

An excerpt from *Lay It Down*, © 2014 Cara McKenna

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The matchstick shifted between Vince's lips as he surveyed the stranger.

Young woman—thirty, tops. Dressed to impress, but not in the way that chicks from Fortuity might. She covered the assets those girls flaunted, held them in reserve. The type who'd make a man buy the cow first, as it were.

The bar had filled up around them, tables dwindling and the volume rising, body heat making up for what sunset had stolen.

Miah frowned at the woman. "Sunnysider. Has to be." Sunnyside Industries was the company that had won the development bid on the casino. Miah wasn't a fan of a project, which had already begun to cause the ranch headaches over road access and construction runoff.

"Well, speak of the devil," Vince muttered, still eyeing the stranger. "Corporate ambassador."

There was a small tech company on the more civilized, western side of the tracks, but the outsiders who worked there didn't look like this girl—they were all doughy, sunburned men in polo shirts and sand-colored slacks. She was too

stylish, too pressed and polished. All shined up like a diamond in a place that only recognized coal.

She was here to dazzle.

And sick to death of all the heavy shit running through his head, Vince welcomed the distraction.

“Wonder what the angle is this time,” Miah muttered, eyes narrowed in suspicion. The Churches had been deflecting buy-out offers on their land and water reserves ever since the casino had been but a glimmer in Mayor Dooley’s beady eye.

The girl was a corporate rep, to judge by the get-up. Crisp short-sleeved shirt tucked under the shiny belt hugging her waist, tailored gray skirt out of a catalog aimed at millionaire secretaries. Wavy near-blond hair – but not the honest kind of wavy, not like Raina’s. No, this was the kind of wavy that demanded an early wake-up call and at least two plug-in devices. Raina’s hair said, *I just got laid. Eat your heart out.* This chick’s hair said, *Hands off. This took me an hour.*

Man, Vince would pay good money to mess that hair up against his pillow. Pretty face, too. The kind of pretty they didn’t make in Fortuity. Too clean, too...pedigreed.

“Glasses,” he noted. Stylish, bold ones, very *hot librarian*. He could roll with that.

The girl gave the entire place a good long study, then Vince – and every other man in attendance – watched as she headed for the bar.

“Chardonnay,” Miah guessed.

“Nah, fruity cocktail. Something with a cherry.”

“Five bucks says it’s white wine.”

Vince murmured, “I’ll take that,” and they shook.

But neither made a dime, as Raina set a double whiskey before the woman.

“Damn.”

Vince shrugged. “Just pandering to the local color. Back home, wherever she came from, that would’ve been a cosmo.”

The woman settled herself at one of the small, high tables in the middle of the barroom, and Miah shifted in his seat to face Vince, scrutiny shelved.

But Vince’s eyes stayed locked right where they were, questions knocking around his head like pool balls. A different persuasion of curiosity rousing a bit further south.

“Glasses,” he muttered again. “How come I never noticed how sexy glasses were before?”

“You’re not her type, Vince.”

“Like you’d know – you had her ordering white wine a minute ago.”

“Leave the girl alone.”

The matchstick rolled from one side of Vince’s lips to the other. “Wonder what’s in that bag.” She’d brought a purse, plus another not-quite-purse – a

weird shape on a long strap, decked out with zippered pockets like a miniature, misshapen hiking pack.

“That’s no briefcase,” he noted aloud, and the handbag was too small to be packed with propaganda. Every other Sunnysider who’d come through Benji’s had been toting reams of “educational materials” outlining the zillion-and-one benefits of a casino coming to Fortuity. One asshole had even shown a slideshow on his laptop, right there on the bar. He’d been laughed out of the place. That’d been ages back though, before the referendum. Now the project had a name, an estimated opening date, logos. Many former skeptics had since adjusted to the idea, grown curious about the construction and hospitality jobs Sunnyside and the mayor promised to bring to the area, all the money that’d supposedly trickle down into the limping local economy and tempt young people back.

“What’s your game?” Vince breathed, eyes on the stylish stranger standing in one of the most familiar corners of his dusty little world. The evening temperature had already taken a dive, but Vince shed his old leather bomber and tossed it on the bench, feeling suddenly stifled. “Think I’ll introduce myself.”

