

A romantic couple embracing at sunset in Sedona, Arizona. The man is on the left, wearing a light purple shirt, looking towards the woman. The woman is on the right, with blonde hair, smiling and leaning her head against his. The background shows a sunset over red rock formations, framed by a large tree on the left and right.

TANYA STOWE

SEDONA
SUNSET

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Dedication

For my dad, who first introduced me to the wonders of
Arizona.

Praise

A Cowboy Christmas:

Fans of good clean reads will certainly enjoy this book, a feel-good story that left me wanting to read more from these authors! ~ Brenda Casto

Lea's Gift:

Lea's Gift would be a perfect [movie, a] Christmas tradition to watch year after year after year. ~ Trudi Loprieto

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Beautiful. Breathtaking. Lara Fallon stopped on the flagstone walkway to watch the most spectacular sunset she'd ever seen. "Brett," she whispered. "Do you see this? Isn't it incredible?"

Her father's right-hand man and her best friend paused on the path from the guesthouse to the main house and glanced up.

"It's just a sunset, Lara, it happens every day."

But not like this. Not in a burst of brilliant, burnt orange that lit every cloud for hundreds of miles. Not with a halo of golden rays spilling into the canyon to pierce every dark corner. The shifting angle of the light had changed the very feel and texture of the air. Everything looked softer, gentler, golden.

Lara took a slow, deep breath, inhaling the curiously mixed scent of dry earth and pines. This morning when she'd left New York, she'd looked up at a cold, pewter sky and nearly slipped on a patch of January ice. Now she stood on a mountain path, wearing a pale blue evening gown and marveling at the spectacle of an Arizona sky.

The tension inside her spun away like an untethered web caught in a soft breeze. The red rocks of Sedona were said to possess mystical, healing powers. Right now, Lara believed it.

Brett had proceeded ahead of her. Now he came back around a bend in the path, his features twisted

into a tight frown. "Lara, I promised Troy I'd be early to help greet the guests and I'm late."

Sedona's rocks didn't seem to be helping Brett relax. In fact, he was more stressed than Lara had ever seen him. Given the fact that tomorrow was the dedication of the Fallon School of Art and Brett had been working on the project for more than a year, she could understand why he might be tense.

But they'd been separated for six months. Now they were together, and Brett couldn't spare two minutes to stand beside her and watch the sunset. Something was wrong. Definitely wrong.

"Why does Troy need your help? Eliza is his wife and she's one of New York's best-loved hostesses. That's why she and my mother got along so well." Lara sounded almost petulant, more so than she intended.

"Things have been different since they've been here, Lara. Eliza's not herself."

Lara halted. Troy and Eliza were like family to her. Eliza and Lara's daily phone calls had slowed since they'd moved to Sedona for the project, but Lara didn't think they'd drifted that far from each other.

"What do you mean, 'not herself?' Is she ill?"

"No, nothing like that. It's just taken a lot more to build this house than Troy anticipated. Between that and the school, it's been stressful. Things have been a little...strained between them. And then there's Christy. She hasn't taken the move very well."

"No eleven-year-old takes a move well."

"I suppose, but the emotional upheaval and puberty hormones have caused a pretty serious flare-up in Christy's rheumatoid arthritis. Eliza has her hands full dealing with that."

Lara's arms dropped to her sides. "Brett, what in the world is going on? How could all of this be happening and no one, not you, or Liza, or Troy, has mentioned a word of it to me?"

He shrugged, frustrated. "What would be the point? What could you do?"

The words hit Lara and penetrated deep. Her eyes burned with moisture. "I guess you're right." She curled her hair behind one ear, hoping her voice didn't sound quite as tight as she thought it might. "An invalid wouldn't be much help to any of you in stressful times."

Brett blinked.

Lara was just as surprised the words had popped out of her mouth.

"I didn't mean *that*. I meant..." Brett began.

"You didn't mean to say it," she interrupted. "But you were thinking it. Everyone does. Since that's the case, don't you feel we should talk about it? At least you and I should." Was there a silent appeal in her tone? Or anger? She didn't know what she was feeling. She only knew that she'd taken one look at that wildly majestic sunset and suddenly felt different. Transformed. A little wild, herself.

Definitely changed.

Brett ran a hand through his hair, leaving it charmingly disheveled. Poor Brett. The next two days were probably going to be the most important of his career, and three hours after arriving from New York, his best friend had complicated his life with an uncharacteristic emotional outburst.

"I'm sorry." She was, but her tone remained taut. "Jet lag is making me crabby."

