

Burning Down the House

Lori Sjoberg

Copyright © 2016 by Lori Sjoberg

Lori Sjoberg (2016-02-08). Burning Down the House
First Electronic Edition: February 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews. Fonts used with permission from Microsoft.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Sign up for Lori's mailing list for the latest new releases, contests, giveaways and more! Click [HERE](#) to get started!

Chapter One

MEGAN WOODWARD WATCHED from her spot by the curb while firefighters doused the flames inside her one-bedroom apartment.

“What happened?” asked Mrs. Bukur, her elderly next-door neighbor. A small crowd of onlookers had gathered across the street from her building, all trying to figure out the cause of the fire so they could add the information to the community gossip chain.

Megan shrugged, her stomach in knots. “I have no idea.”

She’d left the apartment long enough to pick up a bottle of wine and some ice cream. By the time she’d returned, the bedroom was fully engulfed in flames. The fire department arrived within minutes of her calling 911, and the four-man crew had wasted no time in its efforts to extinguish the blaze. She only hoped the damage wasn’t too extensive.

Fighting a shiver, she hugged her arms around her torso. Compared to the rest of the country, February in Florida wasn’t all that bad. However, she hadn’t planned on being outside for this long, and the nip of winter had seeped through her long-sleeved shirt and yoga pants, chilling her to the bone.

A firefighter emerged through the front doorway and removed his protective helmet. At first glance, he appeared to be in his mid to late forties, fit but with a bit of a paunch and streaks of gray along his temples. When he saw her, he tipped his head in acknowledgment and walked in her direction.

“You live here, right?” he asked, and she nodded. “We contained the fire to the bedroom and the adjoining bathroom, but you’ve got a lot of smoke and water damage. The guys are cleaning up as much of the water as they can, but you might want

to find another place to stay until the rest of the damage is repaired.”

Shit. That’s what she’d been afraid of. On the bright side, most of her belongings were safely tucked away in a storage container. She’d moved back to her hometown a couple months ago, when her employer transferred her to the branch office just north of metro Orlando. But now that her mother had relocated to Atlanta and her childhood friends were no longer around, she didn’t know a lot of people in the area. “Any idea what caused it?”

His lips pressed into a thin line. “Not yet. Did you leave anything on when you left?”

She did a quick mental inventory. “I think I left the living room lights on. Maybe the TV. That’s about—”

“Found it,” a man’s deep voice shouted.

She jerked her head turned toward the sound. The voice seemed familiar, too familiar, and when her gaze locked onto the figure striding toward her, her stomach nearly dropped to her shoes.

Bruce Cobretti.

She hadn’t seen him in more than seven years, but she’d recognize those whiskey eyes anywhere. His tanned face was leaner than before, more sharply defined, with a few faint lines at the eyes. She and Bruce had dated for a while in college, but things had fallen apart when she decided to grow up and he continued to party like a frat boy. He was the first, last, and only man she’d ever loved, and ending the relationship had torn her heart to pieces. But what else was she supposed to do? She’d wanted a guy who would be there for her instead of spending almost every weekend on the couch with his buddies getting drunk and playing Xbox.

Something must have happened to convince him to toss out the beer funnel. Tonight, he was wearing a firefighter’s uniform and his thick black hair was now closely cropped and barely brushed the nape of his neck. When his dark, soulful gaze found hers, his mouth dropped open. Clearly, he hadn’t expected to see her either.

But then the surprise melted away, and a look of amusement replaced it.

“What was it?” the older man asked.

Bruce held up a small purple object, badly melted, and Megan immediately knew what it was.

Her rechargeable vibrator. She must have left it plugged in by the nightstand.

Oh. My. God. Of all the people in all the world to find her burned-up sex toy. A hot flush of embarrassment crept up her neck, and she silently wished for the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

“What’s that?” Mrs. Bukur asked, the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes fanning out as she squinted to see the object better.

“It’s a massage wand.” Technically, that’s what the label on the package read.

The old woman craned her neck forward, her voice loud enough to carry over the noise of the nearby fire truck. “Looks kind of small for a massage wand.”

“Well, it is.”

“It was probably a lot bigger before it melted,” Bruce offered, and Megan’s face flooded with heat.

The older firefighter’s gaze darted from Megan to Bruce and back to her again. “You two know each other?”

The muscle along Bruce’s jaw jumped, his eyes never leaving hers. “Yeah, we went to college together.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about that description. In a way, she appreciated him not airing their dirty laundry to everyone within earshot. On the other hand, she bristled at their relationship being reduced to nothing more than mere acquaintances.

Either way, the answer satisfied the other firefighter’s curiosity. “Ah, well, in that case, why don’t you walk her through so she can pack a bag for tonight?”

Bruce gave her a look, as if making sure she was okay with that, and when she nodded, he said, “No problem.”

Without a word, she followed him inside, her nose crinkling at the pungent, smoky smell. The soles of her shoes squeaked against the wet wood floor as they headed toward the rear of the building. When they entered the bedroom, she froze where she stood, too shocked at the sight of charred and soaking-wet *everything* to do anything more than stare.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his hand a comforting weight on her shoulder. “Maybe there’s another apartment where you can stay until the damage to this one is repaired.”

“Yeah.” She didn’t trust her voice not to crack if she said anything more.

Her vision blurred at the edges and her lower jaw trembled as she stared at her ruined dresser. Her dad had made it for her when she was four years old, and now it was a soggy, blackened mess. He couldn’t build her another; cancer made sure of that last year. Her eyes stung. Shit, no stopping it now. A choked sob shook her frame as teardrops spilled down her cheeks.

“Aw, hell.” Before she knew it, Bruce pulled her into his arms, the fabric of his flame-retardant coat scratchy against her cheek. He was a big man, around six-foot-two, and she found herself softening against the hard planes of his body. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you through this.”

What was he talking about? There was no “we.” This was nothing more than a chance encounter, ending when he returned to his station house and she drove to whatever hotel she’d be staying at tonight. The thought depressed her even more.

For a fleeting moment, she wondered about what could have been, if he hadn’t been so damn lackadaisical about his future and she hadn’t been so driven. As soon as the notion crossed her mind, she forced it out. She knew better than to play the “What If” game. She’d done what was best for her future, and there wasn’t any

point in playing with hypotheticals. With a heavy exhale, she steeled her resolve and stepped back from their embrace.

"I'll be fine," she said, swiping tears from her cheeks. The closet door was open, and she started riffling through her clothes in search of something not damaged by the fire.

Bruce stood behind her, close but not quite touching. "Do you have a place to stay?"

Nope. She didn't feel comfortable enough with the friends she'd made in the last month or two to ask if she could bunk on their couches. Ignoring the urge to turn to him for comfort, she pulled out a pair of waterlogged jeans and slung them over her arm. "I'll check into a hotel for the night."

He scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. I've got plenty of room. Stay with me."

Stunned by his statement, she twisted her neck to gape at him. "I haven't seen you in seven years."

"Seven years, two months and..." He hesitated as if doing the math. "Six days. What's your point?"

Was he serious? "My point is that's a long time. People change. For all I know, you could have turned into an axe murderer."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Well, I have an axe, but I swear I've never used it on anyone."

She propped a hand on her hip. "Then maybe I'm the axe murderer."

His gaze roamed over the length of her body, from head to toes and back again, as intimate as a caress. "I'm willing to take the chance." His expression went all serious when he stepped closer and tucked a strand of auburn hair behind her ear. When he drew back, his fingers brushed across her cheek, and the familiar gesture sparked a rush of warm memories from their time together. "Come on, stay at my place. It'll give us a chance to catch up. You can sleep in the guest bedroom, and I promise to be a total gentleman."

