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## Chapter 1

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*From Old Man Turner's Journal:*

*Sometimes fate and life have other plans for you. The same can be said of dating and falling in love.*

“**O**h, yes. Right there,” she murmured. Cybil sighed at the strong hands kneading her tense shoulders. Golden sunshine warmed her skin. Azure waves lapped against the pristine, ivory sand not fifteen feet from where she lounged on a luxurious padded chaise. Her tanned skin glistened in the sun. The coconut scent from her suntan lotion wafted on the gentle breeze and mingled with the salt from the ocean waves. The simmering heat of the tropics caused perspiration to bead on her forehead and evaporate with the light wind. The sunglasses perched on her nose shaded her gray eyes from the radiant sunlight.

It was without a doubt a perfect day.

The light breeze played with the loose tendrils of her inky hair while the sexy-as-sin Pablo—he of the broad, tanned shoul-

ders, gorgeously thick black hair, and soulful eyes—massaged her shoulders with his long, talented fingers. The man had the most wonderful, gifted hands and knew precisely where to exert the most pressure. And those thumbs of his were singularly skilled at ferreting out every ache and pain.

God, she had needed this getaway—away from the cold, the snow, the dreaded holidays, and nonstop work.

She muffled a moan.

Cybil couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this relaxed. She could still taste the lime and salt from her frozen margarita. And she was a breath away from suggesting to Pablo that they take the massage indoors to her beachside bungalow. The thought of those hands massaging other regions of her body left her achy and needy. It had been so long since she had been with a man. Since this was a vacation, she didn't have to worry about getting attached. Cybil moaned as he dug into a knot on her left shoulder.

Pablo lowered his face. Cybil shivered, heady anticipation humming along her skin. Was he going to nibble on her ear? Suggest naughty, decadent delights to be had if they retreated indoors? She was ready and willing for anything the guy had in mind.

“Purrr.” A cold, wet nose pressed against the side of her cheek where it met her ear, amplifying the sound. The purr increased in tenor. Something tickled her nose.

Cybil cracked an eye open. A pair of golden eyes stared at her with expectation and determination, with a side of feline disdain that she had yet to acknowledge their owner. Midnight and ivory fur decorated her cat's face, with the ivory creating a point on his crown between his eyes, and his black pointed ears were twitching. He blinked slowly so he wouldn't miss the slightest movement from Cybil. Rather incessantly, his purr grew louder. His white whiskers blurred with their proximity, and teased the tip of her nose.

Shadows filled her bedroom in that hazy pre-dawn, moments before the sunrise, gray light. The dark mahogany panels of her sleigh bed were visible. Overnight, her rumpled linen bedding had tangled around her body in a cocoon fashion so that she resembled the stuffing inside a burrito.

“Meeeoow.” Gus nudged his nose and face against Cybil’s cheek in a soft headbutt. It was his way of telling her: *hey lady, get up and feed me.*

Cybil blew out a breath. The sweet furball had interrupted a rather magnificent, sexy dream right before the good part. Wasn’t that what was wrong with her life—that she was always stopped before she could get to the good parts? Shoving her hair out of her face, she contemplated the ceiling. It was rather pitiful that the only male kissing her was a sixteen pound, three-year-old, portly tuxedo cat by the name of Gus instead of her fantasy beach cabana man, Pablo, with his dashing, dark good looks, and magic hands.

As the light increased, she noticed some spots on the ceiling where the paint was beginning to fade and get dirty. This summer, she would see about repainting the interior of their little abode. It had been a few years, and the wear was beginning to show.

At the next caterwaul meow and more forceful headbutt from Gus, which made her inhale fur, she sighed. Wiping hair from her lips, she said, “Oh all right, you big baby, I’ll get your breakfast. It’s almost time for me to get up anyway.”

Gus purred even louder at her acknowledgement and rose into Bastet pose, his imitation of the cat goddess. The tomcat Cybil’s sister, Tessa, had adopted three weeks ago had taken a peculiar liking to Cybil. Since joining their little family, Gus chose to wake her every morning in this fashion.

Given his girth, he definitely could go without a meal, but he wouldn’t stop his crying until someone fed him. The sweet furball was a lovable lap cat who liked food and naps, in that order.

