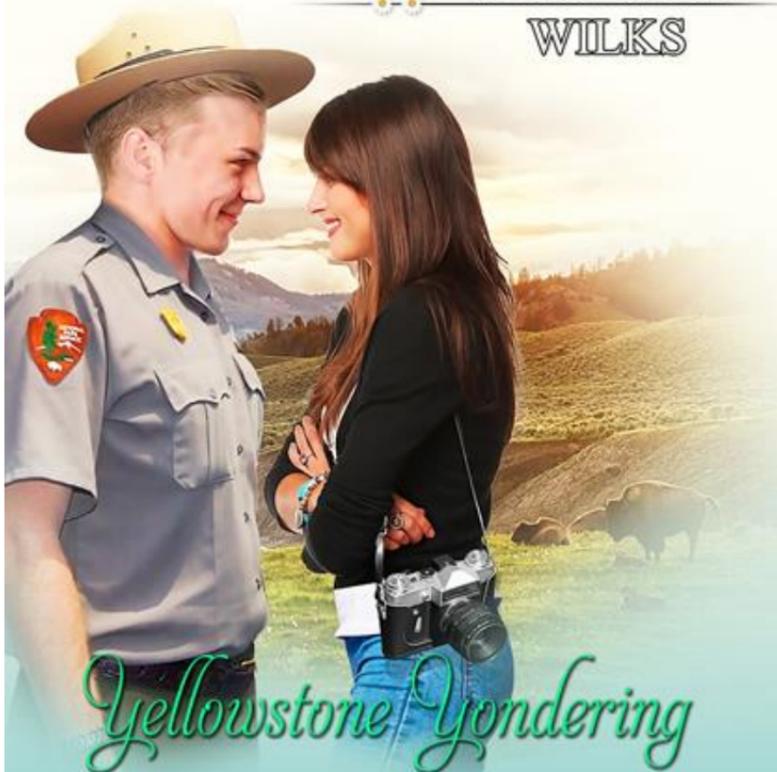


Pure Amore

SWEET ROMANCE - PURE ENJOYMENT™

KRISTEN JOY

WILKS



Yellowstone Yondering

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A FREE-SPIRITED
PHOTOGRAPHER CLASHES WITH A
RULE-OBSSESSED PARK RANGER?

Yellowstone
Yondering

Kristen Joy Wilks

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

Yellowstone Yondering

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Dedication

To Camp Counselor Extraordinaire: Donkey Kong and her cabin of amazing girls who challenged us all with such amazing questions about Love, Waiting, and God.

What People are Saying

“With *Yellowstone Yondering*, Kristen Joy Wilks has woven a fantastical romp through Yellowstone National Park that’s not to be missed.”

~Karen Barnett, award-winning author of *The Vintage National Park Series* which includes: *Ever Faithful*, *Where the Fire Falls*, and *The Road to Paradise*.

Concerning *Athens Ambuscade*

“One of the best books I’ve ever read. I haven’t laughed so hard over a book in eons—if ever. Thank you for the pleasure and enjoyment of your fine writing.”

~Marilyn Rhoads, Cascade Contest Co-Chair, OCW President

About *Spider Gap*

“Take a walk on the wild side. Well as wild as a mathematically minded teacher can be. *Spider Gap* is a sweet romance full of adventure and humor. Add in some sixth graders, a purse-sized dog, and a hunky trail guide and the fun never stops as two very different people find a way to meet in the middle.”

~ Cynthia Hickey, author of *The Shady Acres Mystery* series.

About *Copenhagen Cozenage*

Confessions of a Non-Romance Dude...Sure, romance novels may not be my thing, but if more of them were like this they might be. The book was a freshman work by author Kristen Joy Wilks, a name you might not know but might do well to remember. She writes well with a light, lively, genuine and very approachable

style. Her voice is a good one. She uses plenty of description and color but is not overwhelming. The prose flows nicely in the first person and stays true to character throughout. A cornerstone of this character is a dry, insightful and self-deprecating wit. Even in the most painful and darkest corners of her trials, Morgan (the protagonist) keeps things light and funny. I felt safe in the hands of her personality throughout. It was a nice place to be. She made me laugh.

