor or something?”

“No, he’s a rock star. A very hot rock star,” Amanda explained, staring dreamily into blank space.

“Is that anyway for a pregnant woman to behave?” Ella teased. Amanda just giggled and patted her extended belly.

“Oh, come on Ella, you have to know who he is.” Amanda began singing one of Brady’s songs, selecting one that was currently at the top of the charts. While a bit off key, Ella immediately recognized the tune.

“Oh, him. I hate his music,” Ella said, interrupting the song.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Sorry, hard rock is not my thing. You know that. I’m a country girl. But if it makes you feel any better, if you asked me to name my favorite country singers, I’d have a difficult time recalling who sang what. I never remember names. I just know what I like when I hear it.”

“I still can’t believe you didn’t know who he is. How can you be a writer and not know about this stuff?”

“What does writing historical romance have to do with knowing the names of current celebrities? They’re just people, Amanda. So why the big secret about this Brady guy renting one of the cabins?”

“According to my cousin, he needs to get away from his fans and the paparazzi. I can’t let anyone know he’s going to be up there, because I can’t risk someone bothering him. He’s continually hounded by women.”

“That poor guy!” Ella laughed sarcastically, and then added with sincerity, “Well your secret is safe with me. How about those cabin keys now?” Ella stood up.

“What happen to your set? Did you lose them again?”

“I just put them in a very safe place. Exactly where, I can’t recall.”

“Are you really going to your cabin this time of the year?”

“Hey, if it’s good enough for your rock star, why not me?”

“Seriously, Ella, I hear they’re expecting a big storm.”

“Well, maybe you should worry more about your rock star renter than me. I know these mountains. Anyway, I need to finish my book and I keep letting the distractions get in the way. Without any Internet or television, I won’t wander away from my manuscript.”

“When are you planning to head up there?” Amanda asked as she walked over to her desk and started rummaging through a box of keys.

“I’ll be heading up in the morning.”

“I haven’t rented your cabin since September; that was the last time I had it cleaned.” Amanda found the set of keys she was looking for, and handed them to Ella.

“Remember, I was up there last month; it’s fine. In fact, I suspect I may have left my set of keys sitting on the kitchen counter, now that I think about it.”

“It’s too bad your cabin isn’t closer to the Coopers’; then you could check out Brady Gates and tell me how he looks in person.”

“Aren’t you going to meet him?”

“No. Remember, my cousin Kevin works for him.”

“Now that you mention it, I think I remember you telling me that before.”

“That was the concert I went to last year.”

“That’s right. So is Kevin picking up the keys for him?”

“No, Kevin instructed me to leave the keys under a rock outside the front door of the cabin. Brady is driving directly to the cabin, and when he leaves, he’ll leave the key where he found it. I went up yesterday and stocked the pantry and refrigerator with enough supplies for three weeks. There was already firewood, so that wasn’t an issue.”

“I didn’t know you did the full concierge service thing.” Ella tucked the cabin keys in her purse

“Ha, ha,” Amanda said dryly. “Brady Gates is special.”

“I guess he is!” Ella laughed. “Do me a favor and don’t share your secret with anyone else. This guy is as famous as you seem to think, the last thing I want is a bunch of stalkers crawling all over the mountain hunting for your guy. I’m looking forward to quiet.”

“How long are you planning to stay?”

“Through November,” Ella explained as she removed her jacket from the brass coat rack and slipped it on.

“You won’t be home for Thanksgiving?”

“I consider the cabin home. Anyway, Mom and Dad are spending the holiday with my sister in California. I intend to make myself a nice Cornish game hen, in lieu of a turkey.”

“Can’t you stick around? Maybe we could grab lunch.”

“I’d love to, but I need to pick up my groceries and finish packing. I imagine when I see you again in a few weeks that tummy of yours will be ready to pop!” Ella patted her friend’s belly.

“Oh, I have another three months,” Amanda groaned.

“Any other renters up on the mountain?” Ella asked as she reached for the doorknob.

“No. I imagine some of the owners might go up to their cabins for Thanksgiving, but none have called me yet to let me know—except you.”