Cybil scratched him behind the ears before gently shoving him off.

Fluffy and chunky, he jumped down and waddle-strutted to the door, his thick black tail swishing in expectation as she shivered and slipped on her soft, pale blue robe. Not a lot had changed in the years since they'd moved in here. She still had the same dresser and nightstands of her youth. The king sleigh bed was the one big upgrade she had made furniture-wise this last year. But that purchase had been more out of self-preservation, since she had been waking up in pain each morning because the bed she was sleeping in had been around since they had moved to Echo Springs when she was a teenager.

Downstairs, once Gus was happily chowing down on his kibble, she texted Tessa a picture.

*Cybil: See, he's fed and happy. Awaiting your return on Sunday.*

*Tessa: Oh, he's so cute. I just want to squish his face. They're trying to talk me into a panel for Sunday and changing my return flight to Monday. Will let you know. Only doing it if they pony up the money for the flight and hotel.*

*Cybil: Supposed to get snow next week. Might want to nix the extra panel, even though I know you live for that stuff.*

*Tessa: Will let you know. Give my Gus-Gus a cuddle for me.*

*Cybil: Will do later. Full day today. I let him sleep in my bed.*

*Tessa: Aw, I told you that you'd love him. LOL*

*Cybil: Tolerate him. Especially when he wakes me up from a sexy beach dream before Pablo can get to the good part.*

Tessa texted a laughing smiley face. Cybil studied Gus, who was now lying on his back next to his bowl, cleaning his fur, those golden eyes full of blissful contentment. She snapped another picture and texted it to Tessa.

As much as she enjoyed the solitude while her sister was away on a work trip, signing her comics at an expo in Boston, Cybil missed having her around, even when they were competing for time in the one full bathroom they shared.

Over the last few years, the dynamic of her relationship with her sister had undergone a metamorphosis from being a mother figure to a deep friendship of equals. They depended on one another, always had each other's backs, and enjoyed hanging out together. There was no one else Cybil would want more on her Apocalypse Survival Team, especially with all her sister's geek knowledge.

Cybil dressed in layers, in deference to the biting cold and unpredictable Colorado weather. The layers were useful because, while the current temperature was in the low thirties, as the day progressed, it could warm up and reach the sixties by mid-afternoon—and then drop into the twenties overnight, with a sudden snowstorm. But even with Mother Nature's ever-present temperature roulette, she decided to walk to work today instead of drive. Snow was forecast the next couple of days, but today was supposed to be crystal clear and sunny. A perfect opportunity to soak up as much vitamin D as possible—the real kind, not the sexy beach dream kind.

Cybil strolled the eight blocks to her yoga studio while munching on a protein bar. There was a banana in her bag she would have once she made it to the studio. She yawned. As soon as she reached the studio, she'd brew a cup of coffee. Maybe this morning, she'd go with Kona coffee, continuing with her tropical island dream theme. If she couldn't get to Hawaii, at least she could bring the flavor of it directly to her door. If she made it to the studio fast enough, she should be able to inhale half a cup before her client arrived. Shoving her hands in the pockets of her puffy red coat, she quickened her speed to a brisk pace.

The sun crested the nearby mountain peaks, illuminating the town of Echo Springs in a golden glow. In the early morning light, the mountains were shaded a deep purple-gray, with bands of white crowning each peak, making them picture perfect. The crisp air carried an aromatic hint of snow and pine—or, as Cybil

liked to call it, home. She loved this place, with all its eccentricities and delights.

The town was nestled in the heart of the Colorado Rockies, with the shadowy backdrop of the mountains. It was one of those postcard-worthy places that tourists oohed and aahed over. Echo Springs was located along Interstate 70, which bisected the Rocky Mountains. It stood as one of the main crossroads pitstops for travelers on their way to ski resort towns like Vale, Breckenridge, and many others. The bulk of the town was situated along the northern edge of the interstate, with the mountains beyond forming a natural crescent shape.

Echo Springs had grown a bit throughout the years Cybil had lived there. There were new fast food restaurants offering burgers and tacos, and new shops along Main Street with an eye toward luring tourists. New homes and subdivisions had been built as the township expanded, and another bank had opened off Main Street. But there was also a persistent resistance to change here in Echo Springs. It took time for anything new to take hold, if it took hold at all.