So much for her resolve. Even after all this time, she still trusted him, and she was more than a little curious about how he'd gone from frat boy to fireman. "Well, I suppose."

He flashed a smile, the one that used to make her panties damp. Correction: it still did. "Great. Pack some things. Once we finish cleaning up, you can follow me back to the station. We'll go home from there."

Oh, boy. A shiver raced down her spine, and she wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. For better or for worse, she'd just committed to spending the night at her ex-boyfriend's house.

Chapter Two

BRUCE GLANCED AT the side-view mirror, relieved to find Megan's headlights still trailing behind the fire truck.

Seeing her again after all these years was like being swept up in a time warp. His brain flipped back to his first day of calculus class, when Megan had sat in the empty chair to his right and sent his hormones into overdrive. Half the semester had passed before he'd mustered the courage to ask her out, and when he did, she'd agreed to pizza and a movie. Before long, they were joined at the hip, and when he'd finally sweet-talked her out of her clothes, he'd felt like the luckiest man alive.

Who would have thought a simple bedroom fire would lead him back to the only woman he'd ever loved? He'd never forgotten her. Never gotten over her. And though he'd never believed in fate or destiny, he damn well planned on taking full advantage of the opportunity that had just dropped into his lap.

He'd thought about her a lot over the past seven years, and more than once he'd been tempted to look her up to see how she was doing. Ultimately, he'd decided against it, first because he'd been too angry, then too proud, and eventually too much time had passed to do anything about it.

And now here she was, looking even more mouthwatering than she had the day she walked out of his life. The feel of her curves pressed against him earlier had sparked a deep, wicked yearning to see if those lush lips tasted as incredible as he remembered.

He'd bet his eyeteeth they did.

"Hey, Bruce, what's the story with Vibrator Girl?" Jimmy Ennis called out from the backseat of the cab. He was a good guy, one of the best firefighters Bruce had the honor of working beside, but he

could also be a royal prick when the mood struck him. Like now. “She’s way too hot to be fucking around with D batteries on a Saturday night.”

“Believe it or not, she’s his ex,” Austin Phillips, the station lieutenant, answered for him. He’d given the boss a quick rundown of his relationship with Megan as they finished packing up their gear.

“Seriously? You nailed Vibrator Girl and let her go?” Jimmy snorted in disgust. “What a dumbass.”

The upcoming traffic light changed from yellow to red, and as soon as their vehicle slowed to a stop, Bruce twisted around in his seat to glare at Jimmy. “The next time you call her ‘Vibrator Girl,’ I’ll rip off your goddamn balls.”

Ryan Levy, the other firefighter sitting in the back of the cab, let out a low whistle. “Damn, must be serious. Maybe you can break her of that vibrator addiction.”

Everyone—well, everyone except for Bruce—busted out laughing, while the vein on Bruce’s forehead throbbed like it was about to explode. He hadn’t felt this protective and possessive about a woman since...well, since Megan. And it wasn’t like he hadn’t been with other women since they broke up. He had. A lot. But none of them came close to meaning as much to him as Megan did. He tightened his grip around the steering wheel to stop himself from doing anything stupid.

“Aw, come on, man, you know we’re just yanking your chain,” Jimmy said as soon as he stopped laughing.

Bruce let out a grunt of acknowledgment. Sure, the guys were just kidding around like they always did, but he hated Megan being the object of their amusement. The light turned green, and he hooked a right onto the road leading back to the station house. Glancing left, he checked the mirror again. Yep, there she was, following about four car-lengths behind.

“So what happened with her?” Austin asked.

“I was young and stupid, and I fucked things up.” If they wanted more details, they were shit out of luck.

Honestly, it was a wonder he and Megan had lasted as long as they had. She was everything he ever wanted in a woman: smart and beautiful, with a vibrant personality that bordered on contagious. But he’d been too young, too damn immature, and in his quest to enjoy the first taste of freedom since moving away from his puritanical family, he’d blown his chance with the best thing that ever happened to him.

The cab went quiet for nearly a minute. “Sorry man,” Jimmy said, breaking the silence. “Maybe you can make it up to her or something.”

“Maybe.” Bruce motioned behind him with his thumb. “She’s following us back to the station. We’re going out for coffee when my shift’s over.” The coffee part was a lie, but her staying overnight at his place wasn’t any of their business, so he didn’t feel bad about it.

“No shit?” Ryan shoved his head out the open window and looked behind them. “Damn, Bruce. I’m impressed.”

“Just testing the waters.” He only hoped she’d give him another chance. Before the night was over, he planned on proving to her that he wasn’t the same irresponsible asshole she’d dumped during their senior year of college.

Austin clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Good luck. You can cut out as soon as we reach the station.”

“Are you sure?”

“You were supposed to leave two hours ago. Ramsey can do the equipment check.”

Who would have thought he’d have to thank Ramsey for not coming to work on time? If the other firefighter hadn’t been late, Bruce would have gone home when his shift was over, and he never would have run into Megan.

And that would have been a crying shame.

As he slowly backed the truck into the garage of the fire station house, he saw Megan drive her sporty little black two-seater into the adjacent parking lot and pull into an empty spot. He tossed the keys to Austin and hopped out of the cab, ignoring the ribbing and trash-talk from the guys as he rushed to change into his street clothes.

A short time later, with his own keys in hand, he barely noticed the chill in the air as he exited the station and strode down the sidewalk leading to the parking lot. There she was, still sitting in her car, reading something on her phone.

A punch of raw emotion knocked the air from his lungs and stopped him dead in his tracks. He stood there for a few moments, unable to move, taking in her profile and kicking himself for the millionth time because he'd lost her all those years ago.

"Doing okay?" he asked when he finally found his voice, and her head jerked up at the sound. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

Those beautiful blue eyes flicked up to meet his gaze, and she offered a weak smile. Not a stitch of makeup, not even lipstick, and she still looked more beautiful than a runway model. "It's all right. I wasn't expecting you to come out so soon. I figured you probably had stuff to do before you could leave."

"Nah, my shift ended a couple hours ago. I went on the last call only because my relief hadn't shown up yet." Trying hard not to act like an overanxious teenager, he motioned with his head to the right. "My truck's over there. You can follow me or ride along, it's up to you."

She didn't even hesitate. "I'll follow."

That shouldn't surprise him. She'd always been the cautious type and probably wanted her vehicle nearby in case she needed to make a quick getaway. But a part of him had been hoping she'd trust him enough to leave her car at the station.

"Sounds good," he said, keeping his voice light. "In case we get separated, the address is 820 Heron Cove."

His stomach lurched as he climbed into his truck and buckled the seatbelt. Another wave of memories flooded his mind and reinforced one undeniable fact—he still loved her. He always would. If she was coming to his house, then he still had a chance, and he made a silent vow not to blow it.

Chapter Three

MEGAN PULLED UP to the curb in front of Bruce's house, wondering what kind of drugs he was selling to afford a place this extravagant.

Without a doubt, the house was way above a firefighter's pay grade. Nestled deep within a country club community, the massive two-story home stood in a quiet cul-de-sac with well-manicured yards and cars that cost more money than most people made in a year.

Parked in the driveway, Bruce climbed out of his truck and closed the door behind him. Now that he'd changed into regular clothes, Megan had a much better view of his body. He was lean and fit, with muscled arms, wide shoulders, and a broad chest that tapered down to a trim waist. Considering the physical demands of his job, it really shouldn't surprise her. And damn, he wore it well. She rubbed a hand along her chin to make sure she wasn't drooling.