While the writing was solid, the story itself was what I found... well... romantic. But not in a sappy, silly, sloppy way - more in a surprising, intriguing, face-punching, mystery-at-every-turn, "I didn't know you could write that and call it a romance novel" kind of way. Yeah, sure there was kissing and heart palpitations and daydreaming about that handsome guy, but there was also comedy, adventure, suspense, intrigue, breaking bones, big slobbery lovable dogs, faith, punching, tackling, disguises, people being locked in a cellar and threatened with torture and death, knockouts, secret backstories, bleeding, surprise revelations and smacking people over the head with stuff. And more. It was sort of a Romancing the Stone meets Beethoven meets True Lies. Wrap your head around that one.

So to recap: if you're looking for a fun, funny, nerdy, suspenseful, mystery-romance-action novel with a modern quirky twist, a big lovable slobbery dog, slapstick humor and a punch of passionate Christian wholesomeness, this one's for you.

And that's not cozenage.

~Chris Weedon author of Midnight Snack.

1

So Many Rules, So Little Time

Kayla slowed her motorcycle to a crawl, tapping out an impatient beat on the hand grips. The traffic bunched into four long lines as they approached the west entrance to Yellowstone National Park. A mournful whine drifted from the travel carrier strapped behind her. Kayla turned to address her furry passenger. "I know, you want to feel the wind in your ears, boy. At least they don't make you wear a helmet." She pulled off the hated head protection and shook out a tumble of long brown hair. The dry August wind made her scalp prickle as the sweat of the ride evaporated.

The whine turned into a fierce barrage of barking. A Great Dane out for a potty break flinched away from her bike, nearly toppling his master. The massive beast held his ears at a lopsided, concerned-looking angle and peered from behind his owner's legs.

"Hush, Ainsley." Kayla tried to be stern but knew Ainsley could hear the smile in her voice. The little black dog hushed for all of two seconds before he spotted something even more sinister. Now this was too good to pass up. Kayla unzipped Ainsley's carrier just enough for his head to poke out and then dug in the saddle bags for her camera. Her bike wobbled as

she leaned way back to get a shot of Ainsley's perky ears in the foreground with a large sign in the background.

"That's not even a real bison, boy."

A squat sign constructed of dark logs read: Yellowstone National Park. Next to this helpful text was the image of a giant arrowhead featuring a mountain scene complete with a single grazing bison.

The traffic crept toward a check station covered in a long triangle roof that closely resembled a monstrous bar of Swiss chocolate. Was that Park Ranger pointing at her? Surely not. She'd barely crossed the line.

As her speed slackened, Kayla put out a foot to steady her 1950 Chief. Sunshine yellow, with a fringed leather seat and the beautiful curving lines bestowed upon post WWII motorbikes, her new acquisition was worth every penny she'd paid. Sure, Kayla had emptied her bank account. But she and Ainsley didn't need much. A pair of leather saddlebags full of travel food, her camera equipment, and the pet carrier. Kayla walked Canary (yes, she'd named her bike) forward a few inches and turned to check on her dog.

The bold Scottish terrier let out a low snarl. Ah, a bicycle. One of Ainsley's arch enemies. Oh, my. That Dane thought all the growling was for him. The big dog flinched theatrically. Kayla snapped a few more shots, this time capturing the Great Dane's fearful profile. Let people have their Bullmastiffs, Anatolian Shepherds, and Russian Bear Dogs any day. Kayla felt safest with a Scottish terrier at her side. Scotties were a compact package of utter fearlessness and grit, something a girl on her own needed. She zoomed in, making the Dane's snout look huge, perfect for humorous blog posts. The royalty free photo sites she

often sold to would love these.