It was part of the town's charm that she had grown to love over the years.

Once upon a time, she'd hated how stagnant—and, at times, how archaic—this town could be, with its entrenched traditions and beliefs. Families had lived here for generations. The biggest source of revenue were the tourism dollars. Most of the businesses that had developed and thrived catered more to out of town guests just passing through than to yearlong residents—with exceptions of course, like Fitzgerald's Grocery Store and the post office. Many of the festivals and events had been designed with the intent of skimming some of the tourists' cash before they made it to their final vacation destinations at the ski resorts, or camping in one of the nearby national parks.

But Cybil no longer considered Echo Springs as a mere stopover in her life. It was home. She might want to visit all fifty

states, tour Europe, stand on the Great Wall in China, and touch the sky at Machu Picchu, but this was the place where she would always return. Now, as she neared her thirty-first birthday, she saw her hometown as a steady comfort instead of a prison.

Wrapping her arms in front of her chest to ward off the cold, she trudged the short distance from her duplex to her yoga studio.

A bright yellow school bus rumbled down the street, making its rounds to pick up kids and ferry them to class. She loved the sounds of the world waking up: the birds chirping as they scouted their morning meals; a dog barking from behind a privacy fence she passed. Lights were on in the windows of the Victorian style homes as people started their day.

She yawned and muttered a curse under her breath. Today was going to be a long day. She had picked up an extra shift at Smitty's last night, and had worked until one. Smitty's Bar and Grill was one of the local hotspots for the over-twenty-one crowd. They had a thriving business, mainly because most people didn't like to drink alone. The job paid well in tips, even though the occasional dumbass tried to cop a feel on occasion. After being a waitress at Smitty's for almost a decade, Cybil knew how to handle men who figured it was their god given right to grab things that didn't belong to them. She had attended high school with the current owner, Burke Smitt, who'd inherited the bar and grill from his uncle Tim a few years back when he'd passed. Burke was a good boss. He and Cybil were friends and had even dated for a time, until they realized they were better friends than anything else.

If there was anything wrong with Echo Springs, it was the lack of available, eligible dating material. Hence her fantasy man, Pablo with the great hands. Rarely did anyone new move to Echo Springs. Not on purpose, at least—with the exception of her newest friend, Abby, who had recently moved here from New Jersey and wound up falling madly in love with the town's sexy

sheriff, Nate Barnes. Pure circumstance had brought Abby to their town, as her great-aunt, Evie Callier, had willed her big old Victorian house to Abby. Falling for her neighbor, the town sheriff, had been a stroke of luck.

Cybil was thrilled for Abby, really, she was, but it had been longer than she cared to admit since she'd gotten horizontal—or anything else—with a guy. Her girly bits felt sorely neglected and downright testy lately. It was probably because Cybil knew Abby was getting all the sex—nightly, judging by the satisfied glimmer that seemed to glow from her friend, stating quite clearly for all and sundry to see that she was enjoying every blessed minute with Sheriff Stud Muffin.

Cybil wasn't jealous—at least, not very.

The tiny smattering of jealousy made her feel a wee bit bitchy, as well as a side heaping of self-pity that there was no one special in her life who looked at her the way the sheriff did Abby.

Cybil's pity party, table for one, could be the reason why she had lost her effing mind and signed herself up for the hottest new dating website, Matchmakers.com, a week ago. She was bound and determined to find someone to date. She missed male companionship, and sex. Maybe she wouldn't find the love of her life or a keeper, but it would be nice to get taken out to a meal she didn't have to buy herself. And perhaps, if she was really lucky, she might experience a few good orgasms that weren't of the solo-expedition variety.

She wasn't desperate, by any means, but there were times, like now, when she felt lonely. When she would love to have someone to lean on, and not have to worry about every blessed thing, all the damn time.

After week one, the dating app hadn't produced any winners—not that she'd expected a crown prince when she'd made the decision to join after a night of wine and a pint of her favorite ice cream, but she had hoped to find at least one guy with a little substance whose profile picture didn't resemble a mugshot. She



might be crazy but she didn't think finding a halfway decent guy who was appealing to the eyes, gainfully employed, not an asshole, and didn't live with his mother should be on the same level as the quest for the Holy Grail.

