



Did you hear Denae Archibald is coming back to town?"

James Carmichael stifled a groan. Why wouldn't his long-time friend let up trying to find him a date? The closer he got to thirty, the more determined she seemed. On the flip side, the closer he got to thirty, the less interested he was in her games.

"Everything looks good." Lauren Yanovich stripped off her gloves and looked up at him as she patted Snowball's flank.

"Uh..." Was Lauren talking about the horse... or Denae? It was never safe to assume, even though she was on the ranch checking on the expectant mare in the role of veterinarian. James tore his gaze from Lauren and stroked the filly's forelock. "Great. Glad to hear it."

“Denae is a sought-after editor now. Who knew, right? But she was always so good at everything she tried.” Lauren lathered up in the stable’s deep sink.

“I haven’t spent two minutes in the past decade wondering what happened to Denae.”

Lauren chuckled but didn’t look up. “That’s because you haven’t seen her lately. She’s drop dead gorgeous. She was even first runner-up at the Miss Snowflake contest over in Helena last Christmas.”

“I’m thrilled for her.” Hopefully, the bland way he said the words would hush Lauren up.

“You should be. She’s going to be renting the other half of my duplex from me starting April first—”

“Ah ha, an April Fool’s joke. Nice one, Lauren.”

She dried her hands on a scrap of old towel, glancing at James as she shook her head. “You’re not getting any younger.”

He shrugged. Didn’t he know it. Most guys probably dreaded the big three-oh but, for him, it presented an opportunity. A crossroads. His gut roiled at the thought. He should probably purchase shares in an antacid company, with the amount he was going through lately. Or at least buy them by the case. If only he could do something about the situation now, but it was bad timing. It was always a bad time with Lauren focused on matchmaking. He followed her outside, like a pup after a scent.

Lauren rested both arms on the corral rails and took a deep breath as she gazed toward the Bitterroots. "I always love coming out to the Flying Horseshoe. It's so peaceful."

"You say that like Saddle Springs is a big city," he teased. "When we're full up here in the summer, the ranch's population nearly rivals the town's." She was right, though. His parents' ranch lay tucked in the foothills of western Montana, rolling and picturesque with its small lake. Good thing they'd been able to repurpose the vast acres from working ranch to guest ranch after Dad's accident when James was in college. He'd quit, coming home to pitch in. Never regretted it for a minute. This was his home. His destiny.

"You know what I mean."

He braced beside her, allowing the sleeve of his denim shirt to brush against her navy coveralls. He couldn't feel her arm through all that fabric. Even less when she shifted slightly away.

"I get it." All of it. He stared up to where a few dark clouds shrouded the peaks. Snow again? It was never too late, not in the mountains. They'd even had a dusting in July that one year. Thankfully his best bud's outdoor wedding had gone off without a hitch last weekend.

That only reminded James of Lauren wearing a shapely calf-length turquoise dress, carrying a bouquet of sunny daffodils and white tulips down the grassy aisle. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her in a dress. Prom, maybe? At any rate, he hadn't been able to tear his eyes away.

Ask her out already, dude. His friend's voice rang in his memory.

James glanced at Lauren. Her short dark hair curled around her head, a sensible cut for a veterinarian. The coveralls were sensible, too. The jeans and baggy sweatshirts she usually wore probably fit the same label. When had the life of their high school class become *sensible*?

"There's a new waitress at the Branding Iron. Pretty with long blond hair."

Obviously there was no way Lauren would go out with James. She did everything to get rid of even his friendship. He scowled at her. "Yeah? Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you're—"

"Stop reminding me of my age."

She pulled back at the harshness in his voice. "Sorree. Just trying to help."

"Don't. Just don't."

"I thought you'd probably want to get married and have a batch of little cowpokes running around to keep your nephew company."

"Maybe someday."

She bit her lip. Her pretty, full lip. The one he craved to taste.