“There, now let’s let you breathe a little. All right, boy?” Kayla hung her helmet on the handlebars and pulled Ainsley into her lap so he could sniff at the commotion of park visitors that lined up behind the gate. To the right, a park pickup chugged forward, towing a metal bear trap. On their left a dark blue SUV driven by a couple of pretty twenty-somethings wobbled out of their lane as the occupants hastily hid their beers and what appeared to be an entire case of tuna. A tour bus carrying a load of passengers snapping selfies lurched up behind her. She’d counted license plates from seventeen different states in the last ten minutes alone.

Ainsley gave a sneeze toward the girls with the illegally open beverages and then pointed his snout at the bear trap, sniffing deeply. Kayla laughed. “Good choice, boy. The parties get old pretty fast.” Kayla’s laugh morphed into a sigh. The girls even resembled her old college roommates. She was their age, but Kayla felt incredibly old all of a sudden. She tipped her head back, letting the sun warm her closed eyelids.

It had taken Kayla much too long to figure out something that her dog appeared to know instinctively. Those carefree days added up to a whole lot of hurt. It had required more strength than she’d thought she possessed to walk away and choose something else for herself. Her college mentor had always said “God brings His glory out of failed endeavors all the time”; but Kayla felt exhausted, used up. Had she wasted too much time ignoring God? She was only twenty-seven; surely her course could be corrected. Surely her life could still have an eternal impact, regardless of time misspent.

Stretching, Kayla rolled forward a few more inches. A handsome ranger with precisely-cut blond hair and a park uniform that remained unfathomably crisp and clean despite the blazing sun, was assisting the family in a beat-up van ahead of her. Wait a minute? He was waving at her...and scowling. What on earth did he want and why couldn't it wait a few minutes for her turn?

Paint peeled in faded curls off the van's sliding door and one of the windows seemed to be stuck halfway down, but the vehicle literally bounced with excitement. A smattering of bumper stickers across the back made her smile. "God loves you like a chicken— Luke 23:37" was right next to a Sci-Fi spaceship winging across the galaxy and a puke green sticker that said "Sneeze on God, He won't mind—Luke 5:31-32." Several children pressed their faces against the windows and a catchy tune blared from a scratchy sound system.

The ranger motioned the van forward, and the music faded. The dad nodded at the tidy ranger, then paused to listen as the man spoke for an incredible length of time. What on earth was taking so long? The dad got out and put a dime in the tread of one tire and demonstrated that both tail lights and headlights worked despite the shiny gleam of bailing wire that seemed to be holding one of the headlights on. Park rangers weren't supposed to check that each vehicle in line had functioning blinkers, were they? This could take forever.

Finally, the family was ushered forward. Kayla caught a glimpse of a grandma, snuggling a sleepy child against her shoulder and the mom playfully bonking the dad over the head with a rolled map

before he pulled her close for a kiss.

Kayla sighed. Yeah, this was exactly the kind of thing she might have forfeited during her ill-considered college experience. The Christian dating site she'd joined last month put a lot of emphasis on past choices, especially for girls. Although most of a lifetime stretched out before her, the possibility of finding love seemed increasingly dim as the questionnaire stretched on and on. Every time she started to post her profile, she lost her nerve.

Kayla ran her fingers lightly over Canary's sunshine yellow paint job. She doubted the young family could have afforded the antique bike, and they certainly would require more space than she and Ainsley. The beautiful machine only seated one, two in a pinch. She laughed, realizing that she had been gazing with envy at the ratty van and its cargo of chaos. How long since those drooping parents had slept? Their boys were dancing in the backseat. Were their seatbelts on? Yep, the oldest one appeared to be using his shoulder strap as an unlikely weapon. She smiled as Grandma intervened, rescuing the younger brother and passing out more snacks.