Her breath puffed out in plumes of crystalized white. She shoved her gloved fingers deeper inside her coat pockets. Maybe she should have driven today, given the frigid temperatures. But her aging truck could be temperamental at best during the summer months. In the winter, the ancient beast tested her patience. She tried to save her gas and engine for things like working at Smitty's, or dates from hell in case she had to abruptly flee. A new vehicle wasn't in her financial plans or within her reach for a few years yet.

Her yoga studio was located at the corner of Continental Drive and Pine Street, on the second floor of a building owned and operated by Clark Biddle the Third. The man was old enough that he likely remembered the formation of the Rockies. Cybil liked the old guy. He was always wheeling and dealing and had a keen eye for profit. But he was fair too. He'd given her a fabulous rental rate, and allowed her to refurbish the space to the specifications she needed in order to make her business work.

Local contractor Aiden O'Toole had helped her realize her vision for her studio. It was too bad they didn't have any chemistry together, because Aiden was gorgeous, with his molten dark chocolate eyes and buns of steel. Who knew a tool belt on a pair of lean, masculine hips could be sexy? Unfortunately, there was no connection between them, no blip of something more. Otherwise, she would have already made a play for him. And he had been of the same opinion. They had been friends and known each other since high school. Although some days it felt like they had known each other since the Stone Age.

Cybil had sweated, literally, and saved every extra penny she had earned in tips that didn't go toward her bills for years to bring her vision, her dream, to fruition. She had taught classes at

the local community center, building her following. And while her profession wasn't what she'd originally thought she wanted to do with her life, it suited, to the core of her foundation, the person she was today.

The building itself, with its forest green roof and exterior of sandstone-colored brick, had been built back in the fifties. The three-story structure held an eclectic mix of businesses and apartments. Two-thirds of the first floor were taken up by the offices of Clark Biddle, and the realtor firm Echo Springs Realtors took up the rest. Mr. Biddle was also the owner and landlord for the building. He had dabbled in real estate, in addition to being one of the few practicing attorneys in town.

On the second floor was Cybil's studio, Roe Yoga and Fitness. It was small, only twelve hundred square feet, but it was enough to fit twenty adults on mats comfortably on the golden wood floor. There was also a small workout room, with an elliptical and treadmill, along with a plethora of weight machines and free weights. Along the interior wall near the door was a row of metal coat hooks and built-in shelf cubbies for people to store their personal items. There was also a single bathroom the size of a broom closet that held a commode and sink for clients; a storage room for extra equipment like yoga mats, blocks and weights; and an office. The office was large enough to fit her desk, a chair, a dorm-sized refrigerator and a coffee maker, leaving barely enough room for her elbows, but she had her own private bathroom in exchange for giving up the elbow room. It was picky on her part, but this way she could store feminine items and not have to worry about sharing a bathroom with all her clients.

The space was perfect. Perfect for Cybil, at least.

Across the hall was an office that had been vacant since she had moved in two months ago. Three studio apartments, all currently occupied, were on the third floor. She'd made sure to introduce herself to those tenants, and gave them a discounted

rate that she extended only to the building residents. Now Lily Daniels, Harper Emerson, and Eva Monroe each attended a few classes a week.

There were days when Cybil still couldn't believe that the studio was hers, that after all these years, she finally had achieved her goals, and she took pride in it. The path to achieve her dream had taken several years, during which she'd had to balance waiting tables to make an income while attending classes to become a certified yoga instructor. And, to fully make her dream work, she'd added many more types of fitness styles, like Pilates and Zumba, along with personal training certifications. With all those qualifications under her belt, the diverse number of classes she could offer provided her with a solid platform to launch her studio.

And so far, in the month she'd been open, she was seeing an inkling of success. It wasn't much. Yet. Funds would still be tight for a while longer. She had to continue waiting tables in addition to her workload at the studio. But it was a start. And a good one.

It gave her hope that she had a future that didn't simply include serving other people adult beverages, but making a difference in people's lives, in their health, and helping them reach their fitness goals.

In addition to her already loaded schedule, Cybil continued to teach a few classes at the community center for the elderly residents of Echo Springs. The location was easier for them so that they wouldn't have to navigate the stairs in this building. Most workdays were a race to the finish line. She constantly ran from one class and one job to the next.

