

TAMING HIS VIRGIN WIFE

DEVIL CREEK RANCH BOOK ONE



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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PROLOGUE



“*Y*ou’re insane, I’m not doing that!” Melody Adams focused on the man standing before her—or at least *tried* to focus on him. Those last shots she’d downed with her girlfriends wreaked havoc with her equilibrium. “We haven’t seen each other in what? Five years?”

Lucas McKinney teetered on his feet, but a quick wave of his arms kept him upright. Their friends looked on in drunken and amused curiosity.

“Look,” Lucas began a bit slurred, “my buddies and I deploy soon. We’re going to Iraq. Who knows what’ll happen.”

He grabbed her hand, his grip strong, heated. Warmth slithered up her arm, but Melody told herself it was the alcohol. It had to be the alcohol and not some silly attraction. Though Lucas still had the ‘it’ thing that made girls fall all over him. Tall, broad shouldered, athletic, with brown hair and eyes. Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome in the flesh.

Melody licked her lips then blinked several times, cursing those vodka shots. “I’m sure you’ll be okay, Lucas,” she said.

Yet the idea he'd be thrown into a warzone as an Army Ranger did scare her. He'd been so kind to her while she'd been in his home. Biological kids weren't always great to the foster kids they had to share their space with. She'd chalked it up to the fact he was an only child and he'd always seemed lonely to her. And she knew a thing or two about loneliness.

He squeezed her hand. "Let me try this again." He dropped down to one knee. "Melody Adams, will you marry me?"

Giggles erupted and Melody looked toward her friends. Mary stepped forward and threw her arms around her.

"You have to marry this poor guy," she said. "Come on, things are bad there now. He might not come home."

Meanwhile, Lucas' Army buddies stared in disbelief. They'd probably expected a night of strippers and gambling, not a spur of the moment wedding.

He might not come home... Mary's words tiptoed through her mind. Tears sprang to Melody's eyes, even though she was usually a happy drunk. Lucas remained on bent knee, his brown eyes glassy with too much alcohol as he peered up to her.

He'd been her best friend for the six months she'd spent as a foster kid in his home. He'd protected her from neighborhood bullies and helped her get caught up in school so she'd pass her sophomore year. She might have stayed there until she graduated high school if it hadn't been for her brother. Regret mixed with the rush of sadness.

"Fine," she said suddenly, startling herself. "Let's get married."

Lucas' wide smile lit up his face and guffaws broke out amongst his buddies. "Hell, Luke, what's wrong with you, dude?" one said.

At the same time, her own friends squealed and clapped.

While Lucas dealt with disapproval, her friends suffocated her with hugs and sloppy cheek kisses.

"I can't believe I get to be a bridesmaid this weekend," her friend, Terri, said.

"We have to find a chapel fast before he changes his mind," Tricia added.

"We passed one on the way to the casino, it's next door," Mary said. She grabbed Melody's hand and jerked her forward, almost off her feet, snagging Lucas by the shirt sleeve as she passed him on the way to the casino's front doors. Lucas' buddies shook their heads and headed into the casino to try their luck at the tables.

As she staggered along behind Mary, Melody knew this was a mistake. But then Lucas took her hand, lacing their fingers together, and he was suddenly the boy who had led her through a crowd of jeering neighborhood kids. He was the boy who'd sworn she'd pass all her classes so she wouldn't be held back. He was that sweet boy she'd kissed—her first kiss—the night she'd slipped from his home and disappeared into the night. She hadn't seen him again until tonight.

He might not come home. And Lucas was looking at her with those kind brown eyes, his smile happy and confident. Then they were in a gaudy wedding chapel signing papers. When she'd agreed to come on this girls' weekend in Las Vegas she'd never imagined she'd be standing before a bad Elvis impersonator, exchanging vows with Lucas McKinney, the only boy she'd ever trusted.

They didn't have rings so the chapel happily provided some overpriced gold-plated bands with the chapel's logo on the inside. Her friends wept and called encouragement as Melody and Lucas faced one another, hand in hand as *Blue Hawaii* played in the background.