As if reading her thoughts about the house, he said, "I bought it at a foreclosure auction. The interior had a lot of damage, so I've been doing the repairs on my days off. As soon as I get it all fixed up, I'm putting it back on the market."

Okay, that made sense, which made her feel guilty about being so damn judgmental and assuming the worst of him. She followed him up the stone walkway leading to the front entrance. "It's great. Nice neighborhood."

"Thanks. It's a little big, but with the real estate market rebounding like it is, I'll get a great return on my investment." He unlocked the door and held it open for her. "After you."

One of the lights had been left on in the living room, illuminating soft beige walls and dark wood flooring. The smell of freshly cut wood lingered in the air, most likely from the fireplace at the far wall. There wasn't much in the way of furniture, but what was there looked trendy and comfortable.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Bruce asked as he set his keys on the bar separating the living room and kitchen areas. He crossed to the unfinished kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "I've got water, Pepsi, beer, and...beer."

She couldn't help but smile. "After a night like tonight, a beer sounds pretty good."

"You got it." He popped the caps, then handed her a bottle and lightly clinked the neck of his against hers. "To pleasant surprises."

She sipped her beer, enjoying the burst of hoppy flavor against her tongue. She stole a quick glance in his direction, watching his throat move when he swallowed. Curious, she asked, "So how long have you been a fireman?"

"About four years. Once I finished my degree, I got my EMT certification." He took another drag off his beer and set the bottle on the black granite counter. "I volunteered for about eight months while I applied for full-time positions."

That didn't make sense. The Bruce she knew never mentioned any interest in becoming a firefighter. "But you were a business major. What changed?"

"You left." He lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug, but his eyes went distant as though he was reliving painful events from the past. "After we broke up...well, first I got drunk. But when I sobered up, I locked myself inside my apartment and took a long, hard look at my life. I didn't like what I saw." His mouth hitched up on one side. "So I cleaned up my act while I finished my last two semesters. Cut back on the drinking, stopped partying so much. Somewhere along the line, I realized that what I really wanted to be was a firefighter. It kind of went from there."

The look of fulfillment on his face had her smiling in return. “That’s great. I’m glad you found what you were meant to be.”

“So am I.” He leaned a hip against the counter, seeming totally at ease among the power tools and half-finished tile work. “How about you? What have you been up to the last seven years?”

She sipped her beer while collecting her thoughts. “Well, after graduation I accepted a position as a financial analyst for a company in Seattle.” She left out the part about how much she’d missed him, and how no other man had measured up. “I was there until about three months ago, when a position in the Orlando office opened.”

Interest sparked in his eyes. “You wanted to come back?”

No, not really. The possibility of running into him again, of learning that another woman had taken her place, had filled her with a sense of dread. But her employer had needed someone to clean up a huge mess, and she was the only person in-house who was qualified to handle the task. She knew it, they knew it, and after a few rounds of intense negotiations, she’d agreed to the cross-country move. “They made it worth my while.”

He tilted his head in acknowledgment. “No boyfriend, husband?”

“Not at the moment.” It was embarrassing enough that he’d found her battery-operated boyfriend. No way was she discussing her non-existent love life with him.

She’d dated a bit after moving to Seattle, but it was difficult to maintain a relationship when she was working an insane number of hours. And when she found time to date, she never felt the same sense of connection she’d experienced with Bruce. Which was odd, considering they were different in so many ways. He listened to country while she enjoyed pop music. He didn’t like dancing. She didn’t like NASCAR. But when they’d been together, it all seemed to melt away until there was nothing but him, her, and a chemistry that burned hotter than a supernova.

Not to mention a few sets of sheets.

Too bad it hadn't been enough to build a future on.

She glanced up again, her gaze meeting his, and electricity arced in the air between them. Oh, yeah, the chemistry was definitely still there, just waiting to be tapped. Sparks of desire sped through her system, followed by a flush that heated every inch of her skin. She licked her lips, and his eyes tracked the movement with a predatory intensity.

Without a word, he pushed off the counter and crossed the short distance between them. This close, she saw the gold fleck in his left eye and the thin scar that sliced through one eyebrow. Slowly, he lowered his head, but just when she thought he was going to kiss her, something that felt like tiny needles pricked her calf. She yelped, jerking her leg in reflex.

"Knock it off, Roxie," Bruce said, and a large black cat streaked across the polished wood floor and jumped onto the back of the brown leather couch. He gave Megan an apologetic look. "Sorry about that. She's not even my cat. She sort of came with the house."

All the time she'd known him, he'd always been more of a dog person. "I'm assuming there's a good story behind this."

He shook his head. "No, not really. Her owners must have left her behind when they abandoned the house, because I found her living in the garage. One of her legs is kind of messed up, so she can't live outdoors, and I didn't have the heart to bring her to animal control. So I got her spayed and made her an indoor cat."

She smiled, touched by his kindness. "Aw, that was nice of you to keep her."

Funny, how a little light praise could bring a faint blush to his cheeks. "Yeah, well..." He coughed into his fist before pointing toward the hall past the kitchen. "The guest bedroom's the second door to the right. There's a laundry room across the hall if you want to wash the smoke out of your clothes."

Now that he mentioned it, cleaning the smoky, soggy clothes in her overstuffed gym bag sounded like a great idea. “Thanks. For everything.”

“No problem.” He stared at her for a few heartbeats, as if trying to decide what to say or do next. “I’m going to head upstairs for a quick shower. If you’re not too tired, I’d like to talk some more once I’m clean.”

“Yeah, sure.”

She watched him bound up the stairs two at a time, appreciating the way his jeans hugged the contours of his ass. It triggered a memory of the way he used to feel on top of her. Inside her. Driving them both to oblivion. Her pulse kicked up a notch or two while a flash of heat burst through her body. She shook her head, but despite her best efforts, the memory refused to fade away.

When Bruce reached the top of the staircase, he peered over his shoulder at her and grinned. “Like what you see?”

Busted. “Maybe.”

His grin broadened to a smile, but he didn’t say anything else. He disappeared inside one of the rooms, the door clicking shut behind him.

Alone, she set her half-empty bottle on the bar and headed for the laundry room. Like the rest of the house, it was freshly painted and brightly lit. There was a full-size washer and dryer on one side and floor-to-ceiling wood shelves on the other. After unzipping her bag, she loaded the washer with her clothes, then added detergent and adjusted the settings.

Wow, that took a whole two minutes. Now what?

The door at the end of the hall was closed, so she went to check out the bedroom he said was hers for the night. Nothing to see there, just a queen-size bed and matching dresser. The third room looked like some kind of office, with a computer monitor on one end of a desk and a couple neat stacks of papers.

Still curious about the man Bruce had become, she returned to the main living area. There weren’t any pictures on the walls,

which made sense considering his intention of selling the house as soon as the renovations were completed.

One thing was for sure—he'd gotten a lot neater since they'd dated. There wasn't a single empty beer bottle, fast-food bag, or dirty dish lying around. No beer caps on the floor. But the thing that surprised her the most was the video game system by the television.

The PlayStation console was old, first or second generation if she had to hazard a guess. And judging by the layer of dust along the top, it hadn't been used in a while. The man she'd dated in college had owned all of the gaming systems, usually buying them the week they became available in stores. He'd been a gaming addict. Alone, with his buddies, it hadn't mattered. More than once, he'd been late for dates because he'd been so wrapped up in a game he'd completely lost track of time.

Footsteps on the stairs announced his return, and her heart nearly gave out at the sight of him in low-slung faded denim and a dark green Henley shirt with the sleeves pushed up past his elbows. His short black hair was damp from the shower and his feet were bare.