She worked in her studio Wednesday through Monday, with Tuesday being her one day off a week—mainly for her sanity, and a chance to do things like grocery shopping and laundry, since house fairies didn't exist. Or, if they did, she'd not been able to coax them out of hiding to convince them to do the household chores.

At night on the weekends, she waited tables at Smitty's, and picked up extra shifts when she was able, like she had last night. For a Wednesday, Smitty's had been hopping. Her week had started off with a frenzied bang. And she had three more double-duty days between her studio and Smitty's until she had another day off.

And then she wondered why her most committed relationship was with streaming television while she dreamed of paradise and companionship.

Cybil entered the building with her key, locked the door behind her, and headed up the wooden flight of stairs to her place. The building itself didn't open until eight in the morning, in consideration of the tenants who lived there. She had a personal-training client scheduled at seven. Otherwise, she would still be in bed after her late night, since her first class wasn't until eight-thirty.

She didn't hate mornings. It was more like she was in a tacit agreement with them that if they weren't too awful to her, she wouldn't curse their very existence. The tentative arrangement worked for Cybil.

Her client would call when he arrived, so she could let him in. She wasn't necessarily fond of Alex Dotson, but he was a paying client. That was what mattered.

Besides, she had bigger problems to worry about than Alex. Mr. Biddle had informed her last week that he'd decided it was time for him to retire, and he was not only selling his law practice but had found a buyer for both his practice and the building. Cybil had mixed feelings about the situation. While Mr. Biddle had promised her that the terms of her lease would stand throughout the remaining ten months of it, the change-up was coming at a crappy time of year.

She loathed the holidays. Epically loathed them.

Between Thanksgiving next week and Christmas a few short weeks afterward, this was the time of year when Cybil tended to

just survive. While everyone else was getting holly and jolly, she felt it was a monumental win if she didn't drown herself each evening in a pint of ice cream. It was hard to be sad when that first taste explosion of rocky road hit her beleaguered soul. But it was only a Band-Aid measure and wasn't kind to her waistline. Plus, she didn't want to make it through the holidays and then not be able to fit into her pants.

That was yet another reason why she was trying to date as much as possible. Perhaps if she could find a man to spend some time with, maybe of the dual-orgasm variety, she wouldn't focus so much on the holidays, or braving them solo, or the impending annual return of the anniversary of the day her life had changed forever.

Cybil entered her studio and flipped on the lights, admiring the way the soft golden glow illuminated the custom sandalwood flooring that helped cushion a body during strenuous poses. She'd had Aiden install flooring that catered to the fitness styles she offered. Once in her office, she started her coffeemaker, sighing at the potent scent of Kona roast filling the air as she organized the equipment and weights for the day.

Alex Dotson had said he'd hired her as his trainer because he wanted to build his resistance strength and increase his muscle density. In truth, Cybil figured he just wanted an excuse to show off. Lately, the man had been rather insistent on trying to get her to go out with him.

It didn't matter what floated his boat, because she wasn't interested. Not tempted in the slightest. Alex was a decent guy, for the most part, and was reasonably attractive. But she got nothing, not a tingle or zing in her girly bits, when she looked at him. And wasn't that part of her problem? When she examined the available eligible bachelor pool in Echo Springs, there were four distinct categories: the elderly grandpa crowd, the already dated and not going out with them again, the perfect-age bracket

but so not interested, and then lastly, the hello Mrs. Robinson group.

Echo Springs was slim pickings when it came to men. At least for Cybil.

If she ventured farther afield, there were the park rangers at the nearby stations in Arapaho National Forest, or the next town over, Frisco. It was only twenty miles up the interstate, but it wasn't like Cybil had an inordinate amount of spare time. At the last town meeting, Mayor Fred Bailey had announced that the Colorado State Troopers had leased one of the historic buildings near Main Street, and were planning on opening a division in Echo Springs by this summer. Plus they had a new Search and Rescue Field Office with the Rocky Mountain Region Mountain Rescue Association opening up this spring as well, so there was that.

It was great news for Echo Springs residents—especially the single-female population, if the troopers and crew with the MRA stationed here ended up being single as well. It wasn't often that there was new man meat in town.