A tightening sensation squeezed her chest, but Kayla pushed it away. There were perks to being single. She had the time and freedom to cross the country taking photographs, for goodness sake. This had been her childhood dream job and she was actually making a living at it. God would find ways to use her skills. Not every calling required sleepless nights and the ability to make all the different voices while reading picture books. There were many jobs a single follower could complete for Him. She'd simply had this image in her head of what a life of service

looked like. That was all. She'd never imagined herself, a camera, and her little dog, serving alone.

Kayla grabbed her camera and leaned sideways to get a nice obtuse angle with the ranger scowling in the background and snapped a picture of the beat up van and its plethora of bumper stickers. She took one of Ainsley enjoying the warm August breeze and then snapped a few photos of her green cloth tennis shoes propped up against the shiny chrome of her bike.

This was important work. In her "Trashy Tuesday" photo series showing high resolution images of litter in beautiful locales, she pointed people to all the glorious beauty God had made and gave them a gentle reminder to get off their rears and take good care of it. Both her photo of a kindergartener's tears on the playground, and a puppy watching the window for her owner's return had gone viral. Zooming in and capturing emotion was a significant contribution. Several inspiring speakers had even started using her pictures in their blog posts. Kayla sighed and took a close-up of a dandelion that dared to bloom mere inches from the asphalt.

The handsome ranger scowled again and beckoned to her. Oh, had she missed his wave the first time? Kayla let the camera dangle from her neck and zipped her bike forward, perhaps revving the engine just a bit in her haste. The ranger's mouth flattened into a hard line. What? He'd waved her onward. What did the man expect? Bikes made noise. That was part of the fun. His stern gaze seemed to take in every microscopic bit of dirt and pollen that had attached itself to her cutoff jeans and breezy silk tank. She found herself unconsciously searching for the hair band she kept snapped around one of the handlebars. No, her

hair was fine. There was no reason she should feel compelled to tidy up for a man she would know all of thirty seconds.

“Do you know the regulations for pets within the park, Ma’am?” His voice was a beautiful baritone that in no way matched the sour-lemon expression on his mouth or the critical glint in his eyes.

“Of course I do. Don’t walk your dog near bears or wolves and always provide fresh water.” Kayla gave him her most winning smile and prepared to speed onward.

The well-pressed ranger sighed and pointed to her dog carrier. While Kayla stuffed Ainsley back inside, He pulled out several pamphlets. “Pets are not allowed on trails, boardwalks, or in the backcountry. They must stay in your vehicle.” He scowled down at Canary with something less than adoration. Then he leaned over and zipped up Ainsley’s carrier with a firm, precise motion. “Your dog’s travel outside your vehicle is limited to front country campgrounds and within 100 feet of roads and parking lots. Please present your leash for measurement.” He waited, with one hand held out, the toe of his shiny shoe tapping the warm pavement.

“My leash? Are you serious?” Apparently he was, for the hand did not waver, although the toe tapping did increase in tempo. Kayla sighed and dug through one of the saddle bags. She yanked out a faded blue leash and thrust it at the impertinent man.

The ranger pulled a small measuring tape from his shirt pocket and slid it along Ainsley’s leash with incredible precision and care. “This is an eight foot leash, Ma’am.”

“Yep. That it is. Can I have it back now?”

“Park regulations demand a six foot leash or shorter. Do you have a second leash?”

Kayla shook her head and the ranger retrieved his pocket knife and sawed a good foot of length off of her leash before carefully tying a new loop in the end. Kayla’s mouth hung open. The car behind her honked. The ranger ignored the drivers in line, even though one had thrown his hands up in the air and another was slowly banging his forehead against his steering wheel in frustration.

He handed her a stack of pamphlets, not only on pet regulations within the park, but also papers that listed safe camping techniques, wild animal safety, and motorcycle repair for beginners. Where did he get all of this material? Surely the park did not concern itself with what kind of leather polish she used on the seat of her vehicle.

“I noticed that you are not wearing biking leathers.”

