

# ENTWINED

TORN BETWEEN TWO LOVERS

A Steamy Romance  
of  
Desire and Decisions

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## CHAPTER ONE

# MERRIAM

It's past midnight when I push my front door open and toss my keys onto the little side table. "Home again, home again," I whisper to myself. The place is so quiet, filled with the emptiness of having been nearly abandoned for so long. If it weren't for my maid, Marta, it would be floor-to-ceiling dust. I don't want to unpack but I don't remember when Marta comes back and some of the clothes wrinkle so easily, I might as well do it myself. Even though all I can think about is sinking into a steaming bubble bath. That will have to wait. Besides, I'm in an entirely different time zone and I'm not tired.

For the last three weeks, I've been in Italy with my nephew and his new wife. On the last day, we trekked through Rome, and I foolishly wore these adorable flats because I was heading to the airport directly after the Colosseum. I should have known better. The last time I visited the city was five or six years ago when I had an interest in taking a silent partnership with a vineyard. I ended up going with a French company and it turned

out to be a better investment. I hadn't had a reason to go back to Rome until the invitation arrived in my email. It was, I'll admit, a lovelier holiday than I'd expected. Still, far too much walking! I take my luggage up the wooden and metal stairs and head to my bedroom. The quicker I can get this chore done, the quicker I can unwind.

I have two favorite rooms in the house, my bedroom, and the library. Both are my favorite for the same reason: the view.

My country home is huge, sprawling, and a good portion is triple pane windows. The library wing on the south side, and my bedroom on the north side, both face a small lake that's nestled in the treeline at the base of the mountains. I don't own the mountains, of course, but when I wake up they're the first things I see and the last thing, too. So, they feel like my little piece of earth. With no neighbors on either side of me for miles, the view isn't obstructed. That's why I bought this place. Spending so much time bouncing from city to glamorous city is wonderful but I need a secret little quiet corner all of my own where nobody expects anything from me. So, I picked the big sky in Montana. This is it. I fell in love after my family went on a camping trip way back when I was only a child. I bought my first condo out in Billings as a graduation present to myself. I still have it but now I have this house, too. I bought it as a wedding present for Abram when we got married and every season we spent here, it felt like a honeymoon. When he died, I thought about selling the place. It hurt so much to be here without him,

but I couldn't go through with it. Selling it meant selling part of him, selling all the good and bad memories.

In the past, we spent the late spring and summer here. In the fall and winter we would go to one of our other favorite destinations: Cabo, Roatan or my vineyard in Loire Valley. Winters are so cold in Montana, and although it's fantastic for a couple of weeks of skiing, we weren't really the type to endure the long, dark months.

That was then.

Since Abram died, three years ago, I haven't allowed myself to have the springs and summers here. I've learned to appreciate the autumn months. I've made them my own, so I can still share the space that once was ours, without having to look in the face of what I can never have again. I tried, I really did, but it didn't last more than a day, and after having a breakdown in the kitchen, I escaped to my condo in Billings. Then I booked an Australian cruise and I told Marta not to expect me the rest of the year. Perhaps it was cowardly of me, or irresponsible, but I trust Marta and my brother and his family are known to drop in and borrow the house for their skiing holidays. I wasn't worried that my home, my beautiful charming place that Abram and I created, would fall into shambles.

It's hard to get used to the bedroom each time I step into it. I keep thinking that I'll catch a glimpse of Abram's ghost in the mirror, see him sitting on the chair by the window, tugging off his dress socks.

It takes over an hour to hang up all the clothes I've bought on holiday, and sort my shoes and dirty clothes away into the proper bins. Once I do, I take off my makeup, go through my skin and teeth care routine, and slip into a nightgown before crawling into the bed. I will myself to get tired, and stare out the window, not seeing the mountains but knowing that they're there. It's an overcast night, so not even the lake is reflecting anything. It's all black and windy. I imagine that Abram is in the bed, snoring beside me. At any moment, his arm will fall across my hips. It doesn't and so I hug a pillow into my chest and close my eyes.