"And do you..." Bad Elvis squinted down to a piece of

paper he held, "Melody Lynn Adams, take Lucas Michael McKinney to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Melody swallowed hard then nodded. "Yes. I mean, um, I do."

Her girlfriends clapped.

"And do you, Lucas Michael McKinney, take Melody Lynn Adams to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do," he replied without a hint of hesitation.

Her friends squealed, jumping up and down, drowning out Bad Elvis' next words until she heard, "And now, you may kiss the bride." Bad Elvis did a dramatic Elvis-like twist of the hips.

"Are you ready?" Lucas asked, cupping her cheek. Everything before this moment had blurred together in a drunken haze. But this was a sobering moment. It all became real. *I just married Lucas!*

"I guess so," she said.

Lucas leaned in. The gentle brush of his mouth asked for nothing but promised her everything. A sweet Lucas kiss that made her remember the kiss they'd shared the night she'd run away from his parents' house.

MELODY WAITED ANXIOUSLY. Downstairs she heard the television on, Lucas' parents were watching the evening news. This was her one chance, her only chance. Her pulse raced and she rubbed her sweating palms down her shirt.

Lucas came up the stairs fresh from the shower, dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt with their high school logo on the front. He looked so cute, so Lucas-charming, that her heart tripped over itself.

"Hey," he said. "Did you need something?"

He stopped at her door. She couldn't look him in the eye so she stared at his chest.

"I, um..." Fear stole the rest of her words.

He lowered down and stared into her face.

"What's wrong, Mels?" he said. "Is it school?"

Melody shrugged. She wanted so much to tell him the truth—that her little brother, Mike, had run away from his foster home. She'd heard it at school from his foster brother who was a freshman. When the family had taken Mike in, they hadn't wanted a teenage girl, too, so she and Mike had been separated. Mike was somewhere out on the streets, all alone, and Melody had to go find him. And she had to give up the best foster home she'd ever had to do it. She'd have to give up Lucas to do it.

She wanted to tell Lucas goodbye, but she couldn't say the word. He would tell his parents, and they'd keep her from looking for Mike. She had to go after her brother, even if she hated leaving this wonderful home. So instead, she grabbed Lucas by the arm, pulled him inside her bedroom, stood on tiptoe and planted her lips on his.

His mouth was warm and soft as he cupped her face between his hands. No gross tongue kissing like she'd heard girls talk about in the bathrooms at school, he simply held her in place as their lips lightly brushed together. It was like they were somehow absorbing one another's energy through this fragile connection.

Then he stepped back, gave her the most amazing smile, and said goodnight, before retreating to his bedroom down the hall.

HER FRIENDS DRAGGED her back to the present, hugging her. Overwhelming affection for Lucas welled up inside of Melody. He was staring at her with the same amazing smile she remembered after their chaste teenage kiss. She choked on sobs as confetti rained down on them.

Afterward a cab took them back to his hotel. Lucas scooped her up and carried her over the threshold into his room. She laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck, enjoying this strange, carefree feeling she'd never had before.

He set her on her feet, dropped a kiss on the end of her nose and walked over to the bed.

When she saw the bed, she froze as he plopped down on the mattress.

“You’re so beautiful, Mels,” he said, his voice a low, husky drawl. “You always have been so beautiful and perfect.”

She caught her reflection in the dresser mirror and frowned. Mascara streaked her flushed cheeks and her eyes were bloodshot. He was watching her, waiting for her to come to him. Join him on the bed to consummate their marriage. She hadn’t thought this far ahead. If she had...

Cold washed through her and she squeezed her eyes shut. Monsters howled in her memories. The same howling monsters that had terrified her and her brother as children. It was those monsters that drove her away from any kind of romantic relationships.

She swayed on her feet.

“Mels, what’s wrong?” Lucas was there, his hands on her shoulders.

Her stomach soured. “No, don’t touch me.”

She shoved away from him, and staggered to the bathroom, locking the door behind her, before dropping to her knees by the toilet. Then she heaved, her body ridding itself of both the foul vodka and even fouler memories.

“Melody,” Lucas called through the door, “are you okay?” The door handle rattled. “Let me in.”

She ignored him, hugging the rim of the toilet seat.

“Damn it, Mels, let me in.”