“Of course not. I look terrible in black.”

If possible, his scowl increased in intensity.

“Also, it is incredibly hot. If I don’t crash, I’ll be fine.”

The ranger handed her a pamphlet showing a number of grievous injuries and mangled motorbikes, some of them still in flames. “I’ve compiled a list of motorcycle accidents in the park from the last decade. Please consider the purchase of protective garments appropriate to your mode of transportation.”

Kayla snatched the paper out of his hand and squinted at his name tag which read ALEXANDER BRANDT in precise block lettering. “I’ll take it into consideration, Ranger Brandt. Can I go?”

Mr. Brandt shook his head and indicated her

camera and the equipment tucked inside the open saddle bag. "All park animals are wild. Stay one-hundred yards from bears and wolves and at least twenty-five yards from bison, moose, elk, big horn sheep, deer, and coyotes."

"Of course they're wild. Surely, everyone in this line knows that?"

"Yes, you would think so. Yet somehow I've spent the entire summer discouraging park goers from sneaking up to place their children, children mind you, on the backs of rambling bison and grazing moose for photos. Yesterday, a group of twelve tourists were snapping selfies not five feet away from a Grizzly with cubs and so I say again, the animals are wild!" The ranger paused a moment to collect himself.

"OK, then, let me assure you of my sanity. I am fully aware that these are bear-infested wilderness areas. I swear never to perch my dog upon wildlife of any kind and will personally tackle any parent who attempts to do so. Safety first...you can let me through anytime now."

The ranger raised one brow and lowered his sunglasses. "You might want to skip the tackling part. They would most likely sue." Man, his eyes were blue...and intense, apparently he had no intention of shortening the lecture. "Now, do not feed any of the animals. Even a marmot can give you Bubonic Plague."

Bubonic Plague, really? Kayla snatched her park pass from his hand and was about to pull forward when he gave her just the hint of a smile. It transformed his stern expression, pulling her gaze to those blue eyes and bringing out a single dimple in his cheek. Annoying and cute. How charming. As Ranger Brandt stepped back and waved her forward, he

managed to smash her glimpse of Mr. Dashing with some unsolicited wisdom.

“Remember, no one will enjoy your beautiful photos if you get an antler gouged through your eye.”

Kayla glanced back and smiled. “Actually, nothing increases sales like the tragic death of the artist.” As Ranger Brandt’s eyes hardened and he opened his mouth to reply, Kayla revved the engine and kicked Canary into gear.

2

*If the Dog's Feet Aren't Actually
Touching the Boardwalk...*

Alexander allowed himself to finally unclench his jaw when Felix came back to his post at the West Gate. "Here are the updated nature hike schedules." He handed the papers to his friend and was about to leave when the big man put a hand on his shoulder.

"You only let two vehicles through? Just the van and the motorbike, the whole time I was gone?"

"Yes, but the woman on the motorcycle had a dog and you know how many regulations there are to cover regarding pets in the park."

Felix gave him a calculating look. "So, you just gave her pamphlets from my station, not anything out of that massive stash in your cabin? And most certainly not that horrible collection of flaming bike wrecks that made a park visitor throw up right in the middle of your un-authorized lecture last week?"

Alexander grimaced without comment.

Felix shook his head, but let it drop. "Are you in Norris Geyser Basin today?"

"Not until this afternoon. I'm covering Brad's Hayden Valley tour, but I'll be back at Norris by two."

"Never mind, I'll call maintenance. A visitor mentioned a crooked sign at Norris. I know you always have tools, but it's not your job anyway."

“Is it my sign?”

“If by ‘my sign’ you mean the exact sign that you fixed while in the middle of a tour last month, then yes, it is your sign. People want to learn about the geysers, Alexander. Not rudimentary carpentry.”

“But if I have a moment, without a group, I can fix it without enraging the powers that be. Correct?”