The two old friends chatted a few minutes longer before saying their goodbyes. Ella opened the door to the cabin office and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Greeted with a gust of frigid cold air, she hastily removed her gloves from the coat pocket and slipped them on her hands.

A few moments later, she climbed into her Suburban and headed for home. It was a forty-five-minute drive from the village at Shipley Mountain to her condominium in Canyon City. It was one of the few condominiums in the area that allowed dogs the size of her Sam, who weighed in around sixty pounds. While Australian shepherds are normally high energy, Sam was her special needs dog that was unable to jump on the bed or into the Suburban without assistance.

Instead of going directly to her condominium to pack, she stopped at the grocery store. She considered briefly doing her shopping in the morning, before heading to the cabin, but didn’t want to leave Sam alone in the car while in the store. Before leaving that day, she’d tossed several ice chests in the back of the Suburban, to hold the food that needed refrigeration.

She was annoyed with herself for misplacing the cabin keys, forcing her to take the trip up to the rental office to pick up a spare. She and Amanda had grown up together, and both their families owned cabins on Shipley Mountain. After Amanda married, she and her husband moved up to the village of Shipley, where Amanda’s husband worked for the local fire department. Amanda got her real estate license and eventually started a vacation rental business, catering to summer visitors. Many of the cabin owners took advantage of the opportunity to earn a little additional income from their vacation

homes.

Ella forgot the rule about never shopping when hungry, so she ended up purchasing far more groceries than were necessary for just one person. She stocked up on all her favorite holiday foods and indulged in the gourmet food section. It wasn't until she was loading the groceries from the shopping cart to the back of the Suburban that she began to question the wisdom of her purchase. She filled the ice chests with perishables, and placed the other items in the back of the car. She wondered briefly where she would put her luggage and Sam, yet wasn't overly concerned, considering the size of the vehicle.

When she returned to her condominium the first order of business was taking Sam for a walk. She intended to leave the groceries in her car, as the evenings had been in the low forties and the perishables were on ice. Sam was happy to see her mistress, and as was her custom, she didn't jump on Ella, but pushed the woman's denim covered thighs with a wet nose and gave little nibbles while letting out a howl or two, scolding Ella for being gone so long.

Ella gave Sam's furry back a rough brushing with her hand, and grabbed the leash from a hook by the front door. After slipping the collar around the dog's neck, the two stepped outside to take a walk.

When they returned twenty minutes later, Ella fed Sam and then made herself a sandwich before packing for her trip. She no longer left personal items at the cabin, since it was periodically used as a rental. Long ago, she made a packing list for the cabin, which she always referred to when going for a visit.

One item on the list was *portable typewriter*, and another, *typing paper*. When going to the cabin to write, Ella always took along an old portable typewriter and typing paper. The typewriter once belonged to her grandfather. So far, she had never had to use them at the cabin. But she wanted to be prepared, just in case the electricity went out and she couldn't use her laptop.

In her bathroom, she gathered up the items that she needed to pack. One was her packet of birth control pills. She held the package in her hand briefly and looked at it with a frown. In some ways, she thought it was foolish to keep taking the pill, as it had been almost a month since she'd broken up with her boyfriend, and she hadn't had sex since then.

"What I need more than these are my vibrator," Ella said aloud and let out a dry, sardonic laugh. Unlike many of her friends, she had never indulged in casual sex. As a precaution she grabbed a box of tampons. She knew she wouldn't need them as she just finished her period and the pill kept her regular, but she figured it wouldn't hurt to take them along.

When she finished packing she took a shower and slipped on her robe. Sitting on her living room couch with Sam by her feet on the floor, she grabbed her laptop from the coffee table. Balancing the computer on her lap, she turned it on.

Remembering what Amanda had said about the rock star, Ella decided to Google Brady Gate

curious to see if she would recognize him. A few clicks later, Ella landed on Brady's Wikipedia page. She stared at his picture, and wrinkled her nose a bit.