Pushy Lucas, sometimes she hated that about him. “I’m fine,” she called back. “I had too much to drink. Please, leave me alone.”

She heard a scraping noise then all fell silent outside. She finally made it back to her feet, splashed cold water on her face, and staggered to the door. When she walked out, she

found Lucas on the floor, propped up against the wall next to the bathroom door. His head drooped, he'd passed out while waiting for her to come out.

"Oh, Lucas," she whispered.



LUCAS AWOKE and immediately wished for death. His head throbbed and nausea battled with dehydration as he pushed to a seated position from the hotel room floor. The hotel comforter was tangled around his legs and a pillow lay several feet away. It took several long seconds for him to figure out what the hell had happened. *His buddies, the casino, too much beer and tequila then he'd...*

He groaned and peered around the room. The bed was empty. Where was Melody? The silent space told him she was long gone. He grabbed his pounding skull between both hands and squeezed his gritty eyes shut. God, he'd married Melody then passed out cold on his wedding night.

He got to his feet, and braced against the cool wall. He wanted to be angry with Melody for ditching him. They really needed to talk about the wedding, and when he did a circuit of the room, she certainly hadn't left information on how to get ahold of her.

The same damned disappearing act she'd pulled when they were teens. So, he worked really hard at being mad at her. At Melody. At his *new wife* whom he wanted to turn over his knee at the moment.

But the anger wouldn't stick. At least not on Melody.

"I'm an idiot. A damned idiot."

He sat on the bed, leaned over and buried his face in his hands. They'd both been drunk, but Lucas knew he should've been responsible. From the moment he'd met Melody he'd felt responsible for her. She'd had a rough start in life. She

needed guidance. She didn't need him making foolish decisions that affected them both.

When he'd gotten his deployment orders, his own mortality had slapped him in the face. He'd thought of all the things he might miss out on if the worst should happen. He'd always planned on getting married and having kids. It wasn't so much the idea of dying that scared him, but the idea he had no one to carry on his name.

When he'd run into Melody at the casino, all that worry collided with the feelings he'd always held for her. Feelings he didn't understand, and couldn't shake, even after five years.

He blew out a hard breath.

His cellphone chimed and he grabbed it up, noticing several missed texts and calls. His friends wanted to know what the hell had happened to him. Unfortunately, he didn't have an answer. A gold glimmer caught his eye next to the lamp on the nightstand. He reached out and picked up the ring he'd placed on Melody's finger the night before. He stared at the cheap gold-plated wedding band.

"Damn it."

CHAPTER 1



NINE YEARS LATER.

“*W*hat do you mean you owe the mob twenty-five-grand?” Melody gawked at her brother.

“I didn’t say it was the mob,” Mike said, his face flushing to a vibrant red.

Melody was too good at reading between the lines when it came to her brother. She leaned forward, staring hard at her brother’s face displayed on the laptop screen as they Skyped.

“Have you figured out how you’re going to pay them back?” she asked, though a sinking feeling told her he already had—his sister. And Melody had a whopping two hundred bucks in her checking account, not even enough to cover this month’s rent. She was facing eviction, again.

Mike shoved his fingers through his hair. “Sis, I messed up.” The strain in his voice, the fear, made Melody’s pulse kick up a notch. “I messed up bad.” He lifted his right hand,

and she saw it was wrapped in white bandages. "I'm in trouble."

Melody licked her lips. She did not want to know, because with Mike it was always drama, and she had enough drama of her own, damn it. But she had to know because he was her little brother who always made terrible decisions. And in the end, she was responsible for him.

"What happened to your hand?" she asked.

"They took my pinky finger."

Her jaw dropped. "What?"

"They took my pinky finger. Chopped it off."

"People can't just take your finger, Mike." The absurdity of the idea blocked her initial shock. At least for a few blessed seconds, because once it hit her just how screwed her brother was, panic set in. "Oh my god, what have you done this time? Oh my god, oh my god." She jumped up and paced, holding her head between her hands. "Why do you owe anyone twenty-five-grand?"

Her brother's uncomfortable cough carried to her, but she couldn't look him in the face.

"I, uh, made some bad bets. Football games."

