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By Sandra Marton

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The wild before the storm

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The clock is ticking; forced to confront her life, Jennie is determined to cross some major things off her to-do list. Some might be risky—like taking on the renowned Travis Wilde—but Jennie has nothing to lose, except the one thing she *thought* was untouchable...her heart.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Sandra Marton has written more than 75 novels and has approximately 24,000,000 (and counting!) books in print in twenty-plus languages. A four-time finalist for the RITA, the coveted award given by Romance Writers of America, Sandra has also won eight Romantic Times Magazine Reviewers' Choice Awards and has been honoured with Romantic Times' Career Achievement Award for Series Romance. Sandra lives in Connecticut with her husband.

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For as long as Travis Wilde could remember, Friday nights had belonged to his brothers and him.

They'd started setting those evenings aside way back in high school. Nobody had made a formal announcement. Nobody had said, "Hey, how about we make Friday evenings ours?"

It had just happened, was all, and over the ensuing years, it had become an unspoken tradition.

The Wildes got together on Fridays, no matter what.

Always.

Okay.

Maybe not always.

One of them might be away on business, Caleb on one coast or the other, dealing with a client in some complicated case of corporate law; Jacob in South America or Spain, buying horses for his own ranch or for *El Sueno*, the family spread; Travis meeting with investors anywhere from Dallas to Singapore.

And there'd been times one or more of the Wildes had been ass-deep in some bug-infested foreign hellhole, trying to stay alive in whatever war needed the best combat helicopter pilot, secret agency spook, or jet jockey the U.S. of A. could provide.

There'd even been times a woman got in the way.

Travis lifted a bottle of beer to his lips. That didn't happen often.

Women were wonderful and mysterious creatures, but brothers were, well, they were brothers. You shared the same blood, the same memories.

That made for something special.

The bottom line was that barring the end of the world and the appearance of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, if it was Friday night, if the Wildes were within reasonable distance of each other, they'd find a bar where the brews were cold, the steaks rare, the music an upbeat blend of Willie Nelson and Bruce Springsteen, and they'd settle in for a couple of hours of relaxation.

This place didn't quite meet that description.

It wasn't where the Wildes had planned on going tonight but then, as it had turned out, Travis was the only Wilde who'd been up for getting together at all.

The original plan had been to meet at a bar they knew and liked, maybe half a dozen blocks from his office, a quiet place with deep booths, good music on the speakers, half a dozen varieties of locally-brewed beer on tap and by the bottle, and steaks the size of Texas sizzling on an open grill.

That plan had changed, and Travis had ended up in here by accident.

Once he knew he would be on his own, he'd driven around for a while, finally got thirsty and hungry, stopped at the first place he saw.

This one.

No deep booths. No Willy or Bruce. No locally-brewed beer. No grill and no steaks.

Instead, there were half a dozen beat-up looking tables and chairs. The kind of music that made your brain go numb, blasting from the speakers. A couple of brands of beer. Burgers oozing grease, served up from a kitchen in the back.

The best thing about the place was the bar itself, a long stretch of zinc that either spoke of earlier, better days or of dreams that had never quite materialized.

Travis had pretty much known what he'd find as soon as he pulled into the parking lot, saw the dented pickups with their rusted fenders, the half a dozen Harleys parked together like a pack of coyotes.

He'd also known what he wouldn't find.

Friendly faces. Babes that looked as if they'd just stepped out of the latest Neiman Marcus catalogue. A dartboard on one wall, photos of local sports guys on another. St. Ambrose beer and rare steaks.

Not a great place for a stranger who was alone but if a man knew how to keep to himself, which years spent on not-always-friendly foreign soil had definitely taught him to do, he could at least grab something to eat before heading home.

He'd gotten some looks when he walked through the door. That figured. He was an unknown in a place where people almost certainly knew each other or at least recognized each other.

Physically, at least, he blended in.

He was tall. Six foot three in his bare feet, lean and muscled, the result of years riding and breaking horses growing up on *El Sueno*, the family's half-million acre ranch a couple of hours from Dallas. High school and college football had honed him to a tough edge, and Air Force training had done the rest.

At thirty-four, he worked out every morning in the gym in his Turtle Creek condo and he still rode most weekends, played pickup games of touch football with his brothers...

Correction, he thought glumly.

He used to play touch football with Caleb and Jacob, but they didn't have much time for that anymore.

Which was one of the reasons he was in this bar tonight. His brothers didn't have much time for anything anymore and, dammit, no, he wasn't feeling sorry for himself—he was a grown man, after all.

What he was, was mourning the loss of a way of life.

Travis tilted the bottle of Bud to his lips, took a long swallow and stared at his reflection in the fly-specked mirror behind the bar.

Bachelorhood. Freedom. No responsibility to or for anyone but yourself.

Yes, his brothers were giving life on the other side of that line a try and God knew, he wished them all the best but, though he'd never say it to them, he had a bad feeling how that would end up.

