



WHY WERE THERE always weddings? Weddings, where hopes and dreams and starry gazes gouged Garret Morrison's soul, shattered by memories of screeching, tearing metal and a scream cut short. Weddings, the hurricane-force winds that slammed against every boulder he'd added to the stone wall of protection. Not just his protection, no. The protection of anyone he might dare to love.

Garret forced his hands to roam the grand piano's keyboard while he gathered control and awaited further instruction. Evening sunlight angled low through the church's circular stained glass window, casting a multi-hued glow over the sanctuary, empty except for the two women in jeans and T-shirts.

“You’re thinking *Ode to Joy* as a wedding processional? Hmm.” Tori Carmichael tapped her jaw as she squinted at the knotty pine ceiling.

“Trevor and I love that song.” The bride-to-be cast a beseeching glance at Garret. “It means so much to both of us.”

He pretended not to notice. They’d come to a decision then he’d do what he was told. Long years of experience had made him good at keeping a neutral expression.

Unlike Tori Carmichael. Everything that woman thought was displayed across her face in living technicolor, but she was also willing to describe it in excruciating detail. Any day now she’d get tired of silently mooning over Garret and either confess her adoration to him, or turn her attention to a more likely candidate.

Please, oh, please choose Option #2. Not that she wasn’t sweet and pretty. She definitely was, but she didn’t deserve the likes of him.

“It could work for the bridesmaids.” Tori nodded firmly and turned to Denae Archibald. “But since you’ve always said you wanted a very traditional ceremony, I still think you should come down the aisle to *Here Comes the Bride* yourself.”

Garret’s fingers took their cue from her words, morphing the random notes into the time-honored wedding march. A single guy of thirty shouldn’t know this piece of music as well as he did. At how many of his friends’ weddings had he played now? Too many. Not that he resented their happiness.

It just wasn’t for him. He’d had his chance.

He tuned out the two women who stood just below the platform in deep conversation. The wedding was still two weeks off, and the final decision didn't matter to him. At first Denae had wanted a string quartet to come in from Missoula. Her fiancé had convinced her to save the strings for the dance and let Garret do the honors for the ceremony.

The honors? If only they knew.

He forced his attention to the piano and played the march through a second time then slid back into *Ode to Joy*.

No one had questioned the reasons a young man might uproot his previous life and move to a western Montana community with his retired parents. Many guys around Saddle Springs worked on the ranches where they'd grown up, preparing to take over one day. His new friends thought he was easy-going. Maybe that he had no ambition, or even no past. Their impressions didn't matter. He knew the truth, but if he kept busy enough, kept his defenses strong enough, he could avoid dwelling on it.

Weddings were the hardest things.

"What do you think?" Denae's voice came from close beside Garret's shoulder.

Only decades of practice kept his hands steady on the keyboard at the collision of two worlds. He turned to Denae. "About what?"

"Tori's idea."

He'd blanked their voices. Now he scrambled to catch up. His fingers seemed to have heard, though. They sought and found a transition between the two melodies. "Like this?"

Denae stared at Garret's hands then back at his face. "How do you do that? I didn't hear you practicing. You must have linked those pieces before."

Garret stilled. How could he explain when he himself had no idea? He offered a little shrug. "Is that the concept you're looking for? Because I can try something else if you prefer." He launched back into the closing measures of *Ode to Joy* and found a different segue into the wedding march, raising his eyebrows at the bride as he played.

Beside Denae, Tori swept long brown hair over her shoulder. "You're good, Garret. I like that."

Liked that he was good? Liked the arrangement he was creating on the fly? No need to wonder. With her, it was both. Everything. Always.

The groom's youngest brother would soon be home for Trevor and Denae's wedding. Sawyer was close to Tori's age. They'd both grown up here in Saddle Springs' ranching country, unlike Garret. They were even paired together for the wedding. Maybe they'd spark a renewed friendship when romance already danced in the air. That would be good, right? Then people could stop speculating about her and Garret, which had seemed inevitable since they were the only two singles left in their group.

Maybe he needed new buddies to hang out with. Ones already married.

"Play through it again, Garret?" asked Denae. "Tori and I will take turns coming down the aisle to get an idea how many

times you need to play it before switching to the wedding march.”

“You and I are going to be all three bridesmaids and the bride?” Tori’s eyebrows peaked.

“Sure, why not? But I get to be the bride.” Winking, Denaë gave Tori a side-hug. “Thanks for helping me with this. I owe you big time.”

Tori squeezed her back, her gaze flicking to Garret’s. Her eyes were hazel, somewhere between brown and green and gold. He filed that info away then mentally trashed the observation, scoffing lightly. Why bother to remember? It didn’t matter.

She narrowed her gaze at his muffled snort.

He stared just past her head as though the distant back pew was the most fascinating object in the world.

It needed to be.



Tori pretended to be the maid of honor, proceeding down the church aisle for the second time, fake-carrying an imaginary bouquet against her comfy T-shirt. Denaë, who’d just marched as bridesmaid number two, dashed past her to the back of the sanctuary and waited for the music to transition

to the wedding march. Tori found the masking-tape x on the platform's low carpet and turned to face the bride.