Brett shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced

up at her. Once. Twice. "Yeah. I guess it's been a pretty difficult week for us all."

He looked and sounded as unconvinced as Lara, but they were calling a truce. After the official opening ceremonies and festivities, they would sit down and straighten this out. Brett had helped her through the days and months after the accident. Tomorrow, they'd look back at this and laugh.

Lara fell into step behind Brett and they rounded a corner, coming in full view of the three-story pueblo style house. She halted again, struck by the pure, pristine lines of the building.

An artist, Troy's wood sculptures and carvings were some of the finest in the world. His latest creative ambition was to design his dream house.

Lara and her father had wondered if he would be able to transfer his incredible ideas into a reality. First appearances said yes.

The structure was deep amber, the color of the Sedona rocks, and multilevel with entire walls made of tinted glass. It looked like some modernistic dwelling tucked into the wall of the Sedona canyon, a colored jewel in a dark brown setting. It fit so perfectly, as if had always been there. All the lines had a purity of vision that somehow fell into the natural landscape. The house was a Southwest castle.

Lara was impressed. If the inside was half as tastefully done as the exterior, Troy had outdone himself.

She took a step forward and for the first time noticed a man at the corner of the house. Standing deep in the shadows beneath a full-grown scrub oak, he was almost invisible. He wore sunglasses and was dressed in black from head to toe. He lifted a hand to

his ear and said something in a low, curt voice. A black cord looped over his ear.

Brett came back, every move betraying his impatience. When he saw where her gaze was directed, he sighed.

"The insurance company insisted Troy hire additional security. They felt his own high tech, extremely expensive system wouldn't be enough to protect La Guitarra."

Brett took her arm and gently guided her toward the entrance. "Troy wasn't satisfied with filling his house with priceless Indian and Spanish-Colonial antiques. He had to have something else, something spectacular and memorable to showcase for the opening. So he brought in a three-hundred-year-old gypsy guitar complete with its own legend of lost lovers. I'm surprised you don't know about it. It's one of the oldest survivors of its kind. Your father knew of it."

Lara stiffened. "Why are you surprised? You know my father never talks about his business with me."

It was Brett's turn to pause. "Well, that's true, of course. But you always had a grasp of what went on."

A brittle laugh escaped Lara. "Only because you're his right-hand man and you talked. Now that you're here in Sedona, I'm completely out of the loop."

The troubled look on Brett's face made her feel guilty. Sighing, she placed her hand over his. "I didn't mean that to sound quite so bitter. It doesn't hurt that Father excludes me from the business. I've gotten over that. In fact, keeping up with all of Fallon Enterprises can be exhausting. I've actually enjoyed these last six months off. It's given me time to do a lot of thinking."

Instead of easing Brett's discomfort, her words

seemed to agitate him more. He hesitated, as if he wanted to say something, but they'd reached the double doors of the house. Sealing his lips into a tight line, he led her through the wide, tiled entry.

Hanging from the multi-level ceiling, an exquisite filigree candelabra made of rust-colored iron glowed with candle-shaped, flickering lights. To their right, an iron balustrade in the same delicate filigree pattern ran up a curving staircase and disappeared.

Lara had just enough time to catch an impression of cool, comforting earth tone colors...amber, beige, burnt orange, dark wood.

Then Troy came toward her, his hands extended. Like Brett, he dressed in a tux. For a man over fifty, he looked incredibly young and terribly handsome.

He gave her a light hug that paid homage to her expensive dress and artfully done hair. Troy was the consummate gentleman. Then he held her at arm's length to look at her.

Lara grew uncomfortable, certain that when Troy viewed her, he saw her mother's fine-boned form, honey-blond hair, and delicate features.

"Lara," he said with a warm smile. "You look...stunning."

The pause set Lara off. It allowed the doubts to creep in. In everyone's mind, she was still poor, little Lara. The attitude irritated her. "You mean healthy, don't you?"

Troy hesitated. "No, I mean stunning. Vibrant. Beautiful. Stunning." His words were sincere. He meant it.

Lara was sure of it, but once the doubts had started, she couldn't seem to stop them. "Like my mother?" she asked.

Troy's hands fell away from her arms.

Lara caught her lip. What was wrong with her? These people were family to her. After the accident that had killed her mother and nearly crippled her, Lara had asked over and over why God had taken her mother and left her.

Troy had been one of the bulwarks. He'd pulled her through with his conviction that God loved all his children equally.

When Troy, Eliza, and Brett left New York, Lara had felt bereft, and abandoned. She struggled to get through the six-month separation. Now they were all together again, and she seemed determined to pick a fight with someone...anyone. What was wrong with her?

