

Chapter Two

Sutton stared at the lace concoction. From La Perla's fall collection. Fine Italian lace. Ridiculously expensive for something so small. A special order with the addition of a small embroidered heart to sit at the owner's hipbone. Oh yes, she was acquainted with the underwear but not intimately acquainted. She'd ordered them through Abigail's Boutique, but not for herself. She was too practical.

Wyatt Abbott shook them even closer to her face, obviously expecting her to take them. The thought of touching the lace made her shrink against the driver's door, and she fumbled for the handle, finally finding it and yanking. The door opened and her momentum sent her to the shop floor on her butt.

Her skirt bunched around her thighs, probably high enough for Wyatt Abbott to see her simple cotton pink panties from Victoria's Secret. The fact they weren't white was the wildest she got. She'd even waited for them to go on sale. With a bruised ego and bottom, she scrambled up.

Wyatt hadn't moved. His mouth was parted, still in a slight smile, the panties dangling from his fingers. Instead of the roil of emotions gaining steam inside of her, she concentrated on his hands. They were rough-looking and callused. The nails were short but lined with grease. And they were big. They built things. Fixed things. Put things back together.

A darkness came over his face, clouding his earlier good-humor and giving him an edge of danger she hadn't sensed through his teasing. Instead of getting out of the car from the door, he stood up on the passenger seat, stepped to the driver's seat, and hopped next to her, the black lace of her betrayal dangling in his hand.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

A jackhammering noise from the other bay filled the space so she didn't have to. The crazy thing was that she had sensed something wrong. Something had been wrong pretty much since she and Andrew had gotten engaged.

She'd tried to put it down to nerves or how busy they both were with work. But the truth was she'd been dragging her feet with the wedding preparations. Between the two of them pulling away, the distance had grown until only an echo of what had drawn them together remained.

The hum of a motor and the flash of sunlight on metal drew her attention to the open bay door. Her best friend, Bree Randall, stepped out of her BMW coupe dressed in heels, grey slacks, and a sleeveless silk shell, the pink contrasting beautifully with her dark brown hair and ivory complexion. She was a lawyer for Cottonbloom, Mississippi's city government and had been Sutton's best friend since first grade.

No way could Sutton smile and pretend everything was fine. She grabbed the front of Wyatt's coveralls and looked up at him. The boy she remembered had been too cool and a borderline jerk, teasing her incessantly, almost to the point of tears. The man was still too cool, yet something new lurked behind his ease. She hoped it was akin to kindness.

Bree drew closer. Stuck between a devil she knew and one she didn't, Sutton took a chance. Her voice was hoarse and begging and she didn't care. "Get me out of here. Please."

Without taking his eyes off her, he called out, "Yo, Jackson. Could you put the lady from the Beemer in the waiting room? Tell her Miss Mize isn't feeling well and stepped out back for some fresh air."

If his brother answered, she didn't hear him. Wyatt put a strong, stabilizing arm around her shoulders and guided her around various pieces of equipment and mechanical parts to a door tucked away at the back of the shop floor. She stepped outside, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. The freshness of the air counteracted the bile rising in her throat.

Her knees wobbled as the stark reality of the situation and the fallout took shape in her mind. She glanced at the man by her side. What was Wyatt Abbott thinking right now? Probably that she was borderline psychotic.

A huge red barn sat behind the shop, and they passed from sun back into shadows. A body-sized punching bag twirled from a high beam as they passed by. That explained why the

arm at her back was so solid. Her heels tapped on the wide-planked floor. The smell of weathered wood was overlaid by something sweeter. Honeysuckle, maybe.

No hay was stored in the Abbott's barn. Two tarp-covered cars, the bottom curves of their tires the only part visible, formed a path to the back where a scratched up leather couch and mini-fridge sat.

"Sorry it's so dusty in here. We like to keep the doors open if the weather's nice because of the views and cross breeze." He took a blue towel from his back pocket and wiped off a section of the couch, leaving yellow streaks of pollen. Getting a little dirty was way down on her list of worries and she plopped down, wrapping her arms around her stomach and leaning over so her forehead nearly touched her knees.