A tight ache settled in the center of her chest and Melody stopped her pacing. She took several deep breaths.

"Hey, at least I'm a lefty, right?" her brother joked.

Melody ignored his comment, he was trying to calm her down. She didn't want to calm down. "How much time do you have to pay them back?"

"A month, maybe."

"Maybe? God."

"I mean, I do a lot of work for them so they're giving me some time to get the cash together."

Melody forced herself to sit down. She stared into her brother's face. He'd lost his livid coloring and now looked

chalky, making his bushy red eyebrows and freckles stand out.

“What kind of work exactly?” she asked.

He dropped his gaze and shifted in his chair. The Wi-Fi connection glitched and she waited until his image unfroze.

“I’ve been bringing stuff up from South America for them,” he said, fidgeting. “I’m good at it. I never get searched. I look like an upstanding US citizen. Profiling works great.”

Another joke. Melody bottled up her rising anger. She didn’t need to ask what he meant by ‘stuff’. Mike had experimented with drugs while they’d lived on the streets as kids. She’d hated it and had done her best to discourage it. But when they became adults she’d had little control over his choices.

“What happens if you can’t cough up the money?” she asked.

Mike’s shoulders slumped and tears suddenly shone in his eyes making their pale blue twinkle. Melody’s heart shattered before he ever said the words, “They’ll kill me, sis.”

“Get out of Chicago. Hide out somewhere then.” She tried to keep the desperation out of her voice, but failed miserably.

“I can’t. Seriously, I’ve seen them track down people in the backwoods of Montana. You can’t run from these guys.”

“Then go to the cops!”

“And tell them what, Melody, that I’m in trouble from illegally betting with the mob?” He snorted.

Mike had bad history and trust issues with the law. Even if it became life or death, Melody knew he’d risk the latter before he asked a cop for help.

They fell silent while a siren screamed somewhere on the street outside her window. He was waiting for her to save him. She always saved him from himself. She would do it again. She had to do it again.

“I’ll get the money,” she said even though she had no idea

how. She had to get it because there was no alternative. She had no doubt he'd wind up dead otherwise. "Give me a few days, I'll figure something out."

"I gotta go," Mike said. "Love you."

"Love you too."

She closed her laptop lid and sagged back against her chair, her mind racing. How in the world would she come up with twenty-five-thousand dollars? She had nothing of value. She stared around at her apartment filled with ratty, secondhand furniture. Her car was ancient with a bad clutch. She'd just gotten fired from her latest job because she'd lost her temper with a customer. Hopelessness swamped her. She wouldn't let her brother die. If she could trade places with him she'd do it in a heartbeat.

She could rob a bank. She played with the idea. She'd probably need to rob several banks and, the kicker, not get caught before she got the money to Mike. Outside of shoplifting food for herself and her hungry brother when they were kids she'd never stolen anything. Stuffing lunchmeat and canned goods in her pockets was a far cry from terrorizing bank employees into giving you all their cash.

She pushed away from the couch and stood up on her weak knees. She needed a drink and out of her apartment. The walls were closing in. She rushed outside, decided against driving, and headed down the sidewalk toward the closest bar a block and a half away. The place was decent and had good prices on two for one shots.

The fear in her brother's face haunted her mind's eye as she tried to form a plan of action. She shoved her hands in her jacket pockets and took deep breaths of the chilly evening air. She wanted to let it all go—the awful feelings of fear and drudged up insecurities—duck down an alley, and sob her heart out, but the emotions had become painfully

lodged in her chest. Her eyes stung but the tears refused to flow.

Melody strode into the bar and took a shadowy table at the back of the room. A server appeared and she ordered a shot of their cheapest vodka. Once the server left, her gaze drifted over the other patrons. A few seated at the bar wore sour expressions but most laughed and chatted with their friends. She felt so alone. Never much for making and hanging onto friends, she spent most of her time alone.

Not that she could've shared this worry with anyone, sharing feelings terrified her. It opened someone up and exposed them and could be used against them. She'd had some toxic friendships in her youth, learning some hard but valuable lessons. Unfortunately, her little brother hadn't. Gregarious by nature, he'd always made a habit of hooking up with bad crowds. The painful, strangling lump of emotion grew, spreading deeper into her chest. The server returned and set a shot glass on the table.

