



TREVOR DELGADO liked all these people just fine, but when those two women started looking at each other that way, it made a guy nervous. They were creating a talent show. That should definitely let him off the hook, since he had no talents.

He was still nervous, even though he was poised to shake his head. *Ready, set, no.*

Lauren Carmichael and Denae Archibald weren't up on the meaning of *no*. They just figured a guy probably didn't understand enough to say *yes*. Any objections could be overcome.

They were wrong, but he'd hold out.

Denae turned to Cheri. "Would you be interested in donating a painting?"

Trevor's sister-in-law, Cheri, rubbed her hands across her round belly. "Probably. So long as this little one is patient about his or her arrival."

"The event isn't until the end of May, so you've got lots of time." Lauren made a note on her tablet. "The baby's due in, what, ten weeks?"

"About that. May third."

Trevor tried to ignore his brother's arm slipping around Cheri's shoulder and tugging her close. Refused to notice the smile they shared. He was happy for Kade. Really, he was. The guy was such a sap it was hard not to cheer him on. He'd been in love with Cheri since they were teens, and they'd reunited a year ago. This baby would make three kids, rounding out his and hers with — finally — theirs. It had been a convoluted path to happily-ever-after.

He wasn't used to thinking in terms of that phrase, but Denae Archibald's re-entry into their group had expanded his vocabulary. Always more than willing to explain the ins and outs of character arcs and plot points from the romance novels she edited to anyone who would listen. Anyone who knew so much about romance ought to be happily married herself by now, but Denae was still on the manhunt.

Reason enough for Trevor to keep a low profile, not that she had designs on him. Like, who would? Of the three Delgado brothers, he was the eldest, the loner, the one too absorbed in riding the western Montana ranges to have a social life. He'd had a chance or two at relationships a few

years back, blown it, and was going to stay a bachelor until he died.

Denae beamed at Cheri, her whole face lit by that megawatt smile, as though her friend's pregnancy was her personal joy in life. Course, she was probably the happiest person Trevor knew, which about drove him crazy. Her natural beauty did, too. She was tall and model-thin, with gorgeous black hair that cropped across her forehead in thick bangs just above her dark, sparkly eyes.

Not that Trevor noticed her sparkle. It was simply that she was different from all the girls he'd grown up with, an unknown entity. One he clearly needed to keep an eye on lest she rope him into something he'd later regret.

"We have you and Garret down for music."

Trevor's head jerked before he could control it. Before he saw Denae looking pointedly at James. Whew.

The other guys exchanged a glance and a shrug. "Sure."

"A solo, Kade?"

Kade furrowed his brow. "I don't know. I haven't done any public singing in a long time."

Here it came. Trevor planted his feet deeper into the plush area rug in front of the leather sofa, trying to keep his knee from jiggling. What should he do with his hands? Why wasn't he holding a mug to give them something to do?

"Maybe with Trev." Lauren's voice. "Haven't heard you two sing together in years."

"No." There. He'd gotten the word out. Now he simply had to stick to it against a stampede of yearling calves.

Denae's long black hair swung as she turned to face him. "You sing?"

"No."

"You used to," countered Lauren.

"Not anymore."

Denae frowned. "How can you just stop?"

"He hit puberty in front of the congregation on a Sunday morning." Kade chuckled. "We were singing a duet — what was it, Trev, Rock of Ages? — and his voice went all over the place. Up, squeak, down, squeak. It was hilarious."

"It wasn't funny," Trevor ground out. "Not even a little bit."

"Oh, man, it was, too. You need to learn to laugh at yourself."

Not happening. He raised his eyebrows and looked between Denae and Lauren. "To make a long story short, I'm not participating in your talent show. I also don't build stuff—" he made a tumbling motion "—to donate to the auction. I'll come. I'll bid on things. I'll heckle the participants, especially if one of them is my kid brother. But I'm not performing."

"Well, thanks." Kade laughed. "Not sure I can handle being up front without my big bro." He turned to Denae. "I'll think about it and see if I come up with anything. How secular an event is this? I mean, would it be okay to do a Christian song?"

"I don't see why not. It's family-friendly, so there are strictures against foul language and the like, but no one on the council said anything about spiritual content."

Across the room, Garret picked at a piece of fluff from the area rug where he sat crosslegged. "How come you're on the arts council anyway, Denae? I didn't know you were an artist."

Trevor didn't know that, either. Plus, he rather liked someone else being in the hot seat for a moment. It sure beat being picked on for a cracking adolescent voice. Having a chance to watch Denae without anyone noticing was a great benefit.

His hands stilled on his thighs.

Really? No way. She was just an unknown entity. Nothing more. There might be plenty of room in his house, but there wasn't room in his heart or life for a woman. They were too unpredictable.

Look at Cheri. She'd run off a week before her wedding to Kade, leaving his brother heartbroken. Yeah, they'd eventually reunited, but not after a lot of pain. Watching his brother's despair had nearly killed Trevor.

Look at Lauren. She said she'd loved James since they were teens, but wasn't pushing him off on other women for years a strange way to show it? Yeah, okay, they'd finally admitted their mutual adoration and been married last Christmas, but was the decade of agony worth it?