Brett stepped into the awkward silence. "Lara's had a long day, Troy. She's feeling a little edgy."

"Of course, of course. Perfectly understandable." Troy leaned forward to kiss Lara's forehead.

She let him. But her stomach churned again.

Reliable, dependable Brett. She could always count on him to back her up, to forgive her and to make concessions for her "condition." The problem was she didn't have a condition. Not anymore. She wasn't overtired, worn down, or edgy and she didn't want anyone making excuses for her.

Eliza called her name and hurried toward her.

With relief, Lara pulled away from the men.

In her mid-thirties, petite and almost too slender, with a mass of long, curly red hair that refused to be tamed, Eliza looked spectacular. She wore a flowing, floor-length gown of brilliant multi-colored silk patterned with midsized flowers in fall colors. Burnt orange, gold, and burgundy blended in and over each

other, as bright as the sunset. On Eliza, it looked elegant, tasteful, and vibrant.

She grabbed Lara in a fierce hug, completely ignoring her gown and perfectly styled hair.

Lara's eyes misted with glad tears. It was wonderful to see her friend.

"Heavens, you look great!" Eliza exclaimed. "What have you been doing to yourself while we've been gone?"

"Same old, same old." Lara brushed over the compliment. "But Brett tells me things haven't been so good with you." Now that she was closer, she could see the violet smudges beneath Eliza's eyes. They were artfully hidden by makeup, but to someone who knew Eliza well, they told their own tale.

"Sometimes Brett cares too much," Eliza said. "There's nothing wrong that can't be fixed, especially now that you're here."

"Now that I'm here?" Lara repeated in disbelief. A moment ago she'd been made to feel like a useless invalid. In half a breath, Eliza had her feeling valuable. With a laugh of sheer pleasure, she grabbed the other woman in another hug. "I've missed you so much," she murmured. "Tell me what you need. I'm sure I won't be as much help as you think, but I'll do whatever you want."

"Did you bring your ballet shoes?" Eliza asked.

"Of course, I dance every day. It's my therapy."

Behind them, the door opened. Eliza stood on her tiptoes to peer over Lara's taller, five foot eight inch frame. "There's Rupert Townsend. He hasn't dropped a dime for the school. Troy needs me to schmooze him. There'll be no time to talk tonight, but tomorrow, after the dedication ceremonies, meet me here and bring

your shoes. I'll give you the grand tour of this monstrosity and explain everything." Pressing a quick kiss to her cheek, Eliza hurried around her.

Lara turned to watch her friend greet grumpy, old man Townsend.

Beside Eliza, Troy's gaze never left his wife as she turned on her charm. A slow, soft smile slipped over his lips and his hand came to rest on the small of her back. It was a loving, possessive gesture Lara had seen time and again between the two. Things couldn't be all that wrong if Troy could still look at Eliza like that.

Lara felt better just seeing it.

Standing beside Lara, Brett also witnessed the intimate gesture and it seemed to make him uncomfortable. He pulled at his shirt collar, and then ducked his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets. His glance strayed toward Lara and their gazes met. She waited, hoping he would hold out his hand, hoping he would tell her what troubled him.

Brett and Lara had an understanding. Lara needed to recover and Brett had been consumed with work on the school. But once past those times, they would explore their friendship more, maybe move into a deeper type of relationship.

Lara was ready for that, ready for the same kind of intimacy they'd just witnessed. She hoped Brett was ready, too.

Instead, his hands stayed in his pockets and he stared across the empty space.

After a few moments, Lara walked in the opposite direction.

Brett followed, but someone called his name and he turned away.

Rooms passed by in a blur of earth tones and

contrasting dark woods. Ahead of Lara, French doors led to a balcony. She headed for them and slipped outside. The air had cooled just since they'd gone inside. The sun had lost its grip on the world and dusk was fast on its heels. Lara leaned forward on the stucco wall that formed the edge of the balcony. Its rough texture bit into her hands, and she welcomed it.

Odd. Brett's lack of attention made her angry, not hurt. He'd been focused on the school for ages. She'd been patient and dutiful, waiting for this week, making plans and envisioning how it would be when they were together at last.

The school had been her mother's dream. After her death, her father had begun the work as a way to deal with his grief. He'd assigned the project to Brett, and the school progressed at the same pace as Lara's recovery. The two had joined in her mind. Now the school was finished and Lara healed. She had come to these ceremonies determined to see the school and her new life launched. She'd waited a long time to start her over, but things weren't going as planned.