"Anything else for you, hon?" the server asked.

"One more please," Melody said. The server left. She brought the vodka to her lips, took a fortifying breath and swallowed it at one go. It burned a hot trail over her tongue and down her throat. She couldn't help grimacing, she hated the taste of hard liquor.

The server brought her drink over and Melody mouthed a quick 'thanks' before downing it like the first one. Since she wasn't much of a drinker, and hadn't eaten since lunchtime, the alcohol hit her system quickly, easing some of the tension. With the physical discomfort out of the way, she focused on her brother and her options.

Robbing banks wasn't logical, she knew she could never get away with it. But what else did she have? She rested her forehead on her palm and stared at the scratched table top. Someone had carved *Dad I miss you* in the wood. She traced

her fingers over the rough lettering, the scar of someone's past, and wondered what had happened to this father. Did he die? Would she be adding the loss of her brother in a month's time to this same table?

She snapped closed that train of thought. Right now, she had to focus on options, not outcomes, because the outcomes were too much to bear.

Could Mike work out a payment plan with the mob? Was such a thing possible? She mulled over the idea. She could find work. Something that paid decent and send the money to him. Though she'd be hard pressed to find a good paying job now, she'd been fired so many times in Des Moines that she was on no-hire lists across the city. She lost her temper at the worst possible times and had pretty shabby people skills.

Her mother popped into her mind, and nausea welled up. Could she follow in her mother's footsteps to make money, someone she hated to this day? Someone who'd left her and her brother so messed up? Bitter memories flooded her mind. She was eleven-years-old and stealing her eight-year-old brother away from the rathole motel room her mother rented. The walls had been thin, and monsters had howled in neighboring rooms. Monsters that had terrified her, and still haunted her nightmares to this day.

They'd spent the rest of their childhood bouncing between the streets and foster homes. Some foster families had been okay, but you never stayed in those long. One home, in particular, she wished she could've stayed in forever. Those foster parents had been firm but kind, and their son had been her best friend the six months she had lived there.

Lucas... God, when was the last time she'd thought of him? She shook herself, now wasn't the time to think of her child-

hood. Or of that crazy night in Las Vegas. Now was the time to fix her brother's life. Save his life.

As she started gathering ideas her eyes skipped over the patrons, not noticing much until she met a pair of dark eyes staring at her from across the room. They belonged to a tall, dark haired man leaning against the bar top. He was well-built and dressed in boots, jeans, and a black t-shirt that hugged his muscular torso in all the right ways.

She blinked at the ghost conjured right out of her thoughts, and the hairs on her arms rose. The man straightened, nodded at the bartender, and headed her way.

No.

It couldn't be.

Not tonight, she couldn't deal with this on top of everything else.

The guy tucked his black Stetson beneath his arm, and long strides brought him quickly to her table. He greeted her with a smile that didn't reflect in his eyes. She swallowed hard, wishing for more vodka. Not that it would save her.

"Melody." His voice was strong, deep, with that husky drawl she'd carried within a special spot inside. A voice meant to wind its way into a woman's heart and woo her to his bed.

"L-Lucas," she stammered.



WHEN LUCAS MCKINNEY caught sight of the woman seated at the table across the room he thought he was seeing things. As he studied the long, straight brown hair—the same hairstyle she'd worn in high school—the high cheekbones and aquiline nose, his heart skipped a beat.

"Do you know her?" he asked the bartender, Toby, his cousin and owner of the place.

Toby followed his line of sight and shrugged. "Not really. She comes in from time to time. Her name is Melanie. Or is it Melody? Something like that. She applied for a job once." Toby went back to wiping off the bar top while Lucas studied the woman. "If you're looking for a hookup tonight I think the girls over at that booth would be accommodating." Toby gave him a sly grin.

Lucas glanced at the booth of four staring his way. He had no interest in casual sex, not these days. Especially tonight since Melody had miraculously reappeared in his life. Melody his estranged *wife*. That fated Las Vegas night flitted through his mind. He'd told himself more times than he could count he'd get the marriage annulled, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He wasn't one to make rash decisions, and the decisions he made he stood behind. Even a spur of the moment marriage.