Love was an ephemeral emotion. Here today, gone tomorrow. Lip service, at best.

How his brothers had missed that lifelesson was beyond him.

He, at least, had not.

Which brought him straight back to what had been the old Friday night routine of steaks, beer...

And the one kind of bond you could count on. The bond between brothers.

He'd experienced it growing up with Jake and Caleb, at college when he played football, in the Air Force, first in weeks of grueling training, then in that small, elite circle of men who flew fighter jets.

Male bonding, was the trendy media term for it, but you didn't need fancy words to describe the link of trust you could forge with a brother, whether by blood or by fate.

That was what those Friday nights had been about.

Sitting around, talking about nothing in particular—the safety the Cowboys had just signed. The wobbly fate of the Texas Rangers. Poker, a game they all liked and at which Travis was an expert. Which was more of an icon, Jake's vintage Thunderbird or Travis's '74 Stingray 'Vette, and was there any reasonable explanation for Caleb driving that disgustingly new Lamborghini?

And, naturally, they'd talked about women.

Except, the Wildes didn't talk about women anymore.

Travis sighed, raised the bottle again and drank.

Caleb and Jake. His brothers.

Married.

It still seemed impossible but it was true. So was what went with it.

He'd spoken with each of his brothers as recently as yesterday, reminded them—and when, in the past, had they needed reminding?—that Friday was coming up and they'd be meeting at seven at that bar near his office.

"Absolutely," Caleb had said.

"See you then," Jake had told him.

And here he was. The Lone Ranger.

The worst of it was, he wasn't really surprised.

No reflection on his sisters-in-law.

Travis was crazy about both Addison and Sage, loved them as much as he loved his own three sisters, but why deny it?

Marriage—commitment—changed everything.

"I can't make it tonight, Trav," Caleb had said when he'd phoned in midafternoon. We have Lamaze."

"Who?"

"It's not a who, it's a what. Lamaze. You know. Childbirth class. It's usually on Thursday but the instructor had to cancel so it's tonight, instead."

Childbirth class. His brother, the tough corporate legal eagle? The one-time spook? Childbirth class?

"Travis?" Caleb had said. "You there?"

"I'm here," he'd said briskly. "Lamaze. Right. Well, have fun."

"Lamaze isn't about fun, dude."

"I bet."

"You'll find out someday."

"Bite your tongue."

Caleb had laughed. "Remember that housekeeper we had right after Mom died? The one who used to say, *First comes love, then comes marriage...*"

Thinking back to the conversation, Travis shuddered.

Why would any of that ever apply to him?

Even if—big "if"—even if marriage worked, it changed a man.

Besides, love was just a nice word for sex, and why be modest?

He already had all the sex a man could handle, without any of the accompanying complications.

No *"I love you and I'll wait for you,"* which turned out to mean *"I'll wait a couple of months before I get into bed with somebody else."*

Been there, done that, his first overseas tour.

Truth was, once he'd moved past the anger, it hadn't meant much. He'd been young; love had been an illusion.

And he should have known better, anyway, growing up in a home where your mother got sick and died and your father was too busy saving the world to come home and be with her or his sons.

And, dammit, what was with his mood tonight?

Travis looked up, caught the bartender's eye and signaled for another beer.

The guy nodded. "Comin' up."

Jake's phone call had followed on the heels of Caleb's.

"Hey," he'd said.

"Hey," Travis had replied, which didn't so much mark him as a master of brilliant dialogue as it suggested he knew what was coming.

"So," Jake had said, clearing his throat, "about getting together tonight—"

"You can't make it."

"Yes. I mean, no. I can't."

"Because?"

"Well, it turns out Addison made an appointment for us to meet with—with this guy."

"What guy?"

"Just a guy. About the work we've been doing, you know, remodeling the house."

"I thought that was your department. The extension, the extra bathrooms, the new kitchen—"

"It is. This guy does—he does other stuff."

"Such as?"

"Jeez, don't you ever give up? Such as recommending things."

"Things?"

"Wallpaper," Jake had all but snarled. "Okay? The guy's bringing over ten million wallpaper samples and Adore told me about it days ago but I forgot and it's too late to—"

"Yeah. Okay. No problem," Travis had said because what right did he have to embarrass his war-hero brother more than he'd already embarrassed himself? The proof was right there, in Jake using his supposedly-unknown-to-the-rest-of-humanity pet name for his wife.

"Next week," Jake had said. "Right?"

Right, Travis thought, oh, yeah, right.

By next week, Caleb would be enrolled in Baby Burping 101 and Jake would be staring at fabric swatches, or whatever you called squares of cotton or velvet.

Domesticity was right up there with Lamaze.

Nothing he wanted to try.

Not ever.

He liked his life just the way it was, thank you very much. There was a big world out there, and he'd seen most of it—but not all. He still had places to go, things to do...

Things that might get the taste of war and death out of his mouth.

People talked about cleansing your palette between wine tastings but nobody talked about cleansing your soul after piloting a jet into combat missions. And, damn, what was he doing?