As great as that was, spring and summer were months away. And Cybil wanted co-ed orgasms now. It didn't make her feel any better that her inner monologue on the situation resembled Veruca singing, *Don't care how, I want it now*. And that was why both her id and ego on wine had convinced her to join Matchmakers.com.

She could face the dreaded holidays one heck of a lot better if she were being treated to nightly orgasms. Cybil disliked being in the same category as Scrooge, but the truth was, every year, a melancholy descended over her from Thanksgiving through the New Year. There was nothing for it, and no way to change it.

Boy, her thoughts were maudlin today.

Shaking herself out of her funk, Cybil got her studio prepped for the Hatha Yoga class at eight thirty. That way she could move

seamlessly from her personal training session with Alex to her first class of the day.

At five to seven, Alex texted her that he was outside the building. Cybil headed down the wooden stairs that tended to creak in spots. At least the lighting in the stairwell was decent, glowing off the muted tan walls to create a warm atmosphere. When she strode across the small building lobby that was really nothing more than an oversized foyer, and opened the door, she noticed that the lights in Mr. Biddle's office were on already. The old codger did like to get an early start.

She pushed open the front glass and wood door to permit entry to her client. Admittedly, Alex was an attractive man in his black workout gear. His naturally wavy blond hair was meticulously trimmed, his angular jaw clean shaven, his cheekbones sharply pronounced, and he had a mocha gaze that always seemed set to smolder anytime he glanced in her direction. She just wished his smolder, along with his six-foot lean build, did something for her girly bits, but it didn't. Maybe it was because she knew him well and thought he had the personality of a turnip. Not to mention she sensed an undercurrent of menace that he tried to hide behind a polished sheen, which she didn't trust. She kept her grimace to herself and said, "Alex, come on in."

"Cybil. You look refreshed this morning," Alex said, telling her with his gaze that he appreciated her, the way a man did a woman he found attractive: his gaze roving over her body, warming over the sweet spots like he was a lion envisioning sinking his teeth into a gazelle.

A part of her wished she could feel something for him, anything really, other than mild annoyance.

Before she could reply, Clark Biddle shuffled out of his office, dressed in gray tweed slacks with a matching suit jacket, a bright canary yellow dress shirt and a multicolored plaid bow tie to

complete his ensemble. For a man in his eighties, he was rather spry and moved with efficiency.

“Cybil, I’m glad I caught you. If I could have you come into my office for a few minutes so I can introduce you to your new landlord?” Clark’s voice boomed and echoed in the stairwell.

“I have a personal training session. Can it wait?” she asked, indicating Alex with a slight nod as he crowded her. Really, the man needed to learn about personal space.

“It shouldn’t take more than a minute,” Clark said, his bushy, stark-white eyebrows raised. The tufts of his matching white hair were in wild disarray, looking windblown. Clark’s hair, for all his styling clothing wise, always looked like he’d stuck his finger in an electrical socket and was just too busy to care about taming what was left on his balding dome.

With a sigh of defeat, because she knew Clark well enough that he wouldn’t let up until she capitulated, Cybil turned to Alex. “Would you mind going on up and getting yourself warmed up on either the treadmill or elliptical? I’ll be right up.”

“Sure thing, as long as you don’t forget about me,” Alex teased in an attempt to flirt with her.

Her annoyance at his insistent innuendos climbed, but instead of showing it, she pasted a bland smile on her face and said, “I won’t. I’ll be up shortly.”

Alex gave her what she was sure to his mind was a sexy half grin and a swaggering tilt of his head intended to make her swoon. Too bad it made her want to roll her eyes and ask if that move had worked for him in the past. As Alex ascended the stairs, Clark steered her into his office. The man without fail smelled of peppermint and Old Spice aftershave.

“Now, as I mentioned last week,” Clark said, “the terms of your lease will stand for the full twelve months. Then you will have to negotiate a new lease with your new landlord.”

Cybil replied, “Thank you, I appreciate that. I—”

*Oh, sweet biscuits and gravy, no!*



Not him. Anyone but him. She'd take the devil himself in exchange. Give her Beelzebub, give her Hades, give her the Hells Angels biker gang, all of them, over the man sitting so casually in Clark's office like he owned the place—which from all indications, he now did.