Melody looked good. In the low lighting he couldn't see her eyes, but he carried their mossy-green color in his mind's eye. He sucked his bottom lip between his teeth as memories of the months she'd lived with his family drifted to the surface.

"WHY ARE you so nice to me?" Melody asked while huddled on her bed, her chin tucked on her bent knees. She eyed him like a scared cat and something about that look stirred feelings Lucas couldn't grasp on to. It made his heart hurt for her.

"Because it's the right thing to do." He stumbled over the words. "My parents want you here. I want you here."

She frowned, her eyes narrowing. "I don't believe you."

"What, that my parents want you here? They wouldn't have taken you in otherwise."

Melody shook her head. "No. That you want me here."

He sat down at the desk in her bedroom, his gaze taking in her

scattered homework on the desk top. The whole reason he'd invaded the shy girl's privacy tonight. The school had called to tell his mom that she was failing her classes. She'd be held back a grade. His mom had asked him to tutor her. He was an honor roll student and promised he would do whatever he had to, to make sure she passed her sophomore year. Even if that meant not hanging out with his friends for a few weeks.

He spun the desk chair to face her and placed his hands on his knees. "Look, I'm not sure what happened to you in the past, but I swear I want to help you." Other foster kids had passed through his home and he'd heard horror stories. "I'm not going to let you fail this year. You're smart." He grinned and winked. "I've seen those crazy thick books you read for fun. Seriously, who reads a biography about Winston Churchill when they don't have to?"

She scowled but the look wouldn't hold and a smile cracked across her face. "I had a foster mom for a month who gave me those books, because I liked to read. She was nice."

"And we're nice too, Melody. Just give us a chance."

LUCAS SHOOK off the memories as Melody's gaze settled on him. He saw her eyes widen. Now caught, he had no choice but to walk up to her. Had he been stalling? He wasn't sure now. Talking to her again would be confronting a big moment of his past. And not just the marriage he never bothered to annul. He'd cared for the waif of a girl who'd shared his home when he was seventeen. He'd cared for her in a way he couldn't understand to this day.

He picked his hat up from the stool next to him, tucked it under his arm, and headed her direction.

"Melody," he said as way of a greeting. It seemed the only reasonable thing to say, since 'Hi, how are you' wasn't strong enough. *Why did you disappear that night in Las Vegas without so much as leaving me with a phone number?*

She looked tired, and so much like that frightened teenaged girl huddled on her bed.

“L-Lucas,” she stammered. Her eyes darted from his face and settled over his shoulder. He moved into her line of vision, but she only crossed her arms, and stared down to the table.

“May I sit?” he asked pulling out the chair across from her.

She shrugged. He knew her. She was shutting him out already.

She licked her lips. “What are doing in Des Moines?” she asked as he sat down.

“Visiting my cousin and his family. He owns this bar.”

This close he could see the strain in her features, the lines creased in her forehead.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She shrugged again. He hated that shrug.

“Yeah. How are you?”

He bumped his Stetson against his thigh and leaned back in his chair, giving her a bit more space. He saw her tension ease just a tad.

“I’m fine. I own a ranch in Horseshoe Bluff, Wyoming called Devil Creek Ranch. It belonged to my grandfather, he passed away a couple of years ago. You remember him, right? He came to visit while you were living with us.”

A small smile flitted across her face, but didn’t stay. “I’m sorry to hear that. He was nice.”

Lucas wasn’t used to feeling awkward and out of control. But right now, he felt pretty damned awkward and out of control. Only Melody could do that to him. It felt surreal to think he was staring at his wife right now. A woman he hadn’t had any contact with in nine years. He had questions, but every last one of them stuck in his throat.

Silence stretched tight between them. Melody fidgeted

with a napkin, picking it apart bit by bit. He could empathize with that napkin, because she'd done the same thing to him the night she'd fled from his parents' home without a word. Then again when she'd bailed on him in Vegas, leaving behind her wedding band.

"Melody, something's bothering you, and I don't think it's me. I could see it before you ever spotted me in the bar."