The perks of being the shareholder and partner of a company your father started are that when you have struggles with sleep, you don't have to worry much if you're going to sleep past your alarm and be late for work. I'm a habitual morning person, so tardiness from me is far and few between. Still, since I didn't drift off until the sun was already creeping into the sky, I'm glad for this privilege. I'm also semi-retired and that's another bonus.

I've ended up in the middle of the bed, something that I'm disappointed in. I don't like sleeping alone and have always preferred another body beside me. For a while, I keep my eyes closed in an attempt to convince my body to continue sleeping, but it's eight hours ahead of schedule. So, I stretch out slowly and open my eyes at last. It's noon. That means Marta is awake and can bring me the newspaper and my breakfast. Or brunch, I suppose. Out of habit, I hit a brass call button next to the alarm clock, then wait to feel myself again.

To my surprise, Marta appears half an hour later with a tray of coffee, toast and jam, and a hard-boiled egg. She sets it down on the side of the bed and takes the newspaper and mail out of her apron pocket, handing them all to me. “I didn’t know you were home already. Do you need help unpacking?”

“No thank you,” I say, searching for the pearl-handled letter opener I keep at my bedside. “I did it last night but there are a few things I’m having shipped over. They might arrive today or tomorrow.”

“Of course,” she says. Marta is a great housekeeper. She’s friendly, attentive, and has been a companion of sorts since I was twenty. This is why I trust her so much. She’s only a few years older than me and in some ways I see her like the sister I’ve never had or the less irritable auntie I always felt I deserved. We’re at an age now that the grays are showing in our hair. Her’s less prominent since she keeps hers dyed the naturally soft brown she was born with. It’s only noticeable when she skips an appointment, and her lean muscle is starting to getropy. Sometimes I want to ask her why the hairs at my temples make me look ancient if my laugh lines are actually unattractive wrinkles, and, oh my God, do I have a turkey neck? I wonder if Marta looks at me and thinks to herself ‘When did we get so old?’

When Abram was alive, I used to think how silly I’d been as a child to think that the forties were old, awful, and uninspired. But, now that I have reached past that milestone, I never felt more alive! God willing I still have another forty or fifty years

ahead of me, but grief makes me feel old and dragged down. It makes me feel the way I thought I would as a child. I want to be fully retired when I'm fifty, so I can spend my golden years traveling and lounging about and not looking at the stock market or the tax brackets or company invoices and hiring freezes. With my family's company as successful as it is, this is an easy step. I'm already halfway there, only working three or four days a week. Except I always pictured retirement with Abram. Now he's gone and it's so lonely traveling, I've often thought about taking a commercial flight instead of a private one just to have someone sitting next to me. Am I going to be one of those wizened old ladies who travels with their housekeeper? Would Marta want that or would it just feel like more work for her instead of a vacation? Maybe I should just work until I die. That might be best.

Marta bustles around my bedroom, gathering up the dirty laundry and making sure the curtains are open wide while I smear plum jam over my toast and read the first letter I received while away. She hovers at the door, "Are you okay, Merriam? Do you need an aspirin or something?"

I shake my head, feeling the little throb in my brain. "No. That's alright. I'm sure the coffee will fix it."

"Okay then. In an hour I'm going to the store to get the shopping done. Then I'll be back."

By the time I've finished my breakfast and reading, Marta is long gone and the house is silent around me. I turn on the radio to soft, classical music and set it so that the music travels



through the house. The only part it doesn't reach is the basement kitchen, where I make myself another pot of coffee. Then I go to the library to respond to emails on my home computer, search for when my packages are due to arrive, and try to find something to read to occupy my time. I've always felt listless in the day or two after travel and have never understood it. I suppose it's because the romantic half of me is back in the adventure of new cultures while the business half of me is scrambling, searching for how to make up for lost time. There just simply isn't much for me to do business-wise as there was twenty years ago when I was fighting to make a name for myself, proving I was more than a child of nepotism.