His face lit up when he saw her, like he wasn't expecting her to still be around. "Can I get you something to eat? I'm sorry, I should have asked earlier."

"No, thanks. I'm good." Even if she was hungry, she didn't think she could eat, not with him standing so close, watching her like she was the only thing that mattered in his entire universe.

His gaze moved over the length of her body, the stare so blatantly sexual it stole her breath away. "I never stopped thinking about you," he said, his voice low and rough. "You're the reason I turned my life around."

She let out a shaky laugh while her knees started to feel like rubber. "You did just fine without me."

He shook his head. "I did it because I wanted to be a better man. The kind of man you deserve. I didn't think I'd ever get to see

you again, but if I did..." He moved closer, and the crisp, clean scent of soap and man invaded her senses. For the first time that evening, he appeared a little nervous, dragging a hand through his hair. "Do you think...hell, I don't know... maybe we could try again? We could go as fast or as slow as you want."

It was hard to think straight with him standing this close. His long, lean body threw off a lot of heat, chasing away the last bits of chill she'd been feeling from being outside for so long. She drew a deep breath, taking in his scent, and a different kind of hunger curled low in her belly and settled between her thighs.

God help her, she wanted him. *Badly*. Just the thought of how he used to make her body feel, and her heart slammed against her rib cage. But things hadn't ended well between them the first time around. What made her think this time would be different?

Because he *was* different, said the voice inside her head. Gone was the immature college student, and in his place was a grown man with a career, a house, and responsibilities. What was the harm in taking a chance and seeing how things went between them? Besides, she had wants and needs just like every other woman, and right now she wanted a big order of Bruce, with some hot, sweaty sex on the side.

Throwing caution to the wind, she closed the short distance between them. She laced her arms around his neck and twined her fingers in his hair. Just the feel of him pressed against her made her whole body rev. Pulse racing, she gave him her best seductive smile. "Why don't you kiss me and we'll see where things go?"

BRUCE DIDN'T WAIT for a second invitation. He lifted her onto the back of the couch and nudged her knees apart to stand between them. Her eyes widened, but he didn't give her a chance to change her mind. He kissed her, his fingers tangling in her hair, holding her head in place while he plundered her lush mouth.

God, she tasted even better than he remembered, something he hadn't even thought was possible. He sank into the kiss, stroking every inch of her mouth with his tongue, relishing the soft moan of pleasure she made as her body bowed against him. He wanted so much more but forced himself to go slow, determined not to freak her out by mauling her like some kind of animal.

Lightly, he skimmed his hands down her sides, stopping at the swell of her hips before slipping his hands beneath her shirt. Her skin felt smooth, silky, toned, and even though it damn near killed him to do it, he took his time getting reacquainted with the contours of her body. Up and down her back, over her ribs, not stopping until he reached the soft undersides of her breasts. He paused, waiting for her reaction, and she let out a frustrated sound.

"Damn it, Bruce." The sound of his name on her lips just about did him in. Then she ran a hand down his shirt, past his belt, stroking his erection through his jeans, and the last shreds of his control snapped like a twig.

Fuck it. There'd be time for finesse later.

Leaning back, he pulled her shirt up and over her head and tossed it to the floor. The bra came off next, and for a long moment he was knocked senseless by the sight of her gorgeous breasts and rose-colored nipples. Unable to resist, he dipped his head and took one puckered nipple into his mouth, sucking gently while he flicked the tender tip with his tongue.

Megan gasped, her head falling back, her fingers tunneling through his hair, urging him to take more. She kicked off her shoes and wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer, the hard length of his cock pressed firmly against the juncture between her legs.

Now it was his turn to groan as a thick haze of lust fogged his brain. If he didn't get inside her soon, he'd probably go insane. But before he took any pleasure for himself, he wanted to watch her come.

It took a few tries, but he finally untied the knotted drawstring of her black yoga pants. He dragged the fabric past her hips, over her thighs, and down her long, toned legs. The only clothing left on her body was a tiny triangle of bright pink lace that covered her most intimate area. He couldn't wait to remove it, to taste her there, to see if she was as sweet and decadent as he remembered.

But as he hooked his fingers beneath the waistband, the front door swung open and a woman's voice shouted, "Honey, I'm home!"

Chapter Four

THE SOUND OF another woman's voice was like a bucket of ice water over Megan's libido.

Her eyelids flew open, and with a shriek, she vaulted off the back of the couch, dragging her blouse over her head so fast it was a wonder she didn't rip the fabric. She scooped the rest of her clothes off the floor, balancing on one leg while she shoved the other into her pants.

Oh, God, how could she have been so stupid? Since she hadn't seen a ring on his finger, she hadn't bothered to ask if he was in a relationship. Then again, he could have offered the information, but that didn't ease her guilty conscience. She'd never poached another woman's man before, and it made her feel lower than dirt.

"Shit," Bruce muttered, his brows drawn low. "Megan, I—"

"No," she snapped as she raised a hand in the air to silence him. "I don't want to hear it."

Reining in her temper, she turned her attention to the woman standing by the front door. Good lord, she looked like she was barely out of her teens. Tall, curvy, and wearing all black, she had humongous boobs, lots of tattoos, and an expression on her face that was somewhere between confused and annoyed.

"I'm sorry," Megan said, unable to look the woman in the eyes. She bit the inside of her cheek, fighting back the onslaught of emotions. She wanted to cry, wanted to scream, but most of all she wanted to get the hell out of there before things really got ugly. "I didn't know. Just give me a minute to get my things and I'll be gone."

Not waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and bolted down the hall.

BRUCE WATCHED AS Megan streaked out of the room like her hair was on fire, the bedroom door slamming behind her.

Should he go right after her and explain everything or give her some time to calm down? Damned if he knew the correct answer. For a moment, he felt paralyzed by the fear that he'd choose the wrong path and fuck things up even more than they already were.

He slanted a glance at the woman standing by the front door. This wasn't her fault, but he couldn't help being pissed off at her. "Your timing sucks."

Normally, he didn't do the roommate thing, but the mortgage on the house ate a lot of his budget and the extra money gave him room to breathe. Aside from being a smartass, Zoe was a good kid, the oldest daughter of Austin, his station lieutenant. By day, she took classes at the community college, and at night, she waited tables at one of the local sports bars.

Zoe cocked one eyebrow, a smirk curving her mouth. "You always bring home such interesting people."

Actually, he didn't bring home many people at all. His schedule at the station didn't leave much time for a social life, and when he had a day off, he usually spent it working on repairs to the house.

"Damn it, Zoe, do you have any idea how many years—"

"Not my problem," Zoe cut him off before he could finish the sentence. She walked to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "They're called bedrooms, Bruce. Use one if you don't want to get interrupted. And while we're at it, do you mind not having sex on the couch?" Her upper lip peeled back. "I don't want that mental image stuck in my brain when I'm sitting there doing my homework."

Down the hall, a door opened, and the washing machine stopped running. He needed to explain things to Megan before she walked out of his life for good.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he said as he rounded the couch and headed to the laundry room.

As expected, he found her pulling her sopping wet clothes out of the washer. At his approach, she twisted her head in his direction, looking madder than a hive full of hornets.

“Not listening,” she said as she scooped out the last of her things and slammed the washer lid shut.

Her reaction reminded him of the day they broke up and anger sparked in his system. Eyes narrowed, he shut the door behind him and moved deeper into the room. “Yeah, you’re pretty good at that.”

That got her attention. Her posture stiffened. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you refuse to listen to reason once you’ve made up your mind about something.”

She cocked a hand on her hip. “That’s not true.”

