

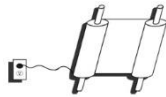


*Sleigh Ride off
Devil's Ridge*



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A M Jenner



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Deadly Gamble

Inherit My Heart

A Heart Full of Diamonds

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Bits and Bites (an anthology)

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Chapter One

Monica Walker, gowned like her classmates in the deep green color of her college, bounced on her tiptoes in her excitement. She watched her eagerly thrown mortarboard soar high into the air with the others as her classmates celebrated the culmination of four years of study.

She searched the field for the love of her life, struggled to his side, and threw her arms around his neck. “Will Slater, I love you! Now we can set the date for our wedding!”

Will’s buddies, standing nearby, snorted and chuckled.

“Yeah, right!” one commented.

“She’s kidding, right?” Another one followed his words with a laugh.

Monica looked at Will, wanting him to tell his buddies to leave them alone, but he looked bored more than anything.

What was going on here? They’d been dating for four years, waiting for graduation before they began their lives together.

“What?” she questioned. “We can do that now we’ve graduated, right? You said...” She faltered as his look changed from boredom to ugly disgust.

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“I didn’t say anything about a wedding. You did, because you’re a fool. I don’t love you. I only wanted access to your brain. Thanks for the A’s.”

He laughed and pushed her away. He and his buddies slapped each other on the back in congratulations, man style, and left together.

The joyful sounds of the night became distorted by the shock of his betrayal. The sea of green-gowned graduates pushed and swirled, bumping into her. She lost her footing and crumpled to her knees; her desolation held her still.

She’d loved him; trusted him. How could she have been such a fool? Monica pressed her palms to her eyes to stop the tears, but nothing stemmed the flood of bleak despair pressing in on all sides. Numb, alone, she was a puddle of misery, kneeling on the cool grass.

* * * * *

Laughter drew Monica from her tortured memories of graduation six months ago. She spotted the source of the noisy hilarity. Ah; the core members of the Brad Hiller Fan Club stood several yards away, their adoration for Brad bright as a neon sign as they laughed at his joke.

Ugh! She turned with a snort of disgust and headed for the employee’s hallway off the lodge’s great room. It led outside by the back way. She didn’t want to be tempted to watch the most handsome man she’d ever set eyes on. She’d rather be in the equipment shed waxing her skis than be caught ogling the resident stud of the Devil’s Ridge Ski Resort, no matter how tempting that was.

As good-looking as Will Slater had been, he couldn’t hold a candle to Brad Hiller. They weren’t even in the same league.

She'd fallen for Will's attractive face and never looked past it. Well, pretty is as pretty does; she'd learned her lesson. She wasn't going to be stupid now and fall under Brad's mesmerizing spell like several of the women here. Time to think of other things; like ski wax. It was safer.

Her summer had been agonizing; wherever she went, everything reminded her of Will and her failed relationship.

Since she'd been a ski instructor for years, Monica hoped working the ski season far from home would help her get over Will's betrayal.

"Hi, Monica." Brad's low voice close to her ear surprised her. She looked up into his chocolate brown eyes and missed the door. Her shoulder hit the edge, twisting her sideways.

He reached to steady her. "Woah."

"Ouch!" She grabbed her shoulder. She'd have a bruise by morning; just what she needed. *Ugh!*

She looked up at him. Was he trying not to laugh? Humiliation made her blood triple its speed, rushing a blush to her cheeks. This wasn't the first time she'd bumped into or tripped over something when she was within sight of the man. Drat it! She'd never been a klutz before. Why now? And why in front of him? *Arghhh!*

His face remained solemn. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, sure; I'm peachy keen." Her eyes felt glued to his face; she couldn't look away as she massaged her shoulder. He should get an Oscar for 'Achieving Perfect Facial Self-control Under Difficult Circumstances'. Were the tables reversed, she hoped she'd be as polite as he was being but doubted she could've managed a straight face. She'd have probably laughed – or at least goofy-grin-smiled – if he'd hit the door. Clearing her throat, she asked, "What do you need?"

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“Monday, some of us are going into the village for pizza. I wondered if you’d go with us?” His voice made it a question.

Monica searched his face, trying to find out how serious he was about the invitation. She’d love to go just to be near him, but it was too risky to her barely healed heart. “Ah, no, thanks; I think I’ll pass.”

“Come on, please? Our next ski classes don’t start until Thursday.” A note of pleading colored his voice. She’d never heard him do that. She sucked in a small breath and held it for a second, considering. Nope; she’d continue down the path of no relationships. It was safer for her peace of mind.

She smiled to lessen the sting of her rejection, shook her head, and turned to walk away. Brad reached out and grabbed her arm, halting her.