The packages I'm waiting for are a new hobby. During the holiday, we all went to one of those studios that host painting parties. We drank a lot of wine and did our best to pay attention to a woman who was trying to educate us on how to use acrylic paints to create shadows and lighting on flowers. I had more fun than I imagined. In fact, I was addicted to it, and for the rest of the holiday, whenever we went to a museum, I noticed things about the paintings I hadn't before. I know I can never be one of those great masters but I can at least attempt. It's not like I don't have the time. So, I ordered a bunch of art supplies from the local store here in Billings and I'm waiting for them to show up. I bought the instructor's art books as well and took them on the flight with me to study.

I already know that I'm going to set up my new easel on the balcony for good weather days and practice painting my

backyard. When I get good enough, maybe I'll put in a deer by the water or a black bear. I know I want to start with landscapes because the books I read on the airplane all said that was easier than painting people. I'm not sure if I could ever paint people because I just can't imagine myself sitting in a classroom and staring at a naked stranger for hours at a time. Then again, I never imagined I would like painting or have a dead husband. So, there it is.

Marta returns from her shopping trip around three o'clock and then there is a buzzing at the gate from a delivery driver with all of my art supplies. While she puts away the groceries and cleaning equipment, I start unpacking my new tools. My thoughts scramble with all the images and scenes I want to paint: The tree on the south side of the house. No! A coffee mug with steam curling out of it and behind the steam, my mountains! No! The meadow in springtime when all the wildflowers are just starting to bloom! No! My library windows are looking out at my view while rain splashes across the glass. How do I do that? How do I make rain and light and mountains?

I'm in the middle of opening the box full of canvases when there's another buzzing at the gate. Marta comes out of the kitchen and looks at me quizzically. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"Not at all. Are you?"

"No." She takes her phone out of her back pocket and taps on the screen, searching for the home camera app we both have installed on our devices. "Oh! It's the neighbor."

“Who?” I ask, standing up to see her screen better. A cowboy hat fills the screen. He’s standing too close for me to get a good look at him but I can see the lower half of his face. A strong, clean-shaven jaw, and thin lips that look pulled up into a perpetual grin like a cat’s.

“Your neighbor on the other side of the bend,” Marta explains to me. “Do you remember Michael Earl Reeves?”

“Yes, of course. That isn’t him.”

“It’s his son Caleb.” She clicks on the button so that the gate swings open to let him in.

“I didn’t know he had a son.”

“Apparently, they were estranged and now that Michael is ill, he’s put his son in a living will and is setting him up to take over the ranch,” Marta says.

She knows all sorts of good information like this because she’s friends with the other people who work on the surrounding ranches and designer get-a-way homes. Since I’m in and out all the time, I depend on her for the good gossip so I don’t end up saying the wrong thing since I don’t know who is feuding with who otherwise.

I check myself in the mirror, wondering if I should go and slap on a bit of lipstick and mascara, but the doorbell rings and I decide against making the young man wait around. Marta opens the door and he takes off his hat before stepping inside. He’s tall, tan, with wide shoulders and a gentle expression. The back of his sandy brown hair sticks up from where the static from his

hat caught it. He has sleepy eyes, the kind that turn down and always look a little sad. “Hello, ma’am. You’re Mrs. Eldeeb?”

I nod. I kept the family name even after Abram and I got married. Yes, it was unconventional but my name holds more status than his. “You can call me Merriam, of course. Would you like something to drink?”

“Water would be fine, thanks.”

“Marta, will you bring us a pitcher to the library?”

Marta smiles and gives Caleb’s arm an encouraging squeeze before she leaves. I beckon him to follow me to the library and I’m surprised to find that he’s light on his feet. Most of the ranchers I’ve met have a terrible habit of scuffing their boot heels across the floor. He keeps his hat held in front of his chest and for a moment, I imagine I’ve been transported back two hundred years. I motion to a set of soft armchairs by one of the windows and he waits for me to sit. It’s old-school charm that I didn’t expect from someone as young as him.

“What can I help you with today?” I ask, settling into the cloudy comfort of my chair just as Marta comes in with the blue carnival glass set. She pours us each a cup of water, ice-clinking around, then gives Caleb another encouraging look before leaving, closing the door behind her. I wonder what’s conspired between the two of them and hope that Caleb is the sort of cowboy who cuts to the chase and doesn’t mince words.