In the photograph, he was shirtless and wore white and black makeup on his chest and face. His features, contorted in an unattractive snarl and he held an electric guitar in his hands. The picture was obviously taken at a concert. Ella cringed at the sight.

"Yuck," she said aloud. Curious about the man, she did a second search, this one for images of Brady Gates. She scrolled through the photographs.

Ella conceded that without the unattractive makeup he was a handsome guy. The color of his eyes was quite startling, causing Ella to linger a bit over one picture. By the number of photographs of Brady with different women on his arm, he was obviously a player. While she was never good at remembering the names of movie stars, she recognized a number of notable female celebs, each holding possessively onto his arm.

According to his bio, he had never been married, and from what she could see, he didn't have a steady girlfriend. Yet, by the photographs, it was obvious he enjoyed an active social life.

"Oh, you poor baby," Ella said sarcastically when she recalled what Amanda had said about Brady needing to get away. "All those demanding women must really put a toll on you!" She laughed again and then closed the webpage, surfing to other topics that she found more interesting. Celebrity fodder never held Ella's interest for long. She found it all very boring.

Chapter Three

Brady failed to notice the Suburban waiting to pull up to the fuel pump when he stepped on the gas and cut the larger vehicle off. He heard the screech of tires and the horn honk that followed. Glancing up into the rearview mirror he saw the angry face of the other driver. Instead of feeling guilty, he was relieved she hadn't run into Kevin's Jeep. He wasn't concerned over hurting someone else's property—he could easily pay for that—but an accident would bring unwanted attention to himself and possibly interfere with his plans.

Brady shrugged disinterestedly over the near collision. In his youth he'd been a reckless driver and during the last five years, he had driven rarely, usually leaving that task to an employee. Silently he reminded himself to be more careful; he wanted to reach the cabin without incident.

He'd left the hotel about six hours earlier at 2 a.m. The night before, Kevin had filled up the gas tank and put Brady's luggage in the car. In the back of the Jeep Kevin added a case of wine and a case of imported beer. Brady didn't ask for the booze, but Kevin couldn't imagine going to a remote cabin without it.

One of Kevin's purchases was a blond wig, similar in style and color to his own hair. Brady had used the adjoining door to enter Kevin's room. He slipped on the wig, a pair of sunglasses and the clothes Kevin had been wearing a few hours earlier. Exiting through Kevin's hotel room door, he hastily made his way to the parking garage, careful to avoid getting too close to anyone Kevin knew. If someone saw him from afar, they would assume Brady was the assistant. Brady didn't stop to consider that someone might think it odd he was wearing sunglasses at two in the morning.

The wig and sunglasses had been removed when he was safely away from the hotel. He'd been on the desolate highway for several hours, passing just a few vehicles. According to the map, it was less than an hour to Shipley, and from there, another ten or fifteen minutes to the cabin. He had just pulled into Canyon City, and according to the map, it was the last town he'd be going through until reaching the mountain village.

Turning the ignition off, he slipped the sunglasses back on and glanced up into the rearview mirror and noticed the Suburban was parked behind him, waiting for a turn at the pump. He didn't see the driver; she had obviously gotten out of the car.

Without giving her a second thought, Brady opened the car door and exited the vehicle. According to the sign on the pump he needed to go into the gas station and pay the teller before he could pump the gas. Shutting the car door behind him, he turned abruptly and ran into the driver of the Suburban.

The two stood silently in the parking lot for a brief moment. Brady inwardly groaned, certain

this woman would recognize him and start making a scene. He was in no mood for another adoring fan. He hoped the sunglasses would help conceal his identity.

Instead of the accolades he expected, the woman shot him a look of disgust and mumbled something under her breath before walking around him and making her way to the minimart section of the gas station.

Did she just call me an ass? Brady silently asked himself. He frowned and followed her into the building. They were the only two people in the station, save for the teller, who was an elderly man sitting on a stool behind the counter, reading a newspaper. The man glanced up briefly, and then went back to reading.

The woman didn't go immediately to the teller, but went to the self-serve refreshment section and poured herself a hot cup of coffee. *That's a good idea.* Brady thought. He could use some caffeine.