"Besides, what about you?" James trod on dangerous ground, now. He didn't actually want to push her away, but her matchmaking needed to stop. Like, yesterday.

"Me?" Lauren tossed her head. "Too busy. With the expansion of the Saddle View subdivision, we've got dozens

more horses in the area, many with inexperienced owners. Lots of calls out that way, to say nothing of the usual.”

He hated to see her overworked and tired. “Is Doc Torrington putting too much pressure on you? Maybe you guys should hire another vet.”

“No, we’re good. I’ve got nothing else to do with my time.”

“If you had more time, you could date.”

Lauren laughed. “Back around, are we?”

“Well, yeah. As you keep telling me, thirty’s coming. As I recall, we share a birthday.” Like he’d ever forgotten.

“Maybe we should have a party!” Her hazel eyes sparkled.

“A... what?”

“Surely you’ve heard of parties. Where a bunch of friends get together and have a good time, often to celebrate a special occasion?”

What he really had in mind was a private dinner for two where he offered his heart in completion of the pledge he’d made on their sixteenth birthday, just after Dillon Scarborough had broken up with her. She’d been crushed.

Good friends don’t let friends turn thirty... single.

They’d even high-fived on it.

Even then, he’d adored the ground she walked on. He’d never dreamed that thirteen-and-a-half years later, he might have the chance to redeem his pledge.

She'd probably turn him down. Laugh in his face. She didn't want to marry anyone. She constantly pushed him off on someone else. But, didn't a guy have to try?

Everything on the line.

He'd been working toward the final test of that motto forever.



IF HE ONLY KNEW.

Right. Lauren muffled a snort. If he did, he'd laugh his head off, and she couldn't bear that. Nope, her best bet was to carry on as she'd begun, trying to find James's perfect match. When he was safely married off, she could relax — yeah, sure — and focus on her work. She'd even teach his kids in Sunday School, no problem.

Okay, it would be a problem, but she'd do it anyway, because Saddle Springs was home, and she wasn't going anywhere. Neither, apparently, was he. Somebody needed to get married and put her out of her misery. Had to be him.

James's sister came around the corner of the stable, leading a black gelding. "Hey, Lauren."

Whew. Good diversion. "Hiya, Tori. Good-looking boy. He new here?"

Tori nodded. "His name is Coaldust. We just picked him up from a ranch over near Polson."

Lauren took in the gelding's conformation and bright eyes. "How old is he?"

"Five. Saddle broke with an easy gait. I think he'll be a favorite with guests this summer."

Coaldust tossed his head with a little whinny.

Lauren dug in her pocket for the apple chunk left over from Snowball and held it out to Coaldust. He eyed her as though to determine whether she was friend or foe before nipping it off her palm. She rubbed his velvety nose and crooned soft nothings to him as his ears twitched.

As fidgety as James shifting at her side. He was sure acting odd today... or was he? He'd slid into somewhat moody and unpredictable behavior over the past few months, or maybe even longer. They used to talk for hours, about anything and everything. Well, nearly. A girl needed her secrets. But things had changed, and she couldn't figure out why.

At first, Lauren had thought he'd fallen in love and was thus avoiding her. She'd braced herself for the introduction to his girlfriend and seeing his eyes light up for the other woman, but time went on, and it hadn't happened. It needed to happen, as much as she dreaded it. Once he'd moved on, she could, too. Right?

"...wouldn't that be fun?"

Lauren blinked, refocusing on Tori. "Um, sorry. Wool-gathering. What did you say?"

“Never mind,” James said quickly. “Bad idea.”

“I think it’s a great idea.” Tori pouted at her brother and turned back to Lauren. “I was thinking a few of us should get together for a weekend getaway before the summer rush begins. We could ride way back above the Flying Horseshoe and into the National Forest. Camp for a couple of days by the geothermal pool.” She elbowed Lauren. “I’ll share my tent with you.”

James’s face shuttered. “Too much going on.”