She glanced up to catch the last flashes of the setting sun. At least she wouldn't miss the sunset. Even if she had to see it alone, it was worth it.

The sun, a brilliant orange ball, sat on the crest of the canyon, half gone, trying desperately to send last vestiges of color into the darkening sky.

Lara walked along the balcony that ran the length of the house, following as the bright circle sank behind the mountain. Its last rays caught the clouds and lit the sky in an explosion of orange and gold before it finally disappeared.

Lara turned toward the house. Farther down the balcony, a man leaned against the low retaining wall

with both hands. He was tall, with a dark complexion accented by a loose, full-sleeved white shirt. Longish hair hung just over his ears. Something about him intrigued Lara.

European. He looked European. Experience was written in the lines of his face. He had a strong, straight nose and full, well-shaped lips. A broad, strong brow made his brown eyes look hooded. He turned toward her, and the wind ruffled his dark hair. A slight frown creased his forehead, making his gaze seem intense, focused on her.

Lara shivered. Rubbing her hands along her arms, she turned and moved back inside. But she took the wrong set of French doors. This pair led into a small sitting area off the formal living room. Across from Lara, poised on a table, was La Guitarra.

Lara's father had made his fortune in antiques. She'd grown up around the family business so she recognized a fine piece when she saw it. She moved closer, studying the unusual instrument. Even if Brett hadn't told her something about La Guitarra, she would have known it had a past. The aged wood spoke of a well-loved instrument.

It would be unthinkable to add the oils of her hands to the guitar's unfinished wooden surface. If Brett followed procedure—which he always did—the stand would be mounted on a sensor. Any lessening or adding of weight and alarms would ring throughout the house. But still, looking at the guitar's dark surface, polished only by the touch of its players, her hand involuntarily raised.

“Compelling, isn't it?”

Startled, Lara turned.

The man from the balcony stood inside the French

doors, leaning against the jamb with his arms crossed. He must have thought Lara was about to touch the guitar. Embarrassed, she clenched her fingers and lowered her hand.

He motioned to the guitar. "I can never look at it without wanting to touch it," he said.

"I would never—"

"But you wanted to." He pushed away from the door and came toward her.

Lara's stomach jumped.

The way he moved, loose-limbed and smooth, powerful. Almost predatory.

It made her want to run. She backed up until she felt the table behind her.

He towered over her, almost certainly well over six feet. Up close, his eyes proved strangely light, not brown after all, but a hazel color. A small cleft pierced his chin. His features were not classically handsome, but arresting. And he spoke in pure clean, American tones, without a trace of a European accent.

"La Guitarra begs to be touched," he said, jolting her from her examination. "Like most pieces of art. Its lines are pure, made for the hands." His gaze traced over her shoulders and down one arm and suddenly, she didn't think he spoke of the guitar.

Flustered, she turned toward the instrument. "You seem to know a lot about art, Mr.—"

"Alex. Call me Alex."

His too-familiar tone set her senses jumping and she struggled to harness them. Purposely turning away, she managed a half-haughty tone. "Since you know so much, you should also know that touching destroys some art."

"Ah, but not La Guitarra. It's part of the legend."

She couldn't resist. She had to look at him. When she did, he stepped closer so they were almost touching. She could feel his heat. He smelled of soap and something tart and intriguing. Something memorable she couldn't name.

Reaching across the space, he clasped her shoulders and turned her to face the guitar. He stood behind her, so near his breath moved the hair near the nape of her neck. His voice was low and rich as velvet. "Once, a young man—not a renowned luthier, but a simple peasant named Juan Miguel loved the music of his people," he murmured and then stopped.

In the silence, Lara could hear her own ragged breath. It sounded intimate, sensual. She rushed to cover it with a question. "A luthier?"

"Someone who makes stringed instruments. Juan bought the finest wood and shaped a special guitar, using all the care and passion inside him. When he finished, he took it to an old gypsy woman for a spell. He asked that when he played, people would feel his love of life."

Lara's gaze dropped to the hand resting on her left shoulder. It was warm and lean and strong. The kind of fingers that could coax music from a simple guitar and make a woman feel things she'd never felt before.

"Juan was a vibrant man who loved life and when he played, everyone heard that love. Magic flowed from the guitar and captured all who heard it, including a beautiful young gypsy girl. Lucia could not resist him," he whispered. "Juan played, and she danced. He played so her body moved like he played the guitar. The music and her movements were one. All of Juan's passion could be seen in Lucia's body. To watch them was to experience the magic between