Instead of paying for his gas, he walked toward the woman. She glanced up and he again waited for her to recognize him. Had the station been full of people, he would have avoided her attention, but since they were virtually alone, he thought it would be amusing to watch her recognize him and witness her blush of embarrassment for calling him an ass. He imagined she'd be offering to pour him coffee while making up some lame excuse for her earlier comment.

Ella glanced up and watched the man from the Jeep approach. She wondered briefly why he was practically smirking. It was obvious he wasn't contrite for cutting off the Suburban. He just stood there a moment, staring at her. She didn't know if he was trying to figure out what to say or was simply waiting for her to get out of his way. The notion occurred to Ella that he half expected her to hand him her cup of coffee. She told herself she should be grateful he wasn't shoving her out of his way or snatching the cup from her hand. Silently, Ella's gaze swept over the arrogant stranger and then she walked past him, without looking back or making a comment.

Brady frowned, then turned and watched her walk to the counter. He couldn't help but notice the sexy little sway of her cute backside, as she walked away from him. Smiling, Brady was confident that if he wanted, he could remove her denims with minimal effort. He had to admit she was attractive, in a wholesome, country girl kind of way. He typically dated high maintenance women, who photographed well. It had been years since he'd taken a casual fan to his bed. It was too bad he didn't have the time. Brady told himself as he filled a Styrofoam cup with hot coffee.

"Morning, Ed," Brady heard the woman say to the man reading the newspaper. She set her coffee cup on the counter and reached into her purse for her wallet.

"Hey, Ella, I didn't realize that was you. With my reading glasses on, anything beyond a couple feet is a blur. Have you finished your next bestseller?" Removing his reading glasses, Ed stood up. Still holding the glasses in one hand, he folded the newspaper he had been reading and tossed it on the stool.

"I'm working on it. My editor says if I get the manuscript to her by the first of December

might actually be out before Christmas.”

“I’ll be sure to let Carol know. She wanted me to tell you she loved the last one, by the way.”

“Glad to hear that, Ed. Tell her hi for me.” She handed Ed two twenty dollar bills. “I need for dollars’ worth.”

Ed gave her a little nod and wink, then watched her walk toward the exit and out the door before turning to Brady, who was now standing at the counter.

“She’s an author,” Ed announced to Brady after Ella left the building.

“Oh?” Brady glanced from Ed to the front door. He could see Ella through the glass pane walking toward her vehicle. Brady looked back at Ed. It was obvious the old man had no idea who she was. That didn’t particularly surprise Brady, considering the man’s age.

“Yep, she’s my wife’s favorite author. I haven’t read her books, mind you. She writes stuff that women like to read, you know, romance. But we’re pretty proud of our Ella. She’s our local celebrity.”

“I take it she’s from around here.” Brady asked, mildly curious.

“Sure is.” Ed said proudly.

“What did you say her name is?” Brady asked, wondering if he had heard of her.

“Ella Lewis. But she writes under another name, and I never can remember it.”

“Do you know who her publisher is?” Brady asked as he handed Ed money for the gas.

“Oh, she publishes her own stuff,” Ed explained.

“Really?” Brady smiled and glanced toward the door. Not long ago he’d met with a publisher regarding his biography. The two got into a discussion over the recent trend of wannabe writers who jumped into self-publishing. *Lazy, no talent hacks*, the publisher termed the upstarts. The man went on to say most independent authors made very little from their efforts, and Brady suspected this Ella was probably lucky to sell a few books to her friends. He couldn’t imagine she actually made a living writing romance novels without the assistance of an agent and real publisher.

Ella waited patiently for the man to return to the Jeep and get gas, so she could fill up the Suburban’s tank. If the second pump wasn’t out of order, she would have moved her car, but the pump had been out of order for over a week now.

She planned to stop at her favorite diner after getting gas to have breakfast before heading back to her condominium to pick up Sam. According to the morning weather report, a storm was moving in but she intended to be at the cabin by noon, and she hoped to miss the bad weather. She wasn’t overly concerned about reaching the cabin safely because her vehicle was four-wheel drive, and she wasn’t traveling in the dark.