Miah shook his head. “I know that look—leave the poor woman be. Second ago you had her employers tangled up in a murder plot.”

“Never said that.” Not her employers, necessarily. More likely it had something to do with the outfit Sunnyside had contracted to undertake the construction, if the bones Alex had spoken of had been uncovered at one of the

sites. *If they'd been uncovered.* "And putting aside whatever Alex may have seen, I'm anti-Sunnyside as a rule. I like my town the way it is."

"On that we agree, at least."

"And if this innocent woman's gotten herself mixed up with evil corporate monsters," Vince added, "it's my moral imperative to seduce her away from the dark side. By any means necessary."

Miah's eyes rolled. "Oh yeah, fucking Saint Vincent over here. Anyhow, she'd bore you to tears. Look at her."

"Even vanilla tastes exotic when you're only used to rocky road."

"Whatever she's here for, it's not depravity with the locals. I can tell you that for free."

"City girls got needs, too." Vince slid out from behind the table and grabbed his jacket. "Plus I'm an ambassador myself, for this town. This is my civic duty – winning hearts and minds. And any other willing parts that might present themselves."

Miah exhaled in a huff, abandoning the protest. He knew better than anybody, trying to change Vince's mind was a waste of breath. Particularly with the fairer sex involved. "I better head home, check on that fence. Leave you to your lost cause." He stood, abandoning his half-drained bottle.

"Thanks for coming out. This talk ain't over, incidentally."

“It probably is for me, Vince, unless the sheriff gives you some answers worth worrying about. He does, I’m first in line to help. Otherwise, let a good man rest in peace.” With that, they traded grumpy goodnights and Miah headed for the door.

Vince didn’t honestly know what he wanted to get out of the mystery woman—not aside from a sense of her role in the greater development machine. But if a bit of reconnaissance flirting happened to lead someplace interesting...? So much the better. His bottle was empty so he dropped it at the bar and Raina handed him another.

She took in the arms that eight hours a day swinging hammers and hauling rocks had built, and all the black ink that decorated Vince from the wrists to the shoulders. Not her work—she’d done the tattoo on his neck, but been away when he’d gotten the sleeves, not seeming likely to return. Still, the way her eyes always narrowed at them, you’d think he’d cheated on her.

“Funny how you lost your jacket the second everybody else zipped theirs up,” she said. “Who’s the striptease for?”

“Just hot, that’s all.”

“Over who?” Like she couldn’t guess.

“You served her. What’s her story?” he demanded.

Raina broke his ten and spoke quietly, a touch of conspiracy in her voice. “She just got in. Something to do with marketing.”

Ah. “Marketing to who?”

He'd leaned in real close and Raina forced him back by the shoulders. "Find out for yourself."

"I love when you get handsy. How come we never started something?"

"Because I know you too well. Go prey on the innocent—you'll stand half a chance."

Vince snagged his bottle and turned, locking crosshairs on his target. She was checking her phone, that pretty face lit blue-white by the screen. Through the speakers, on came Tammy Wynette and *Run Woman Run*. How was that for mood music? Vince closed the distance in a half dozen lazy paces, but she didn't look up. Not until he set his bottle her beside glass with a *clunk*.

Her eyes found him first, swiveling up above the frames of her glasses. Her chin followed. "Good evening." Sexy voice. Confident, unimpressed.

"You're from Sunnyside, aren't you?"

He'd expected a little taste of intimidation at his tone, but this girl looked cool and dry as the desert after dark. Fine by Vince—he loved a challenge.

"Not exactly." She reached for her tumbler and slid it close, away from Vincent's beer. Like her toy poodle had wandered too close to a frothy mongrel.

"Not exactly?" he echoed. "But kind of."

"They've hired me, but I'm a free agent."