“Oh, really?” His voice jacked up a couple notches in volume. “How about you not giving me a chance once you got it into your head that I was nothing but a frat boy?”

Her eyes thinned to slits. “You weren’t a frat boy. You just acted like one.”

“I was trying to change. You didn’t give me enough time.”

“I gave you plenty of time,” she said through clenched teeth. “Like the time we were supposed to go to my parents’ for dinner, but you forgot because you were too busy playing video games with your buddies. Or how about the time you didn’t show up for our date because you were too hungover to get out of bed?” She blew out a frustrated sigh, and when she spoke again, her voice sounded tired and deflated. “The last night I saw you, you were passed out on the couch with a penis drawn on your forehead in black marker.”

Not his finest moments, that was for damn sure. In truth, she had a point. Back then he hadn’t put a lot of effort into trying to

change, not until she delivered a cold slap of reality by walking out his door and not coming back.

But that was then. He was a new man now, one he considered worthy of her love if she'd only listen to reason. He braced his arms against the washing machine, effectively caging her in. Head tipped up, she glared at him, and he leaned in close, his lips a whisper from hers. "Zoe. Is. My. Roommate."

Clearly stunned, a pair of lines formed between her eyebrows. "Your roommate?"

"Yeah, her bedroom's at the end of the hall. Christ, she's barely eighteen. What kind of person do you think I am, some kind of child molester?"

"No, it's just..." Confusion clouded her features. "She called you 'honey.'"

"It was meant as a joke. She says it every time she comes home." Because he couldn't be this close and not touch her, he cupped her face in his hands. "I swear on my mother's life that she's only a roommate."

Megan blew out a heavy exhale, her shoulders relaxing, but the creases between her eyes remained. "Oh, God, I'm sorry. I'm so embarrassed. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions like that. I need to go out there and apologize to—"

He cut her off with a kiss to the lips. "Don't worry about it, not tonight. Are we good?"

She nodded. "Yeah, but I don't know if I can ever look Zoe in the eye."

"Trust me, she'll get over it." He leaned forward, pressed another kiss to her lips, and the hunger he'd been feeling all night turned into a deep, dark craving. "If I don't get inside you soon, I'm going to lose my mind. You got a problem with that?"

She licked her lips, her eyes locked on his. "What do you think?"

"I think you two better have some clothes on when you leave that room," Zoe called out from the hallway.

Megan's face turned beet red.

"Zip it, Zoe." Bruce spoke loudly enough to be heard through the barrier of the door. "Unless you want to see my naked hairy ass, I suggest you go to your room."

"Unless something's changed, your ass isn't hairy," Megan said, her voice just above a whisper.

He grinned. "She doesn't know that."

Outside the laundry room, Zoe muttered a petulant sounding, "Gross." Then her heavy footsteps thudded down the hall and a door slammed shut seconds later.

"That's our cue." In one swift motion, he picked up Megan and slung her over his shoulder.

Her squeal brought a grin to his lips. "What are you doing?"

"Taking you to my room." He slapped her butt, his grin widening when she let out another squeal.

"But my clothes—"

Another slap, another squeal. God, she had a great ass. He couldn't wait to give it a good nip. He swung back to the dryer, used his free hand to toss in her sopping wet clothes, and hit the button to turn it on. "There, all set. Happy?"

"Yeah."

"Good, 'cause we're heading upstairs." He threw open the door and strode down the hall. "In the interest of public safety, I'm going to make sure you never need to buy another vibrator."

STILL SLUNG OVER Bruce's shoulder with her hair hanging past her face, Megan had a vertigo-inducing upside-down view of the stairs—and Bruce's rear. Her ass still stung from the swats he'd given it, so she decided to even the score by landing a few of her own.

In response, his hand slid further up the back of her thigh, just below the swell of her butt. “Do that shit again,” he warned, “and you’ll end up over my knee.”

Heat pulsed in her core at the thought. He’d always had a dirty mouth, and she couldn’t wait for him to use it on her.

Her view upended when he dropped her onto the mattress. Before she could speak, he came down on top of her with a loud, hungry growl. He was all male, hard and hot, and he completely overwhelmed her senses. The feel of him against her, his heart pounding against her chest, made her want a whole lot more. Then his mouth was on her, rough, demanding, and her hunger deepened into something dark and desperate.

Needing to touch him, she threaded her hands into his hair, loving the feel of the short strands between her fingers. But it wasn’t enough, not by a longshot. She ran a hand past his strong shoulders, over the muscled planes of his back, not stopping until she reached his very fine ass.

He growled again, nipping her lower lip, then soothing the sting with his tongue. But instead of kissing her again like she expected, he pulled away and stood beside the bed, and she immediately missed the warm weight of his body.

He reached for his belt, his eyes smoldering with unspoken emotion. “First one naked gets to be on top.”

She grinned, remembering how they used to play this game so many years ago. Good thing she hadn’t bothered to re-tie the drawstring of her pants. She stripped off her clothes in record time, but as she shoved her yoga pants past her ankles, she heard him say, “I win.”

No way. Glancing up, her mouth went dry at the sight of Bruce in all his glory.

He’d put on more muscle than she’d originally thought. At least thirty pounds, all of it chiseled. A light dusting of hair covered his broad chest, trailing down over his ripped abdomen, before

narrowing down to a V like an arrow pointing to his impressive erection.

He palmed his cock and stroked the hard, thick length. “Like what you see?”

Hell, yeah. “What do you think?”

He grinned, his teeth flashing white against his dark complexion. Without taking his gaze off her, he bent down and picked up his jeans, retrieving a condom from the wallet in a back pocket. He tossed it onto the nightstand.

“I hope you have more than one of those.”

“There’s a box in the dresser, but I’m not sure how old they are.” His smile dimmed. “I mean, I’m clean, if you’re worried about that. I haven’t had sex without a condom since... well...”

Since her? The admission touched her deep inside. She was on the pill, had been on it for years, so she wasn’t worried about getting pregnant. Smiling, she extended her arms toward him. “I haven’t either. Come here.”

He stretched out beside her, the bed giving a little under his weight. Lightly, he skimmed a hand over her hip, past her waist, the tips of his fingers brushing the side of her breast before his palm cupped its full weight. She sighed at the feel of it, her eyes drifting shut. Using his thumb, he stroked her sensitive nipple, and pleasure shot straight to her core.

“God, I’ve missed you.” Reverence filled his voice. He kissed her then, slowly, deeply, and with so much passion it made the ache inside her nearly unbearable.

As they kissed, he eased her onto her back, desire rising in her blood as his big body settled between her thighs. It felt like he was everywhere at once—kissing, licking, sucking, stroking, igniting fires with his hands and his mouth. He knew what she liked, what she loved, and what drove her absolutely wild. She caressed his back, loving the feel of slick skin and hard muscles beneath her fingers.

Slowly, he kissed a trail down her body, suckling one breast then the other, and when he grazed his teeth over her aching nipple, she moaned and arched against him. No other man ever made her feel this way. What was it about him that made her so damn responsive? It didn't matter; she didn't care about anything but the feel of his mouth, his hand between her legs, touching her, teasing her, the pleasure coiling tighter and tighter with every single breath she took.

"Now," she panted, her body trembling with the need for release. "Please."

"Not yet, babe." He moved even lower, kissing the insides of her thighs. "I'm just getting started."

If that were the case, she didn't think she was going to survive the evening.

His mouth found her clit, feasting on her flesh, licking and sucking the tender bundle of nerves before he slid his tongue along her folds. She cried out, gulping for air as the rush of sensations sent her flying over the edge. Breathless, mindless, she bucked her hips off the mattress, only to be held down by Bruce's strong, calloused hands. He continued the onslaught, his gaze locked with hers as he wrung every last ounce of pleasure from her body. By the time he was finished, her muscles were limp and she barely remembered her own name.