Trevor didn't do pain. He didn't do does-she-love-me-or-not games. He'd dabbled in that one once, gotten burned, and learned his lesson. He wasn't stupid enough to blindly go back for more, even if it was a different woman dealing the cards this time.

Nope.

“—Amazing!” came Lauren’s voice. “Show them, Denae.”

Oh. He’d missed the announcement.

Denae glanced at him — why him? — and hesitated.

He forced out a casual grin. She didn’t affect him. He wouldn’t let her. “Sure. Show us.” Then he could clue into what he’d missed. A guy needed to know what his friends were up to.

She could be his friend. They hung out in the same crowd, after all. They were more Kade’s friends than his, typical of their entire lives when his little brother gathered friends like the Pied Piper, and Trevor tagged along. It had been easier than finding his own, with a mere eighteen months separating them. Only one grade apart in school.

Cheri stretched a hand toward Denae as though they could touch across the room. “Go ahead.”

“Yeah, Denae.” Garret nodded. “If you can do it at the talent show, there’s nothing to fear from us.”

Trevor narrowed his gaze at Garret. Was the ranchland newcomer sniffing around Denae? That would be good, right? Because Trevor wasn’t getting involved with anyone. Still, thinking ‘Go, Garret’ immediately morphed to ‘Go away, Garret.’

Yeah. This was going to be a problem.



Why didn't Trevor's face show anything?

Denae Archibald didn't let her gaze linger on the strong, silent oldest member of this group that had welcomed her in. She didn't need to stare at him to remember every plane of his angular face, every dip of the thick brows that shaded his dark eyes, the ever-present five o'clock shadow.

He was gorgeous enough to take her breath away, and he'd done so every time she'd seen him in the past ten months since she'd moved back to Saddle Springs where Dad had owned a ranch when she was a kid. She'd loved summers at Standing Rock, loved riding wild and free in the mountains, away from the bratty little half-brothers she got to leave behind at Mom's. Dad had sold that ranch to the Delgado family a few years ago and simply told Denae after the fact, as though it wouldn't matter that he'd ripped away her happy. He'd thought nothing of it, had no clue what the ranch meant to her.

Now Trevor Delgado lived alone in the sprawling ranch house she loved so much. She wasn't sure which was worse: imagining this particular man sprawled in front of one of the field rock fireplaces, or imagining the stately home with only one person in it.

Sometimes she thought he watched her in an interested sort of way but, if so, why didn't he make a move? She was a pure romantic, old-fashioned enough to think the guy should express interest first but, one of these days, she was going to take matters into her own hands and be what may.

Denae fumbled with her tablet until she found the portfolio she was looking for then handed it to Garret on her left without a word.

"Scroll through it," suggested Lauren. Lauren, who'd been with Denae through thick and thin since the move and even before.

Garret emitted a low whistle and glanced at Denae with an approving nod. "Nice work." He handed the tablet to Carmen, who handed it to Cheri, who handed it to Kade, who handed it to Trevor.

Denae held her breath. Would he see what she'd tried to capture in those photos? The essence of people's souls through their eyes, the beauty of each face, each body, even though not perfect by society's standards? What she wouldn't give to photograph Trevor. She'd shoot him outdoors, on his black gelding, that cowboy hat in place. She'd capture those dark, mysterious eyes.

The ones that looked at her now. Really looked at her, as though a piece of the photographer had found its way into the subjects and then into the viewer.

He dipped his head. "Definitely a talent." He passed the tablet to James's sister Tori who sat on the floor nearby, but his gaze returned to Denae.

She was caught. Couldn't avert her stare. All she could do was try to convey, somehow, that she was as aware of him as he seemed to be of her at that moment in time. *Ask me out, Trevor.* Could she beg that with her eyes without anyone else noticing?

He looked away, the connection severed.

"Do you do family sittings?" asked Cheri. "I've been after my in-laws to get new portraits done. We should update the Eaglecrest website, too."

Family sittings? Not usually, but if it meant getting Trevor in front of the lens, it might be worth it. "I'm sure we can work something out. Do you want to do it before or after the baby?"

Cheri's hand went to her belly. "I hadn't thought that far. Maybe after, when spring has come to the ranch and the apple trees are in blossom."

Kade caressed Cheri's shoulder. "We'll have to schedule around Sawyer if we're doing family photos."

Right, the youngest Delgado. The rodeo cowboy who was rarely home. A guy who risked life and limb for an instant of glory held no interest for Denae. Not when there were men like Trevor, who worked hard every day, regardless of the weather, regardless of the praise, regardless of the loneliness.

Because a person couldn't spend so much time alone without being lonely, right? Denae would go nuts without people around. Her chosen career as a romance novel editor was solitary enough, even though she entered romantic, flower-strewn worlds where devoted couples overcame all odds to find their true love. Still, when she closed a

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manuscript, she was still in the tiny spare bedroom of her rented duplex with Shae's big brown puppy-dog eyes looking up at her.

Still without a love of her own.

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