“Yes, but the tour in Hayden Valley—”

“I have time. Thanks for the tip and your line is getting impatient.” Alexander pointed toward the fuming collection of drivers before leaving Felix mumbling under his breath about unnecessary pet-regulation-related delays.

Alexander started up his SUV and moved into traffic, traveling exactly forty-five miles per hour. He rolled down the windows and let the fragrant August wind dry the sweat that had beaded up on his forehead. That girl on the yellow motorbike, Kayla Dineen, was almost a textbook example of the kind of foolishness he’d fought against all summer. No protective leather clothing, no tent, no plan. Just an open air vehicle, a dog, and a camera. Didn’t she know how close the bison got to vehicles in Hayden Valley? Did she imagine that a bull elk or bear wouldn’t trample her because she sat perched upon a glorified bicycle?

Gritting his teeth and forcing the muscles in his shoulders to relax, Alexander pulled into the parking lot at the Norris Geyser Basin. He had just enough time to repair the sign before his tour in Hayden Valley. There might even be a moment to walk the crowd, looking for the subtle signs of stupidity boiling beneath the surface and threatening to blow. It had been a long summer and the tourists seemed to get crazier every

year. He would believe of them any and every folly after last year's wrongful death suit against Yellowstone. A mother had actually thrown rocks at a full grown bull bison to get its attention for a photograph and then had the gall to sue when her husband was trampled.

As he hopped out, Alexander froze. Apparently, his encounter with rampant folly would have to come before any sign repairs. Miss Dineen was standing on the bleached out boardwalk that snaked through the steaming thermal basin. She carried her portable dog kennel strapped to her back and leaned one hip against a sagging sign that clearly showed the outline of a dog with a red circle and slash through it. The message could not be clearer, yet there they stood.

Alexander slammed his vehicle door and strode past Miss Dineen's buttercup yellow motorbike. A rectangle of text on the rear fender stopped him short. "Guarded by a Scottie." What kind of fiend would paste a bumper sticker on a meticulously restored classic motorcycle? He marched into the hot, sulfur scented wind that surrounded the boiling pools and geysers. "What do you think you're doing?"

Instead of looking properly guilty, Miss Dineen flung a thick tangle of cinnamon-brown hair over her shoulder and met his gaze with a smile. "Well, let's see. I believe that I am taking in the beauties of the advertised geysers and hot springs." She gestured toward a striking azure and gold pool that stood out from the whitened earth like a blossom against a bed of chalk. "What are you doing?"

"Spinning my wheels against the inevitable extinction of the human race, apparently." Alexander raised an eyebrow and gestured toward the sign.

"Hmmm...it appears to indicate that one should not throw garbage, cigarettes, or Airedale dogs into this pool."

Alexander stared at the slouching signage. Yes, the dog in the outline did resemble an Airedale terrier, but that was beside the point. "No dogs. Not in the pool, not around this fragile thermal area, and absolutely not upon the boardwalks."

The insolent young woman pulled out her camera and took a knee, clearly zooming in to capture him scowling and gesticulating at the sign as the jewel-toned waters of the thermal area steamed behind him.

"So, what's the problem?"

Perhaps he should have chosen law enforcement instead of becoming an interpretive ranger. Then he would have the power to arrest this tenaciously belligerent park guest and march her to the safety of the local jail. Alexander pulled his thoughts back into line and tried not to notice the way her hair blew around her face, curling across her cheek in such a lovely manner that his furious thoughts seemed almost unwarranted. Almost.

He simply pointed at the Scottish terrier that lounged in the carrier upon her back.

"So?" She held her camera at arm's length, taking several selfies that included the unlawful canine joyfully wagging.

"You are clearly transporting a canine upon the boardwalk not thirty minutes after I myself explained to you that it was expressly forbidden." There. Even she couldn't misconstrue that.

"No part of Ainsley's person is even touching your precious boardwalk."

Ainsley? A good Scottish name. Alexander pulled