As the tremors subsided, he trailed kisses up her body, pausing only long enough to grab the condom.

"You don't need that," she said, but he was already sheathed, and she appreciated the gesture.

His smoldering gaze locked with hers again as he slid his arms under her thighs and thrust inside her. Hard, deep, just the way she liked. She gasped at the feel of him stretching her, filling her, making her forget about everything but him. She clenched her inner muscles and he let out a groan, his eyes drifting shut as a look of pure bliss formed on his face.

“Don’t do that,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’m working on a hair trigger here.”

He pulled almost all the way out and thrust back in, and she sighed at the feel of his thick, hot length stroking nerve endings she’d forgotten she possessed. She caressed his shoulders, his sides, his arms, enjoying the feel of him beneath her fingers and remembering the reasons why she’d fallen in love with him all those years ago.

“More,” she said on the heels of a groan.

His jaw muscles flexed. “I’m trying not to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” She squeezed him with her inner muscles again, and a low growl rose in his throat. “Now give me all you’ve got, and don’t you dare hold back.”

It was almost like something snapped inside him. He thrust into her, much harder than before, and she cried out as a shock of pure ecstasy rippled through her.

“Yes, just like that,” she said, her short nails digging into his back, her hips rising up to meet him.

Bending his head, he claimed her mouth in a no-holds-barred kiss, his tongue sliding against hers while his hips surged faster and deeper. She clung to him, her head buried against the pillow, her moans mixing with his as he drove her toward another orgasm. She could feel it building, the heat, the friction, until it finally overpowered her in a blinding blast of sensation. She cried out again, his name on her lips as she rode out the waves of euphoria. This time, though, he was right there with her, a guttural sound rising up in his throat while the force of his release shook his body.

A shudder ran through him as he collapsed onto his elbows, his face buried in her hair, his breath gusting hot against the curve of her neck. Gradually, his breathing returned to normal. With obvious reluctance, he pulled out of her and disposed of the condom. Then he rolled to the side, taking her with him, her body nestled to his. It felt so good, so right, that she simply closed her eyes and melted against him.

“As good as you remembered?” he asked, his voice filled with masculine satisfaction.

“Better.” It felt like coming home again after being away for far too long. The musky scent of their lovemaking saturated the air around them. She stretched against him, her hand on his chest. “You?”

A low sexy sound rumbled in his chest. His lips, still red and swollen from kissing her, tipped up in a lazy smile. “I never want to leave this bed again.”

She understood the sentiment, because she felt the exact same way. Hell, she didn’t even want to move.

“Will you stay the night?” he asked. “In my room, I mean.”

Like there was any question about that. “Of course.”

“How about tomorrow?” There was a hint of uncertainty in his deep voice, and she found it oddly endearing to know he wasn’t taking her for granted.

She propped her chin on his chest. “What about it?”

He huffed out a breath. “You’re way too smart to play dumb.” His hand slid over her hip before hugging the curve of her ass. “I want you in my bed every night so I can see your face first thing every morning. What can I do to make that happen?”

She gasped when his fingers slipped lower, stroking over the seam of her sex. “That’s a good start.”

“I’m serious, Megan. I love you, I never stopped.” His whiskey eyes smoldered with emotion. “I’ll do whatever it takes not to lose you again. Are you willing to take a chance on me? On us?”

How could she possibly say no? It was rash, reckless, but she honestly didn’t care. Being with Bruce—in his house, in his bed—felt so damn right she never wanted it to end. Propping her weight on one elbow, she leaned over and kissed him, pouring all of her love into the act, and he let out another low growl. “Yes. I want this—us. I love you, too. But how do we—”

He silenced her with another kiss. “All I need to know is that you love me. The rest is details.” With a grin, he pulled her on top

of him, her legs straddling his thighs. Already, he was hard again, the thick length of his cock pressing against her slit. “In the meantime, we’ve got seven years of catching up to do. Are you up for the challenge?”

As if he had to ask. She shifted against him, making him groan, then guided him to her opening and slid down, burying him to the hilt. She sat there for a moment, not moving, not breathing, his cock so deep inside her it felt as if they were one. “What do you think?”

He rolled his hips and pleasure rippled through her. His grin widened. “I think it’s going to be a very long night. Good thing I don’t have to work tomorrow.”

THE END

Please read on for an excerpt of *Driven*, book one of the Southern Alphas Series.

Sign up for Lori’s mailing list for the latest new releases, contests, giveaways and more! Click [HERE](#) to get started!

The following is the first chapter from *Driven*:

MASON FALCO DROVE down the rutted dirt road, cringing every time his sleek Maserati ran over a water-filled pothole.

Normally, he wouldn't dare take his car on a street in such terrible condition, but it was the only way to reach the Whispering Oaks Equestrian Farm. His attorneys had been trying to get in touch with the owner for weeks, and he'd finally decided to take matters into his own hands and contact the woman himself.

Open fields banked each side of the tree-lined road, with one side sectioned off into what he assumed were paddocks for horses. The Phillips family had owned the property for close to a century, one of the last farms of its kind in the area. All of the other landowners sold out long ago, accepting generous cash payoffs in exchange for the deeds to their properties. Only one remained, and he couldn't move forward with his development plans until he secured the forty-five acres currently deeded to Kayla Marie Phillips.

He'd skimmed over her profile before he left his office in downtown Orlando. Single white female. Age twenty-nine. She looked petite in the picture provided by his staff, with long brown hair and delicate features. Before she'd taken over the family business, she'd been a competitive show jumper. One of the articles he'd read listed her as an Olympic hopeful, but that was almost a decade ago and he saw no other mentions.

Probably couldn't make the cut, he mused. So many people gave up when the going got tough, and he held no respect for quitters. He took pride in the knowledge that he'd clawed his way from nothing to the top of his field. At thirty-two, he'd yet to reach his peak, turning rundown properties into multimillion dollar ventures across the globe. He'd never been on the losing end of a deal, and he wasn't about to let Ms. Phillips break his streak.

Gradually, the road curved to the right and the gates of the farm came into view. It wasn't fancy by any means, just a simple wrought-iron gate that slowly swung open when his car tripped the motion sensors. The Maserati hit yet another pothole, this one filled with enough muddy water to splash the front quarter panel

of his car. Once through the gate, he swung into a spot in front of what he assumed was the stable.

As soon as he stepped out of the car, he was hit with a blast of heat and humidity. Not surprising for Florida in July. Sweat formed on his brow as he rolled up his shirtsleeves and strode toward the entrance to the building. A handwritten note taped to the door warned visitors to watch out for the kittens in the tack room. He opened the door, and sure enough, two pure black kittens made a dash for freedom. Though he caught one, its littermate slipped between his feet and darted outside.

He swore under his breath. The last thing he needed was a deal going south because he lost one of the owner's kittens. Grumbling, he stomped back outside in search of the runt. It took nearly ten minutes to corner the little beast and grab it by the scruff of its neck.

He ignored the kitten's meows of protest as he carried it back to the tack room. This time, he carefully opened the door and nudged back its playmate with his shoe before he entered. But instead of backing off, the kitten climbed up his leg. Its tiny sharp claws pierced the fabric of his dress pants and dug into his skin. Biting back a curse, he set the first kitten on the ground, peeled the other off his leg, and placed it on one of the trunks that lined the front wall.