Music poured from the piano, the sound so complex, so full, it seemed four hands played instead of two. She didn't need to see Garret's face to imagine his focus as his fingers flew over the keyboard. She'd memorized every angle of his jaw ages ago. He didn't seem to know she existed, even though they'd chatted one-on-one plenty of times over the past several years.

Was she some kind of idiot? Who hung around for years waiting for a guy to notice her? A stupid woman, that's who. And Tori wasn't stupid. She needed a game plan, and then she needed to step out on a limb and execute it. Either that or forget about Garret Morrison.

This impromptu practice was faker than even a wedding rehearsal, but Denae could hardly have fit a wider grin on her face as she strolled toward Tori if it were the real thing. She was absolutely head over heels for Trevor Delgado, and it showed even when he wasn't in the building. Denae had spent the entire year of their engagement meticulously planning her ideal day to the tiniest detail.

Tori didn't need that much perfection. She'd rather elope like Carmen and Spencer had done last fall, but her parents would never forgive her. At this rate, they were going to die of old age waiting for someone to take their baby girl off their hands, but they were nowhere near the age of Garret's folks.

The music drifted away, and Denae pumped her fist as she pivoted toward the piano. "That was perfect! Thanks, Garret. I knew you'd nail it."

"Yeah, I think it worked fine."

His baritone voice was so dusky, Tori shivered. Certainly not from chill on a warm spring evening.

"So I'm playing for James and Lauren's duet..." Papers shuffled. "I've run through that with them a few times."

Finally an excuse to look at him. "They sound really good together."

Garret nodded but didn't glance her way. "And then I've got *The Love of God* for the candlelighting ceremony. Right?"

"Yes." Denae slid onto the bench beside him. "Two or three minutes, maybe? It won't take long."

He jotted a note.

"That leaves just the recessional for you." Denae nudged Garret. "You're off duty for the reception, so you can just kick back and enjoy it. Ask a pretty girl to dance." She winked at Tori.

"I'm not much for dancing." His face blanked. "Two left feet."

"Oh, I doubt that." Tori perched on the edge of the platform. "I'm sure you've got the moves."

"You'd lose that bet."

Tori was failing already, since he wouldn't even look at her. But she'd get him out onto that dance floor if she had to trip and fall in his arms to force him there. It was her new calling in life. Mission: make-Garret-look-at-her.

"Anything else?" asked Denae.

Garret shook his head and glanced at his watch. "We're good. James will be here in a few minutes to practice for Sunday morning worship."

"Okay. We'll get out of your hair." Denae linked her arm with Tori's and dragged her to the entry where they'd left their purses on a table.

"See you!" Tori hollered toward Garret, but he'd already immersed back into music and didn't look up.

"That guy," muttered Denae as they left the building. "He's really something, but his social skills? Not so much."

"Tell me."

Denae narrowed her gaze at Tori. "And yet..."

Oops. "And yet what?"

"Has he ever asked you out?"

Tori shook her head, maybe a little too hard. "I'm pretty sure he doesn't know I exist."

Denae grinned. "And you wish he'd notice?"

Tori hip-checked her friend. "Stop it."

"I can't help myself. I edit romance novels for a living, remember? I see hearts and ribbons and fluttering eyelashes everywhere."

"I don't think it's meant to be." But that was a heart-breaking thought. He was such a great guy. He helped out with the Cowboy Santa program every year, and anytime someone needed a hand. And the way he took care of his aging parents? Wow. He had such a soft heart toward anyone in need. Maybe

he didn't figure Tori needed anything, but she did. The love of a kind heart like his.

"Hmm. Let me have a look at you." Denae stopped in the middle of the church parking lot, put her hands on her slim hips, and gave Tori a slow once-over.

"Umm... hello. I'm still here."

"Have you tried short hair?" Denae fingered Tori's long strands. "I can see you with a sassy cut, maybe with a tint of red to liven it up. And some new clothes. You've got a great figure. We can show that off a little."

"Right. Have you forgotten I earn my keep taking kids on trail rides and mucking out stalls? There's a reason for the jeans and T-shirts."

Denae rolled her eyes. "Not twenty-four-seven, I hope. I mean, you're here now, not riding."

"A favor to a friend." Tori grinned at the bride-to-be. "I guess you're right, though. Living on the ranch makes me a little lazy." She finger-combed her hair back from her temples. "You really think I could pull off short?"

"Yes! Lauren's mom is a whiz at cute cuts. Plus, she'll keep you entertained the whole time you're in Shear Inspirations. I'm zipping into Missoula on Monday. Any chance you can get the day off and come with me? I would love to take you shopping."

"Aren't you too busy running wedding errands? You're down to two weeks."

"Never too busy for a friend. It would be nice to think about something else for a few hours."

Tori examined Denae's face. Nothing showed to make her think her friend didn't mean it. "You know what? I'll see if Mom and Dad can spare me for the day. The guest cabins aren't full yet — not like they will be in a week or two when schools everywhere are done for the year."

"Let's do it!" Denae hiked her eyebrows and pointed her thumb toward the church. "Garret Morrison isn't going to know what hit him."

Maybe it was a chance to get his attention, just once. How could she resist?

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