Vince hunkered down with his forearms on her table. He caught her scent, something light. The essence of some rare flower he probably couldn't spell. He

wanted to curl a fist around her collar and bring his face real close to hers, breathe that perfume in so deep he got drunk off it. Goddamn, when was the last time he'd gotten laid? Weeks? A month or more? Maybe Miah was right, thinking he'd grown irrational – maybe he was going crazy from sex deprivation. Maybe a good tumble would clear his head.

“Free agent?” he echoed. “Free to do what?”

She leaned over to lift her weird little bag onto her lap and unzip it along three sides. She opened the flap, revealing a camera with a lens about as long as Vince's foot.

“Don't tell me they're printing travel brochures already? Casino ain't much to look at yet. Bunch of pits and unlaidd pipe, far as I've seen.”

“No, not yet. They need promotional materials to wow their investors – shots of the progress and the natural beauty of the area and all that. And I need work, so...” She tilted the glass to her lips and Vince watched her throat work. Goddamn women had no clue what it did to a man, the way they looked sipping liquor, or sucking a long pull off a bottle. Or maybe they did. Maybe this one could guess exactly how suffocating Vince's jeans were suddenly feeling.

He focused with some effort. “You're a city girl, if I'm not mistaken. You travel far?”

“Portland, Oregon.”

He nodded at that, unsurprised. Sunnyside's parent outfit was California-based. God forbid the hypocrites hire a local, eager as they claimed to be to stimulate the town's economy.

"You got somebody showing you around while you're here?"

"No need. Job's simple—take pretty pictures. I wasn't told I'd require a tour guide for that."

"Fortuity's got its rough areas. Though stick to the daylight hours and you'll probably be fine."

"That's generally good advice for landscape photography." Her smile was wry, and it made Vince feel funny. Dirty-funny. Made him want to bite her lip, or maybe get bit in return.

He nodded to the camera. "Hell of a weapon you got there."

She lifted it out of its case with loving care, unscrewed the massive telephoto and replaced it with a stumpier lens from one the bag's many pockets. The camera whirred to life with a wink of green, and she held it to her face, aimed at Vince.

"Cheese," he offered, beaming her his best panty-melter through the contraption's eye.

Nothing seemed to happen, but digital cameras were quiet. Vince dropped the grin, then swore at the sudden flash, then another, and turned away, spots dancing.

She checked her screen, looking pleased. Looking smug, which was Vince's rightful shtick. "They'll probably go with the mountains and hot springs, but it's always nice to showcase the local wildlife. What shall I caption these? What's your name?"

"Vince. Grossier."

She stuck out a small hand. "Kim Paget."

Her skin was just as it should be—all lake-stone smooth in his gravel-roughened mitt. Exactly what he needed to soothe the warm ache she'd stuck him with. "Pleasure," he said.

"Indeed. What's with the match?"

Her gaze had moved to his mouth, and he dropped his own to her lap, smiling. "Got an oral fixation." He hauled his attention up in time to catch her expression of complete and total disinterest. *Fine*. "So, Kim..."

She batted her eyelashes, parroting his coy act. "Yes, Vince?"

"How much would it cost a redneck like me to get you to take nothing but photos of the landfill and the sulfur springs and the trailer park, and scare these greedy motherfuckers out of their plans to wreck my town?"

She flinched at the cuss, but barely. "I'm just here to do a job. And I hate to break it to you, but it's an easy one. I'm sure Fortuity's got flaws—every town does. But there's a reason people would pay good money to visit. I got a hell of a preview on the drive in. It's gorgeous country."

“For now, maybe. From down here.” Until they cluttered the mountains up with condos and polluted all the water, then caught sight of the east side of the tracks from their hilltop penthouses and decided the trash needed taking out.

“I’m not interested in getting drawn into the politics,” she said gently, more calm than meek, and drained her shot in two swallows, barely wincing. “I just need the pay day.”

“What for?”

Another little smirk, straight out of Vince’s own playbook, and she slid from her seat. “I’ll see you around, maybe.”

“Hey, don’t let me run you off, now.”

“You’re not,” she said. “I only came here looking for a quiet drink, and that’s just not going to happen.” She looked around them, seeming to mean the general volume of a Friday night, not Vince specifically.

In a voice that welcomed no protest, he told her, “Follow me.”