The room was no larger than ten by twenty feet and smelled strongly of oil and leather. The far wall was lined with four rows of large wooden pegs that held at least two dozen saddles. On the opposite wall, hooks held bridles and long strips of what looked like heavy cotton with metal buckles on each end. Pictures adorned the space above the pegs, mostly of riders on their horses.

Mason stepped closer and studied each picture until he found one with what appeared to be a young Kayla Phillips. She couldn't have been more than eighteen years old. The young woman rode a huge brown horse, her body perched slightly above the saddle as her mount leaped over an obstacle built to resemble a red brick

wall. The planes of her face were etched tight with concentration, and he admired her competitive spirit.

Had her fire burned out, or was she still as iron-willed as she was when the photograph was taken? There was only one way to find out. Careful not to let the kittens escape, he slipped out the door at the other side of the room that led into the stable.

Two giant fans blew air around the building but did little to make the heat more tolerable. Mason paused for a moment; his gaze took in the rows of stalls that lined each side of the building. Half of them were empty, which made sense, considering the number of horses he'd seen grazing in the paddocks. To his right, a guy in his late teens pushed a wheelbarrow filled with pine shavings down the walkway between stalls, and Mason strode in his direction.

"Excuse me," he said, and the kid skidded to a halt.

The teen's eyes narrowed as he took in Mason's appearance. Obviously, they didn't have many business types running around the farm. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Kayla Phillips. Do you know where I can find her?"

Hands full, the kid jerked his head to the left. "She's out in the arena with a student."

Before Mason had the chance to say thank you, the kid ambled off in the opposite direction and disappeared into one of the stalls.

Whatever. Her employee wasn't his problem. With renewed determination, he strode down the length of the stable. When he reached the end, the riding arena came into view. It was far from impressive: just a large, fenced-in area of dirt with a dozen or so obstacles scattered about. A teenage girl rode a dappled horse around the perimeter, and in the center stood a woman he presumed to be Kayla Phillips.

She was shorter than he expected, no more than five two, with the kind of body that made a man want to settle in and stay for a while. The faded jeans she wore clung to her curves, as did her

simple white T-shirt. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a braid and hung halfway down her back. Toned, tanned arms hinted at the hard work she put in to keep the farm afloat.

A floppy straw hat and sunglasses obscured her face as she barked out commands like a drill sergeant. “Shoulders back, Courtney! Keep your chin up!”

Immediately, the girl followed Kayla’s instructions as the horse continued to trot.

“Looking good, looking good. Okay, I want to see you take the outside line, cut left to the red gate, and then circle around to the opposite line. Got it?”

“Yes, Miss Kayla.” The girl kicked her heels into the horse’s side, and the animal shot into a canter. It rounded the curve, gathering speed before it cleared one jump and then another. The girl said something he couldn’t make out as she steered the horse to the left and over what he assumed was the red gate. Then it was off to the opposite side of the ring, where she guided the beast over two more jumps before slowing its pace to a walk.

“Great job!” Kayla clapped enthusiastically. “Let him walk for a bit and then bring him in for a wash-down.”

She turned away from the girl and strode toward the stables, and when she pulled off her hat and sunglasses, it finally gave him the chance to get a good view of her face.

The picture didn’t do her justice. She was a beautiful woman with high cheekbones, a narrow nose, and full, lush lips. Kissable lips. Her deep-brown eyes sparked with intelligence as she walked in his direction. When she drew close, she looked him over, and confusion crinkled her forehead.

“Something I can help you with?” Now that she wasn’t shouting commands, her voice carried a husky Southern accent.

“I hope so.” He flashed her the smile he always used when warming up difficult clients. “I’m Mason Falco of—”

“Falco Enterprises,” she finished for him, not shaking the hand he offered. The planes of her face sharpened with irritation as she

cocked one hand on her hip. "You wasted your time coming out here. I'm not selling." In obvious dismissal, she turned on her heel and headed toward the stable.

Stubborn woman. He took off after her, catching up at the entrance, and fell in line with her long, quick strides. "You haven't even heard my latest offer."

"Don't care. I'm still not selling." She hung the straw hat on a hook as she passed and walked into a small room that housed a washing machine, dryer, and stacks of supplies. A bathroom was off to the right and she stepped in, leaving the door wide open.

Mason followed her into the supply room, stopping short at the entrance to the bathroom. She paid him no mind while she washed her hands, and his temper simmered beneath the surface.

"The offer would make you a rich woman. You'd never have to work another day in your life."

Farm life wasn't easy; he knew that much. County records showed her being late with the property taxes for the last two years in a row. She didn't strike him as the type to dodge her responsibilities, leading him to believe she suffered from a serious cash flow problem.

After turning off the spigot, she grabbed a towel to dry her hands and wipe the sweat from her brow. Her skin was flushed from the summer heat, but it didn't seem to bother her. She peered up, and those beautiful brown eyes locked with his.

"In that case, why are you still working, Mr. Falco? Last time I heard, you were worth over a billion."

Score one for the horse whisperer. "One point one eight, if you want to be exact." And damn proud of it. He'd clawed his way from nothing to the top through hard work, good instincts, and sheer determination.

"I stand corrected," she said, "but that doesn't answer my question."

Feisty little thing, wasn't she? He liked that in a woman. Not to mention he'd always enjoyed a good challenge, and this was

shaping up to be one of them. “I like what I do, Ms. Phillips. It’s what makes me successful. You, on the other hand, have been struggling for years to keep this farm in the black. Why continue to scrape by when you don’t have to?”

She frowned, and the lines between her eyes deepened. “My business is my business, Mr. Falco. It may not rake in millions of dollars, but I sleep well at night after an honest day’s work. Do you?”

Now it was his turn to scowl. How dare she make that kind of insinuation? Sure, he could be ruthless when the situation called for it, but business was business, and he’d never done anything illegal. “Of course.”

“Figures.” She smirked. “Your type usually does.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets so she wouldn’t see them balled into fists. In less than five minutes, the woman had managed to push every one of his buttons. Part of him wanted to kiss her senseless while the other part wanted to take her over his knee. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a smart man. I’m sure you can figure it out. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a business to run.”

And with that, she turned her back to him and walked out of the room. She strode over to the girl who was busy at work removing the saddle from the horse she’d been riding.

This wasn’t over, not by a long shot. Mason fumed as he exited the building and stalked to his car. While he was gone, a bird had shit on the windshield, making his visit complete. He turned the key in the ignition and the car roared to life, and he slowly eased the vehicle out of the spot while he watched for more potholes. He’d go back to his office to refocus and regroup, and then he’d plan his next move.

KAYLA WATCHED AS Falco's luxury sedan rolled down the narrow dirt road and chuckled under her breath every time it ran over a pothole. It served him right for trying to talk her into selling her home. The farm meant everything to her, and before he'd died, she'd promised her grandfather that she'd do everything in her power to keep the property in the family.

Her younger sister Louise walked up alongside her and leaned against the doorway. "Was that who I thought it was?"

"Yep. Pompous ass." Although she had to admit, he was easy on the eyes. Tall, dark, and devastatingly handsome, the man looked as if he was better suited for a magazine cover than a boardroom. But then he'd opened his mouth, and she'd recognized the predator that lurked beneath the surface. Now that she knew, she'd never forget it. He was the kind of guy who'd use any means at his disposal, and that included the fine art of sweet-talking.

Kayla slanted a glance in her sister's direction. "How'd you get so dirty?"

"Echo threw me." She said it casually, as if getting tossed from a horse was an everyday occurrence. Well, actually, it was for her. Over the years, she'd built a reputation for being able to train even the most ill-mannered horse. The woman was absolutely fearless, but one of these days it was going to rear up and bite her right on the butt. She brushed at the dirt that stained the side of her jeans. "Don't worry, I'm fine."