"You want a Coke or tea or something?"

She raised her head enough to see his big hand holding out a bottle. He shifted back and forth in his black work boots, the hem of his coveralls ombred black to grey with grease.

"It's a little early for whiskey, but I've got that too if you'd rather." He sounded so worried and unsure, she straightened, took the Coke and pressed the cool plastic against her cheeks and neck.

"You must think I've gone batty." She rarely drank alcohol and never whiskey, but for a moment she considered it as a viable option, even though it was still technically breakfast. It was five o'clock somewhere, right?

"I think something really bad happened," he said. "I'm not sure what, but I suspect it has something to do with the restaurant receipts and the underwear."

"Oh God. The receipts." Her mind hadn't even circled back around to those, but everything notched into place like a puzzle whose missing piece turned up stuck on the bottom of a shoe covered with chewed up old gum and bug guts.

His late nights working. Breaking dates at the last minute. His distraction. How long had it been since they'd shared the same bed? Two months? Three? She'd put it down to the

natural progression of a committed relationship and the busyness of their lives, assuming things would be better once they were living under the same roof.

“I’m a moron.” Tears crawled up her throat and choked off her feeble attempt of a laugh.

She closed her eyes wishing she could teleport herself back under the covers. The cushion sagged next to her, and she tipped towards him, her shoulder bumping his biceps. A moment passed before his arm came around her shoulders, and they sank back into the couch together.

She turned her face into the space between his neck and shoulder and took a deep breath, desperately trying to get a handle on her out-of-control emotions. Pain was to be expected, but the flashes of fierce fury took her by surprise.

Easygoing and nice and cheerful were bandied about when people passed compliments her way. At least, she’d always taken them as compliments. Now she wasn’t so sure. Maybe all those things were code words for weak and gullible.

Another breath. She concentrated on Wyatt’s warmth and scent. So different from the expensive cologne Andrew wore. Wyatt smelled like pine trees and the garage. His dark, almost black hair, tickled her nose. A tear slipped out and she wiped it away with the heel of her hand.

“You want me to go get your friend?” His chest vibrated against her, deep and rich.

Friend? She didn’t want to examine the other half of the betrayal. Worse than Andrew cheating on her was who he’d been getting down and dirty with. Her best friend. No. A friend wouldn’t sleep with her fiancé behind her back while helping her plan the wedding with an enthusiasm that oftentimes exceed her own.

Sutton ransacked her brain for moments she could point to and say *Aha!* but none came to mind. Bree had been supportive and helpful over the last few months. Lies. How many lies had Sutton accepted as gospel truth? A few more tears escaped along with a ragged breath.

Wyatt made a humming sound that was distinctly uncomfortable, and he pulled away.
“Let me—”

She grabbed his coveralls. “No. Don’t you get it? That was her thong.”

He shifted to face her. “Is identifying underwear in a single glance your superpower?”

Despite her life crashing down, a shard of humor sliced through the shock, and her lips twitched. “Expensive underwear. The heart on the panties matches her tattoo. A special order.”

“You fiancé and your best friend?”

Put like that, she felt even dumber. “My life has turned into a cliché.”

“It’s a cliché because of how often it happens. Nothing for you to be ashamed of. It’s them that should feel like chickenshit.”

“You don’t understand how people like to talk.”

“I understand, alright. I just don’t care what people say.” The defiant edge in his voice spoke of his own pain and sorrows, but right now she only had room for her own. He was quiet for a moment. “You want me to get rid of her?”

Sutton sank back and took a swig of Coke, the burn bringing a different, more welcome, sort of tear to her eyes. “I need to talk to her. Confront her.”

“Yeah, but not hurt and crying. You need to prepare. Get mad then get even.”

His advice made her sit up straighter. She’d been raised to smooth feathers, not ruffle them. Her mother had taught her how a smile and pleasant word could diffuse most situations. The lessons had contributed to her business success but hadn’t done her personal life any favors. Another whip of red-hot fury flayed her heart.

“She’s my ride back over the river.” Her voice sounded even and strong, her anger a mast to cling to amid the wreckage.