What on earth was he thinking? Lauren angled a look at him. “It was a ton of fun when we used to do it.” So many good memories from before he became owly.

He shrugged.

Men. Lauren turned to Tori. “Let me know what weekend you’re looking at, and I’ll see if I can book it off. Who all are you thinking of inviting?”

Tori glanced between them. “Well, us three, of course. We could ask Cheri and Kade. I think Sawyer Delgado is away on the rodeo circuit, but Trevor might be interested.”

Trevor would most likely cast a wet blanket on the trip, but that was no more than James was already doing. Who could be counted on for amusement? “Oh, I bet Denae Archibald would love to come. She’s moving back April first.”

James groaned.

“Nice. And maybe Carmen Haviland?” Tori tapped her jaw. “Possibly Garret Morrison.”

“Sounds like a fun group. Are you thinking of including the little ones? Cheri and Kade can probably get his mom to watch their kids, but I’m not sure whether Carmen can get away.”

“I can’t believe you’re talking as though this is a real thing.”

Tori jammed her elbow into her brother’s side. “Why not? I only got to go along that one time and then you guys quit doing it. Before that, I was just the little tagalong no one wanted.”

“We were all kids then.”

Lauren chuckled. “I’m pretty sure I’m not too old or out-of-shape to sit in the saddle for a few hours on a mountain trail. If *you* are...”

He scowled at her. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, woman.”

“Well, either you can handle trailriding, or you can’t.”

“It’s not about being horseback.”

She raised her eyebrows, not daring to read anything into his piercing glare. “Then what? I happen to know you can cook.”

“I have to say he’s out of practice.” Tori giggled.

He whooshed out a long breath and looked between them. “I just want to go on record as saying it’s a bad idea. Okay?” Then he strode away.

She dared watch his fine form until he disappeared into the end guest cabin he’d claimed for his own a couple of years ago, the scuffed boots, snug jeans, denim shirt stretched over

broad shoulders, and his dark cowboy hat etched in her memory along with all the other sightings.

“Man, he’s like a bear stumbling out of a leaky cave in the middle of winter,” Tori observed. “He’s been such a grouch for the past few months. Even worse since Kade and Cheri’s wedding. Wasn’t that dreamy?” She sighed. “Talk about a happy ending.”

“James is probably pining for a good love story of his own,” Lauren said lightly. “I was thinking he and Denae might hit it off, so your idea of a camping trip is great timing.”

Tori tilted her head and regarded Lauren. “Interesting thought. I’ve sometimes wondered why he hasn’t latched onto a gorgeous woman of his own. I mean, the grumpiness is off-putting, I’m sure, but he’s decently good-looking. If a kid sister is allowed to say so.”

“I’ve seen uglier. At least he doesn’t have a wart on his nose.” Lauren forced out a chuckle. “He probably just hasn’t met the right girl yet. When he does, he’ll move so quickly your head will spin.”

Tori giggled. “You’re probably right. So, what’s your work schedule like? How many weekends do you get off? Then I’ll start calling around to see who’s in, and we’ll go from there.”

Lauren pulled out her phone and opened the calendar app, sharing the info with Tori.

“Great. I’ll be in touch.” Tori thumbed over her shoulder toward James’s cabin. “And if Mr. Grumpy doesn’t want to come along, we can have a great time without him.”

“Yeah! We sure can.” Lauren slapped Tori’s raised palm. “I’d better get back to the clinic and see what other calls we’ve got. Keep me in the loop.”

“Will do.”

Lauren climbed into her Jeep Wrangler and shot one more glance at James’s cabin. A good time camping without him? Definitely not. There’d be a huge gap if he didn’t come. It wasn’t just his voice lifted around the campfire during the sing-along she’d miss. She’d miss his easy way in the forest, building a fire, helping everyone out with all the little things in camp, making everything run smoothly. She’d miss filling her eyes and mind with his handsome — if somewhat moody — face.

No. What she’d really miss was the chance to hook him up with Denaë.

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