"This time. You've got to be more careful. Please tell me you were wearing a helmet." If the answer was no, she was stapling the damn thing to Louise's head. She, of all people, should know better. It was hard to enforce the helmet rule when the owner's sister broke it on a daily basis. Not to mention the insurance company had been adamant about it when she renewed the liability policy for the farm. Any infractions and their coverage was toast.

"Of course I wore it, after the hissy fit you threw last time."

Well, at least that was one less thing to worry about. “Thank you.”

“So how much did he offer this time?” Louise pulled out the elastic band that held her long blonde hair in a ponytail. “It must have been a lot if he came all the way out here to present it.”

“I don’t know.” Kayla shrugged. “I cut him off before he started talking figures.”

Louise’s blue eyes got all big and wide. “Are you crazy? The last offer was for over four million.”

Four million two hundred thousand, to be exact. She had to admit, when she first read the proposal, she’d been tempted by the sheer number of zeroes. But then she’d done the math and the offer lost a lot of its appeal. Taxes and the outstanding mortgage balance would eat over a million dollars of the proceeds. Then there was the cost of purchasing a suitable property to relocate the farm, one large enough, dry enough, and zoned for agricultural purposes. The closest one she’d found was located in Chuluota, and it came with a price tag of a million three. And when she factored in the cost of building the house, stable, equipment shed, arena, paddocks, and pastures to the required county codes and specifications, they’d be left with just under a million dollars to live on while they rebuilt their clientele. Which sounded like a lot, but with little or no money coming in, the monthly expenses would eat it up in no time.

Besides, this was their home, and she refused to be bought. Four generations had lived and worked on the farm, and she’d promised her grandfather that she’d keep the tradition alive. Everywhere she looked, she saw a part of her family’s history, of what shaped her into who she was. And when the mortgage refinancing finally went through, they’d have a little wiggle room in the budget.

As she turned her gaze away from the road, she took in the paddocks on the other side of the arena, each one occupied by one or two horses. Altogether, there were thirty-four horses on the farm. Nineteen she owned, and the rest of them were boarded by

people who either didn't have enough room for a horse on their property or their land wasn't zone for large animals. The rental income was enough to pay the mortgage and insurance, leaving her to scrape and scrounge for the funds necessary to cover the other expenses.

Like taxes. Electric. Feed and vet bills. Not to mention water, gas, wages, and food. Stud fees covered some of the expenses, while Louise trained horses and Kayla gave riding lessons to boost the bottom line. Even then, it sometimes wasn't enough to make ends meet. To cover the difference, Kayla tended bar three or four nights a week at one of the clubs downtown.

"Excuse me, Kayla?" It was Ashley, one of the interns from the university's pre-veterinary club. Each semester, two students worked ten hours a week at the farm in exchange for three credit hours. The first couple of weeks ate a lot of Kayla's time, but after that the kids were worth the investment. The students gained valuable experience they could put on their applications for vet school, and in exchange the farm got free labor. Which was great, because good farmhands were hard to find; it was tough, physical work, and a lot of folks didn't want to get their hands dirty.

Kayla turned, and the look on the girl's face made her nervous. "What's wrong, honey?"

"It's Harlan. He won't let me in his stall."

Kayla let out a mental sigh of relief. Harlan was her prize stallion. With his champion bloodlines and award-winning offspring, he was by far the farm's most valuable asset. Last year alone he brought in almost three quarters of the farm's stud fees, and this year looked to be about the same. But the stallion could be a bit temperamental, and when he got into one of his moods, she and Louise were the only ones who could handle him.

"Don't worry about it," she told the intern. "Is his feed bucket outside the stall?"

The young woman nodded, and her purple-tipped bangs fell over one of her eyebrows. "Every time I get close, he slams against the gate."

Typical. For a horse, he could be a bit of a jerk. "I'll take care of it. Louise, is there anything else you need Ashley to do before she leaves for the day?"

Louise met her gaze for a long moment before she focused her attention on Ashley. "Yeah, why don't you come along with me? I was about to put a shoe back on Zenith."

The pair took off toward Zenith's stall, leaving Kayla free to deal with Harlan. She boarded him at the end of the stable, with a Friesian gelding in the adjacent stall that seemed to keep the stallion calm. As she drew close, she heard him pawing the ground and letting out snorts of impatience.

"Hungry, are you? Well, it serves you right for being such a butthead to Ashley."

She picked up the bucket and approached the stall. The stallion stopped pawing when he caught a whiff of the food, letting out a soft snuffle as he backed up far enough to let her inside. She threw back the bolt and slid the door open.

God, he was beautiful, all eleven hundred pounds of him. He was tall, a hair under seventeen hands, with a coat the color of rich mahogany. He hadn't competitively jumped in almost nine years, but she kept him in excellent condition. At least four times a week, after the stable hands left, she tacked him up and gave him a workout in the arena. He still jumped like a champion, attacking each line with the same level of energy and enthusiasm as he did during his first year on the circuit.

Harlan nudged her with his big head, his teeth playing with the bottom hem of her shirt.

"Knock it off." She gave his head a playful shove. Undeterred, the stallion nudged her again, impatient for his late afternoon meal. She placed the bucket a few feet away from his water. A smile

warmed her face as he bolted down his food as though he hadn't eaten in a week.

"Greedy bugger." She ran a hand over his big, powerful body, and his muscles rippled beneath her fingers. He got two meals a day, a roof over his head, and he earned his keep by playing stud for some of the premier thoroughbred mares in the area. Considering how most other horses spent their days, he'd certainly hit the jackpot.

But breeding fees alone couldn't keep the farm in the black. She'd have to either increase the stud fees for Harlan or sell at least two of the colts. She planned on saddle training Dusty in a week or two, but Jigsaw and Prescott probably wouldn't be ready for at least another six months. If she trained them well, she could fetch a higher price when she put them on the market.

She exited the stall and slid the door shut behind her, making sure the bolt was securely in place before she left the building. One of the stable cats brushed against her leg, and she bent down to give it a quick pet. Every muscle in her body ached with fatigue, and no wonder: she'd been at it since a little before sunrise. But now that every horse was fed, watered, and safe in their stalls, she could finally go to the house, shower the sweat and dirt from her body, and eat dinner. Then it was off to her second job tending bar, where she'd put in a five-hour shift before she returned home and crawled into bed.

As she locked up the stable, thoughts of Mason Falco crept back into her head. She scowled. It amazed her, how such a handsome man could be such a pompous ass. Really, it shouldn't surprise her. Over the years, she'd run into his type plenty of times. Hell, she'd even dated one, and what a mistake that had been.

The crack about her business ability stung, most likely because it was true. Try as she might, she never managed to get ahead. It seemed like every time she got her head above water, the well pump broke, or one of the horses got sick, or something else happened to suck all of the money from her bank account. There were days

when it all wore her down to the bone, and sometimes she wondered whether she'd ever get the farm back to the level it was before her accident.

As she stood on the porch, she stared out at the property and resolved herself to find a way. Come hell or high water, she'd make it work. She shoved the worries aside as she strode into the house, pulling her boots off in the mudroom before washing her hands in the kitchen sink. She'd figure a way to make the farm profitable again if it was the last thing she ever did.

END OF SAMPLE

More books by Lori Sjoberg:

Southern Alphas: Coming April 2016!

Driven
Fractured
Devoted
Denied

The Grave Series (Paranormal Romance): Now Available!

[Grave Intentions](#)
[Grave Destinations](#)
[Grave Vengeance](#)
[Grave Attraction](#)