"Cybil. Good to see you. From what I understand from Clark, you're one of my new tenants," Miles Keaton said in his deep baritone voice as he rose from his seat when she entered the office.

"No," was all she could say. He couldn't be her new landlord. Surely she was still in bed and having a nightmare. That was all. She would wake the moment her alarm rang. Any minute now.

Miles raised a golden brow in her direction. His turquoise eyes, the ones that had haunted her dreams for thirteen years, regarded her coolly, with indifference.

It would have been far better if he had gotten fat or gone bald over the last thirteen years, losing some of the tousled golden hair that always looked like he'd run his long, sturdy fingers through it a hundred times. But if anything, he was like a fine wine or scotch, where he'd only gotten better, more potently gorgeous and alpha with age. The handsome, strong lines of his face had matured, and there were crinkled lines at the corners of his enigmatic eyes that glimmered with intelligence. He hadn't shaved today, and there was a hint of darker golden stubble gracing his square jaw, framing a pair of the most kissable lips she'd ever seen and tasted on a man. His six-foot-two, broad-shouldered frame, which had always been solid, had thickened and filled out with muscle. He wore a pair of tailored black slacks that rode low on his lean hips, and a crisp salmon dress shirt, unbuttoned at his neck, that should have looked girly, but which made Miles appear even more dominant and alpha, if that were possible.

The man had always been a walking wet dream. And dammit, but her girly bits awoke like a princess awakening from

true love's kiss, and were throwing an excited rave at his presence. Although sadly, in her case, it was probably closer to a mummy emerging from his sarcophagus than a princess.

"I see you already know each other, Cybil, Miles. I just finished signing all the contracts for the transfer of my practice and the sale of the building. It will take another thirty days for the close of the sale, but for the sake of an expedient and painless transfer, as of today, Miles is your new landlord."

"I see. Well, thanks for the heads up. I have a client waiting." Cybil took a step back, ready to retreat to a place of strength and to figure out just what the heck she intended to do about Miles as her new landlord. She didn't know if there was anything she *could* do, with the exception of clearing the local supermarket out of their supply of rocky road ice cream.

"Cybil, I want to reaffirm with you, as I am doing with all the tenants in the building, that your lease will stand as is, and then we can discuss new terms once you are up for renewal," Miles stated. He studied her reaction intently. Too closely, to her mind. Uncomfortable with the scrutiny, she felt an all too familiar ache lance through her chest.

Her smile tight, she said, "Thank you for putting my mind at ease. I will sleep so much better now. If that's all you need, I have to go."

"Yes, yes, you young folk, always running from one place to the next," Clark said, shooing her out.

Miles didn't say anything, he just nodded, like a king granting a boon.

Miles had been visiting Echo Springs quite a lot recently. Coming into Smitty's frequently to hang out with his best friend, Nate. Escorting his mom to brunch or dinner at one of the local eateries. And now she knew why. Miles was back, back in Echo Springs. It took every ounce of her composure to maintain a straight face, when she wanted to act like a five-year-old and stick

out her tongue at him, then go throw a temper tantrum that would make the Big Bang look like a bottle rocket explosion.

Agony, guilt, and regret infused her being any time they had the misfortune to meet. Guilt over the things she'd said to him and the way she'd treated him. Regret, large heaping piles of it, that she had ended their relationship and the real reasons behind the break, damn near choked her. It never helped that whenever he looked at her, it took her right back to that time, like the last thirteen years had never happened. She didn't know what was worse, his stony indifference or studious curiosity. They rarely said more than two words to each other; today's little conversation was an exception.

And she wished like hell it didn't hurt, that looking at him didn't feel like a thousand knives piercing her heart. But it did. Every. Time. It was the price of keeping the promise she had made long ago. Now, instead of just having to dodge him occasionally, it would become a daily occurrence.

Cybil feared what being around him all the time would do to her. And with a simple roll of the dice, her day had turned into pure, undiluted crud. Rather different than the first time they had met.

When he looked at her with that cold indifference, she wondered if he ever thought of that time. But then she tried to think of it no more as she escaped into her studio and used the buffer of work to shove it all out of her head.

The thing was, when it came to Miles, there was never a time when he wasn't there in some form in the back of her mind.