A flea-bitten bar in the wrong part of town absolutely was not the place for foolish indulgence in cheap philosophy. Travis finished his beer.

Without being asked, the bartender opened a bottle, put it in front of him. "Thanks."

"Haven't seen you in here before."

Travis shrugged. "First time for everything."

"You want somethin' to eat before the kitchen closes?"

"Sure. A steak, medium-rare."

"Your money, but the burgers are better."

"Fine. A burger. Medium-rare."

"Fries okay?"

"Fries are fine."

"Comin' right up."

Travis tilted the bottle to his lips.

A couple of weeks ago, his brothers had asked him what was doing with him. Was he feeling a little off lately?

"You're the ones who're off," he'd said with a quick smile. "Married. Living by the rules."

"Sometimes, rules are what a man needs," Jake had said.

"Yeah," Caleb had added. "You know, it might be time to reassess your life."

Reassess his life?

He liked his life just fine, thank you very much. He needed precisely what he had. Life in the fast lane. Work hard. Play hard. Nothing wrong with that. It was how he'd always been.

His brothers, too, though war had changed them. Jake had, still was, battling through PTSD. Caleb carried a wariness inside him that would probably never go away.

Not him.

Sure, there were times he woke up, heart pounding, remembering stuff a man didn't want to remember, but a day at his office, taking a chance on a new stock offering and clearing millions as a result, a night in bed with a new, spectacular woman who was as uninterested in settling down as he was, and he was fine again.

Maybe that was the problem.

There hadn't been a woman lately.

And, now that he thought about it, what was with that? He wasn't into celibacy any more than he was into domesticity and yet, it had been days, hell, weeks since he'd been with a woman.

"Burger, medium-rare, with fries," the bartender said, sliding a huge plate across the bar.

Travis looked at the burger. It was the size of a Frisbee and burned to a crisp.

Good thing he wasn't really hungry, he thought, and he picked up a fry and took a bite.

The place was crowding up. Almost all the stools were taken at the bar; the same for the tables. The clientele, if you could call it that, was mostly male. Big. Tough-looking. Lots of facial hair, lots of tattoos.

Some of them looked him over.

Travis didn't hesitate to look back.

He'd been in enough places like this one, not just in Texas but in some nasty spots in eastern Europe and Asia, to know that you never flinched from eye contact.

It worked, especially because he didn't look like a weekend cowboy out for a night among the natives.

Aside from his height and build, which had come to him courtesy of Viking, Roman, Comanche and Kiowa ancestors, it helped that he'd given up his day-at-the-office custom-made Brioni suit for a well-worn gray T-shirt, equally well-worn jeans and a pair of Roper boots he'd had for years but then, why would any guy wear a suit and everything that went with it when he could be comfortable in jeans?

The clothes, the boots, his physical build, even his coloring—ink-black hair, courtesy of his Indian forebears, deep green eyes, thanks to his pillage-rape-and-romp European ancestors—all combined to make him look like, well, like what he was, a guy who wouldn't look for trouble but damned well wouldn't walk away from it if it came his way.

"A gorgeous, sexy, bad boy," one mistress had called him.

It had embarrassed the hell out of him—at least, that was what he'd claimed—but, hey, could a man fight his DNA?

The blood of generations of warriors pulsed in his veins, as it did in the veins of his brothers. Their father, the general, had raised them on tales of valor and courage and, in situations where it was necessary, the usefulness of an attitude that said don't-screw-with-me if you're smart.

It was a message men understood and generally respected, though there was almost always some jerk who thought it didn't apply to him.

That was fine.

It was equally fine that women understood it, too, and reacted to it in ways that meant he rarely spent a night alone, except by choice.

"Hi, honey."

Last time he'd checked, the barstool to his left had been empty. Not anymore. A blonde was perched on it, smiling as if she'd just found an unexpected gift under a Christmas tree.

Uh-oh.

She was surely a gift, too. For someone.

But that someone wasn't him.

To put it kindly, she wasn't his type.

Big hair that looked as if it had been shellacked into submission. Makeup she probably had to remove with a trowel. Tight cotton T-shirt, her boobs resting on a muffin-top of flesh forced up by too-tight jeans.

All that was bad enough.

What made it worse was that he knew the unspoken etiquette in a place like this.

A lady made a move on you, you were supposed to be flattered. Otherwise, you risked offending her—

Her, and the neighborhood *aficionados* who'd suddenly shifted their attention his way.

"Hello," he said with forced politeness, and then gave all his attention to his plate.

"You're new here."

Travis took a bite of hamburger, chewed as if chewing were the most important thing in his life. "I'm Bev."

He nodded. Kept chewing.

She leaned in close, wedged one of her 40 Double D's against his arm.

"You got a name, cowboy?"

Now what? This was not a good situation. Whatever he did, short of taking Bev's clear invitation to heart, would almost surely lead to trouble.

She'd be insulted, her pals would think they had to ride to the rescue.

Users Review

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