

A glimpse into Troubled Waters...

“That was close,” he said and she opened her mouth, stunned at his acknowledgment.

“Yeah, it was.”

He winced, hunched his shoulders, and blew out a breath. Water dripped down his face, catching in his cinnamon whiskers. “I should have....I...” He met her eyes. “I can’t swim.”

He said it so softly, in such a different tone than the one he’d used outside to assure everyone that he was fine, she thought she’d imagined his words. “What?”

His shirt was plastered to his chest, water streaking the hairs on his legs as he shivered. He appeared just a little wounded, and it scared her.

She tucked the blanket tighter around him and went to the bathroom to swipe a towel.

When she returned, she handed it to him. He wiped his face and repeated himself, his voice stronger. “I can’t swim.”

Yep she heard him right, and as if to further clarify, “I get sick just being near water.”

She sank down on the bed next to him. “What were you doing jet-skiing?”

“I dunno. I hate letting something beat me, and...I had a life jacket.”

“They don’t work when you’re trapped *underneath* a jet ski.”

He closed his eyes and she guessed she hadn’t needed to stay that.

She gave into the urge to put her arm around him. “I understand, Ian. Noelly can be persuasive.”

His teeth chattered. “We’re just friends, Sierra. I’ve known her a long time.”

“I know.” She didn’t mean to sound so defensive. “I’m just saying, I know she likes you, and saying yes to jet-skiing with her is...well, I’m glad you were having fun.”

“I’m not having fun, thank you.”

His words came out so sharp, she felt them in her chest, a lance.

He must have seen her recoil because he shook his head. “No, of course—yes, I’m having fun but...okay, I just have to ask. Is...” He swallowed. “Is Dex coming onto you? Do I need to tell him to back off?”

What—? And she searched his face. But he was being serious. “No. Of course not. He’s being...he’s being nice. Gallant.”

Ian closed his mouth, looked away, nodded. “Fine.”

The air conditioning connected with the moisture still on her skin and raised gooseflesh. He wasn’t... “Are you jealous?”

He frowned. “No. Of course not.” But his answer came quick, almost harsh.

Ho-kay. Maybe better to change topics. “Is that why you’ve never taken the yacht out? Because you can’t swim?”

He got up and tossed the blanket back on his bed. “What do you think?”

“Actually...” And maybe it was his story, maybe the sense that despite his movements, he was still a little shaken, maybe even less guarded, and perhaps because she, too, felt a little raw, she let the question unravel from where she’d tucked it tight in her chest. “I’d like to know why you call her the Montana Rose.”

Silence, and then he turned and looked at her.

It reminded her a little of how he’d looked so many times when she’d seen him staring at her across the Gray Pony Saloon and Grill, especially that summer she’d dated Sam Brooks. Or even further back, when she’d look up and spot him across the office, his gaze on her. He always covered it with a tinge of a smile, one that curled forbidden warmth through her.

Now, he simply held it, unyielding, unguarded, so much emotion in his expression she couldn't move.

Couldn't breathe.

"Why do you think, Sierra?"

Her heart thundered, banging hard against her ribs, her mouth dry around the boulder in her throat. "I don't know," she whispered.

He blinked then, and gave a sort of nod. "Wow. Really. Hmm."

A knock at the door made her jump and he blew out a breath, looked away. "Can you get that?"

Uh, sure.

She opened it and Erica stood there holding a tray of bottled water, towels tucked under her arm. "Kelley asked me to bring Mr. Shaw—"

"Thank you," Sierra said, and took the supplies.

But when she turned, Ian had already slipped into the bathroom and locked the door.