“Well, to be frank, ma’am. My dad’s put our land in a bad way. He’s not much when it comes to cattle and overbought the last couple of years. Our grasses are over-grazed. Now, I’ve sold off

all the heads we didn't have room for and I made a pretty good buck out of it but the way it stands, I can't wave the money in front of our plots hoping it'll let the grass grow."

"Why not sell the rest of the cattle and then buy new ones once your grass is all fixed?" I ask.

Caleb stares at me, his upturned mouth and downturned eyes pressed into something flat and expressionless. He says, slowly, and in a tone that is clear he thinks I'm an imbecile and has only just now realized it. "Because? How will I pay for new cattle if I don't have any to calf this year?"

"Oh, I see. Of course." I'm about to ask why he can't just use a rainy-day fund or a savings account that surely he must have, but as I'm not his accountant or business partner, there's no need for me to ask about his financing. Still, that's what I would do. I'd get rid of the lot, make the money off them, invest the profits, and then buy new ones in a year or two. It doesn't seem very hard.

He clears his throat and reaches for his water, takes a slow sip, then sets it down again. He's very careful with the glass like he's worried he'll break it. "As it stands. I'll need a plot of land to let my remaining cattle to graze in the springtime and I was hoping I could rent your western half for the season."

"The western half?" I repeat. There's a line of trees that splits what I consider the backyard, which has the lake, and the rest of the property. It's about one hundred acres in total.

"Yes ma'am. I have fifty head of cattle and that's just the size I need to get them through a year. After that, I'll have my first

grazing plot ready to move them back next year. That'll give my far grazing two years to recover and I can get back on track."

"How many cows did your father have if you had two plots that are unusable?" I know nothing about ranching but the conversation is interesting to me.

Caleb clears his throat again and thumbs the crest of his hat. "We had two hundred. The cost to keep their hooves trimmed alone was doing us in. Rule of thumb is that you have to have two or so acres for a cow-calf. We were already overdone and had so many heads ready to calf. The soil would have been ruined and beyond repair if I let it go. Now, I've got thirty acres left untouched and that's not enough for the cows I have left."

"What happens to my grass, though? Won't you be ruining it?" I ask, refilling my water glass to give my hands something to do.

"It'll grow back. Think of cattle like nature's lawn mower. The ratio is good. If you'd like, I can keep ten on that thirty acres. I'd aimed on cleaning it up and widening the plot a bit by selling off some of the lumber, but I can do that next season. I can pay four percent of the market value right now per acre." Caleb runs his thumb over the curve of his hat again but he doesn't break eye contact with me. I appreciate this, I know talking about money causes anxiety in some people. "I know that's on the low end of the scale but it's the best I can do. I'm just trying to recover, ma'am."

I nod. It's not like I'm using the West plot for anything. Abram had wanted a tennis court and swimming pool. I wanted

a guest house. It was something we never agreed on. “Give me a day or two for some research on my end. I’ll need to speak to a few of my own people before I make such a big transaction.”

“Yes ma’am. I won’t take up any more of your time.” He stands and so I do, too. He’s so very tall that I have to lean back a little to catch his eye. As we walk to the front door, he smooths down his dark hair before putting his hat back on. “I appreciate you hearing me out.”

“Sure. Why don’t you come by around noon on Wednesday? I’ll have an answer by then.”

“That sounds fine,” he says. “Thank you.”

I watch him walk down the curve of the driveway where a roan horse is ground tied. He hooks his boot in the stirrup and swings onto the saddle with a smooth swoop of his other leg. Then he touches the brim of his hat with his knuckle as a final farewell to me, before trotting down beyond the hills toward the gate and beyond my view. With his fitted jeans, tough jacket, that hat, I can’t help but imagine Caleb cut out from a different era. He’s attractive. Certainly too young for me, but...very, very attractive. He is a fantasy, come off the pages of a grocery store romance novel. I wouldn’t mind that bit of scenery. Not one bit.