She shrugged. He shifted, fighting impatience, and dropped his hat on the table top. He signaled for the waitress and she appeared. He ordered a beer, picked up the empty shot glass on the table, did a quick sniff, and ordered Melody another vodka. When the waitress disappeared, he fought the impulse to reach across the table and grab Melody's hands. Protective instinct welled up inside of him. He'd sworn once to protect her and he sensed she needed his protection.

Instead of reaching for her he balled his hands in his lap.

She darted a look to his face then stared around the bar. "I'm just so shocked to see you here, that's all," she finished.

"Liar," he countered.

The waitress reappeared. He thanked her and slapped a twenty-dollar bill on her tray. "Keep the change," he told her, effectively dismissing her.

"I'm not lying, I *am* shocked to see you."

"I know something else is bothering you. Please, Mels, tell me what it is. You know you can trust me. Whatever it is I can help you." Because whatever it was he *would* help her. He had to when it came to Melody Adams.

He knew trust didn't come easily for her, but he wanted it now more than ever. They had so many things to deal with tonight, and he didn't need her pulling a disappearing act again. It seemed whenever things got heavy between them she disappeared. Like when he was seventeen and she was sixteen. Like Las Vegas.

"Oh, Lucas." Her voice trembled and she picked up the

vodka and tossed it back. She set the glass down and ran her finger around the rim. The innocent action sent heat low in his belly and he silently cursed. Melody was in trouble and his damned cock got the wrong ideas. He chugged his beer.

"I, um, sort of owe some people some money, and I don't know how to get it."

Lucas frowned. "You mean a bank?"

Her shoulders sagged. "No."

Lucas had often worried she might fall into bad habits since she'd had such a rough childhood. Though she'd never divulged much he knew enough because he'd seen how it'd scarred her emotionally.

He reached across the table and with his fingertips, tipped her chin up. She tensed with his touch, her gaze settling on his face. Those big eyes rimmed by long, dark lashes stared into his. She still didn't bother with makeup, something she'd never needed to be perfect.

"Tell me what's happened," he said firmly but softly. She started to turn her head, but he grasped her chin tighter and leaned across the table. He wouldn't let her move away, not until he had answers. "I can't help you if I don't know what's happened."

He saw tears shining in her eyes and his protective instinct flared hotter.

"You can't help me, Lucas." She sounded so alone and desperate. "I owe them twenty-five-thousand dollars. If I don't pay, then..."

She sniffed and a single tear slipped down her cheek. He shifted his hand and caught it on his thumb. In the months he'd known her he'd never seen her cry. Even when a group of neighborhood bullies had kicked her ass. Her tears were frightening.

"I want to know what the debt is for, Melody." He kept his voice calm but stern.

She sagged into his hand. "It's for gambling. I made some bad bets with some worse people."

He released her and sat back, closing his eyes, feeling the blow from her whispered words. Twenty-five-thousand dollars was a hell of a lot of money, but he felt Melody's fear, and it crawled inside of him. She'd always seemed at once strong and yet incredibly fragile. Like an old, sturdy oak that at last gives way to the storm. He felt responsible for her now, because at seventeen he'd taken responsibility for her. Responsibility wasn't something he could easily shirk.

He couldn't very well leave her here at the mercy of a bunch of bookies. God knew what they'd do to her, a waifish woman who topped out at five-foot-six.

An idea took root in the back of his mind. A crazy idea, as crazy as the night he'd proposed then married her. Though this time he didn't have alcohol to blame it on, he only had the strange hold Melody always had on him.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Melody said.

She slipped off the bar chair and headed to the ladies' room. He picked up her phone and, finding it unlocked, texted himself, so he'd have her number. When she returned, he nodded to her phone.

"I programmed my number in your cell. I want to help you, Mels. I know you well enough to understand you're wanting space, but I'm going to call you later. Answer the call. Promise me."

Melody shrugged. God, he *hated* that shrug. He grasped her chin and forced her gaze to his. Then he cupped her cheek and he felt her lean slightly into his touch. A small victory, because she never liked to be touched.

"Promise me you'll answer my call," he said again.

"Okay. Yes, I promise."

Then she walked away, and Lucas wondered if letting her leave was yet another huge mistake.