“I can be your ride.”

“But you have work to do.”

The look he cast her was full of disbelief. “You’re not going through with the restoration, are you?”

The Camaro, the red harbinger of her ruin, had already slipped her mind. She didn’t even like the stupid car. Her daddy and Tarwater senior had hatched this surprise over a round of golf with Ford Abbott after she’d confessed she couldn’t think of anything to give Andrew as an engagement present. Only when her daddy had anted up half the money had she agreed. Their “go big or go home” mentality had seemed a ridiculous waste to her.

Dear Lord, her family. What would her daddy say? As a long-standing judge, he was sort of a colleague of Andrew’s. She closed her eyes and rocked forward and back on the edge of the couch.

“What if I’m overreacting?” If only this was a bad dream. Yet, did she really want that? An undercurrent that felt vaguely like relief trickled through the anger and humiliation and doubts.

“About which part, your fiancé cheating or who he was cheating with?” Wyatt stuck a hand into his pocket, came out with the thong and tossed it on her lap.

She leapt up and brushed it off as if she were Miss Muffet and it was a venomous, hairy, black spider. She kicked at it with the toe of her shoe. The red heart mocked her from the black lace. Yet the little girl who’d shared her pimento cheese sandwich with Bree every day during kindergarten wanted to be wrong.

She sank back down to the edge of the couch, feeling like she was shoring up the situation with Scotch tape. “There could be a reasonable explanation. Like she and Andrew went to lunch and for some reason she had them in her purse and they fell out. Maybe I’ve jumped to the wrong conclusion.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. She appreciated the fact he wasn’t calling her on her BS excuses even though his face was the definition of skeptical.

“You sure you don’t mind giving me a ride?” she asked.

“I’ll get rid of your *friend* and take you home. That should buy you some time to figure things out. Confront her on your terms.”

Her initial impressions of Wyatt Abbott were from the viewpoint of a preteen girl. Back then, she’d been self-conscious of her skinny arms and legs and flyaway hair, and whenever she’d come to the garage with her daddy, Wyatt had made it his mission to tease her mercilessly.

What was he now? On the surface, she’d label him a good old boy. Fun, flirty, simple. Except, his gray eyes were anything but. Not flat like shale, but ready to spark a fire like a flint. Raw emotions provided a sharp awareness. Her memories of him urged her to be cautious with her trust, yet his jaw was set and his shoulders were rolled forward as if ready and willing to go into battle.

“Why?” she finally whispered.

“Why what?”

“Why are you being so nice to me? You hated me as a kid.”

“*Hated* you?” He stuffed his hands into his pockets and tipped his head enough to shutter his intensity of his eyes. “I never hated you, in fact . . .” He shook his head.

“In fact what?”

“Not important. Simply put, unlike your fiancé and your friend, I’m not an asshole. If you don’t need me—”

“No, I do need you.” She stood but misjudged how close he was. They weren’t touching, but she could feel his heat and appreciate his strength. “I just . . .”

Wyatt Abbott was handsome, but even more potent than his looks was an intangible confidence and ease with himself. The man probably talked a different woman out of her panties every weekend. Would he cash in on her humiliation for a good story to tell brothers

and drinking buddies? Did it even matter? Whether it was him or someone else, rumors would rush through the town like their river after a storm

Insecurities pinged between her head and heart, the message clear. Protect yourself. But surely, she could at least trust him to get her home. “I would really appreciate a lift home.”

He chaffed her arms like a coach might comfort a little kid after a loss. “It’ll be okay. You wait here while I handle your friend, okay?”

She nodded, and he strode back toward the garage. Highlighted in a shaft of sunlight, he hesitated at the metal door they’d ducked through and glanced behind him. A zing of warning—or premonition?—skittered down her spine.

Her life had been spun into chaos, yet in that moment, she felt connected to Wyatt in a way that terrified her. Then he disappeared, and she waited to discover out if her trust had once again been misplaced.

Copyright © 2017 by Laura Trentham and reprinted by permission of St. Martin's Paperbacks.