Brady filled his tank and wondered briefly why the woman simply didn’t use the other gas pump. He didn’t notice the out of order sign. When he finished, he got back into the Jeep and drove off without looking back.

According to the map, there wasn't much but vacant highway from his current location to the village of Shipley. He should be there in less than an hour. Hungry, Brady decided to have a quick breakfast before getting back on the highway. Keeping his left hand on the steering wheel, he took a sip of his coffee, and then set the Styrofoam cup between his legs. He grabbed the blond wig from the passenger's seat and hastily fit it on his head.

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Ella noticed the Jeep the moment she pulled up to the diner. After parking the Suburban, she got out of her car, clicked the remote attached to her keychain to lock the vehicle, and walked to the diner's front door.

It was fairly busy, and the only empty booth was adjacent to a man with shaggy blond hair. She glanced around, didn't see the driver of the Jeep and suspected he was in the restroom. As she walked past the booth with the blond man, he turned and looked at her. He wore sunglasses. Her eyes widened slightly when she realized he was the man from the Jeep.

Without making a comment, she sat at an empty booth and hastily picked up the menu that was already on the table. Trying to hide behind the menu, she scooted down in her seat.

What is he, some kind of a nut? Ella asked herself, certain he'd recognized her from the gas station. *What kind of a man wears a silly blond wig?* When she glanced up over the menu, toward the table, she noticed he was staring at her. He immediately looked down at his menu.

She suddenly remembered Amanda discussing the rock star who rented the cabin and how he wanted to keep his stay a secret. *Could that be him?* Ella asked herself. She tried to remember what Brady Gates looked like. When it came to remembering faces, she had poor facial recognition skills. Setting the menu on the table, Ella reached into her purse and pulled out her iPhone.

As she went online to do a quick search for Brady Gate images, a waitress walked up to her table. Without setting down the phone, Ella gave the waitress her order and continued with the online search.

A few seconds later Ella had her answer. The man in the next booth was Brady Gates. Ella wasn't excited to discover the famous rock star was just a few feet away, but she was relieved he wasn't some serial killer that might run her off the road while she drove down the highway, and cut her into little pieces.

Ella smiled, put her phone back in her purse, and added cream to the coffee the waitress had just brought her.

Brady felt like an idiot sitting in the booth wearing the damn wig. While the waitress didn't seem to recognize him with the dark glasses and blond hair, it was obvious the woman from the gas station recognized him from earlier. So far, it didn't seem as if she knew his real identity. If she did

he imagined she would at least be asking for his autograph by now.

Getting another look at the woman, he had to admit she was attractive. He was half tempted to give her a tumble, yet considering she was some wannabe writer, he had no doubt she'd exploit the sexual encounter to get more readers. She might have a nice ass, and sexy eyes, but she wasn't worth the trouble.

Determined to get out of the diner before the woman came over and started pestering him, Brady wolfed down his breakfast and was heading out the door by the time the server brought Ella her food.

Ella chuckled to herself as she watched Brady throw money on the table and rush out the door to the Jeep. She looked out the window and watched him pull out of the parking lot. She could swear she saw him pull the silly blond wig from his head.

When Ella finished breakfast, she paid the server and headed back to her condominium to pick up Sam. She found her dog waiting patiently by the door, ready to leave. She gave her home a final inspection, making sure everything was turned off and windows and doors were all locked, which delayed her trip another fifteen minutes. She was surprised to find the sky much darker than it had been when she'd gone inside just minutes earlier.

Overhead heavy dark clouds replaced puffy white formations. No longer stationary, they drifted steadily as if someone was calling them together for some ominous purpose.

"Looks like that storm is coming, Sam," Ella said to her dog as she opened the back door of the vehicle. Sam jumped up and put her front paws along the floorboard behind the driver's seat. Ella reached down and picked up the dog's rear end, helping the canine get into the car. Ella gave Sam's rump an affectionate little pat before closing the door. Sam quickly moved onto the back seat and lay down.

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