She looked at his hand, then up at him, not saying a word. She couldn’t. Her breath got caught with her heart’s hammering cadence at his nearness. Her mind screamed *danger, danger!* She could feel a tingly sensation on her skin as beads of moisture gathered at her hairline and knew sweat dappled her forehead. Oh, great; exactly what she didn’t need – physical proof of her nervousness. She swiped at it with her free hand, removing some of the moisture.

“Please.” His voice was nearly a whisper.

Monica shook his hand off. It matched the shake of her head. She forced her legs to continue walking away. She exited the lodge, and the cold winter air slapped her face with its briskness, bringing some relief.

She halted just outside the door and sucked in a deep breath that smelled of pine and pending snow, wanting the lightly cloudy sky and the quiet mountain beauty to fill her

with peace. Had she nearly succumbed to the wild enticement of staying near so he'd be with her and no one else? *Ugh!*

Standing still, Monica mentally checked her innards. Calm was not going to happen anytime soon. Her heart was drumming a wild dance against her ribs and more sweat was freezing to her forehead. She brushed a trembling hand above her brow to remove the moisture, glad she'd been strong enough to walk away from such temptation.

When she'd arrived six weeks ago, Brad had been in the lodge's workout room during her official tour of the resort. She could have sworn Adonis was supposed to be spending the winter months in the underworld, not up here at this beautiful lodge bothering the mere mortals of the world.

He'd smiled a welcome; she'd promptly stumbled against the edge of the treadmill, bruising her ankle. That seemed to set a pattern.

While teaching the basics of skiing to young teens, she was at peace and fully coordinated. If Brad was in her vicinity, she tripped over dust.

In a few months the ski season would end; she'd never see him or any of the other instructors again. If she kept herself away from emotional entanglements, she'd be home free and clear with a mended heart.

Her degree was in web design and development, a far cry from the mountain slopes she thoroughly enjoyed. When she finished this season and moved into her career field, her job wouldn't allow her the winter months off to teach skiing. She'd make sure she chose a different company to work for than wherever Will was, and not look back.

She shuddered at the thought of him, and a quiet voice close behind her spoke. "Do you need your jacket? You left

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it by the desk.”

Monica whipped around. Brad held her bright yellow ski jacket. She opened her mouth, but her words and her breath were stuck somewhere in the region of her belly button. Nodding, she reached for it, but he held it for her like a gentleman should.

She turned and put her arms into the puffy jacket's sleeves. Keeping her back to him, Monica finally said a “thanks” loud enough to be heard by the human ear.

He slid the coat up to her neck but kept one hand on her shoulder. She could feel a warmth where he touched her, right through the fabric of her jacket. It made her tremble with desire.

“I wish you'd come. The whole gang will be there, so we won't be alone.”

“The whole gang?”

“Carolee, Phil, Jack, Ralph, Harland, Paula, Suzie, Elaine and Ginny. Please come with us.”

“I don't think so,” she repeated. *Gosh, what an extensive vocabulary you use with this man*, she mentally chided herself. Usually she could banter words with the best of them. At least she wasn't stumbling over one-syllable words.

“Please, Monica; you'd be doing me a favor.” He squeezed her shoulder, the pressure soft and gentle. Hot tingles zipped from that spot straight through her tummy and down to her toes, burning a new track along her nerves.

“A favor?” Curious, she cautiously kept her back to him. This man could charm fish from an open ice hole on the nearby frozen lake. Rousing cheers by all the women watching would accompany his exploits. Monica doubted he needed anything from her. He dropped his hand from her

shoulder and cleared his throat.

“I don’t want to be sandwiched between the gigglers for a couple of hours, but I’d already told Ralph I’d go before they signed on.”

His words were so at odds from her perception of him, she couldn’t help it. She turned and looked up at him, studying his expression. He was serious.

“I’m not sure how I could be helpful.”

He raised his eyebrows, a hopeful gleam coming into his deep brown eyes.

“If you came with us, we could eat together, and I could sit and talk to you. It would give me some breathing room.”

Stunned, the surprise was evident in her voice as it spilled into the air between them. “Breathing room? I’m good for ‘breathing room’?”

Brad ducked his head. A ruddy flush of color stained his face, the shade clashing with his bright orange ski suit.

“That didn’t come out very well. Sorry. What I meant was...,” he continued, but Monica didn’t hear his words because she was laughing.

She couldn’t help herself. She didn’t know he could blush. She hadn’t known he didn’t like all the attention he attracted. She *definitely* hadn’t expected him to be embarrassed about anything in his world.

Monica continued to laugh. It brought a relieving, cleansing feeling to her. A peaceful, soothing sunshine of generosity flooded in and gave her a confidence like nothing else had done since she’d arrived at the lodge.

He joined in her laughter, which made her laugh even harder because she knew he didn’t know what had made her laugh. Finally, they regained control.

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Still smiling, he spoke. "I'd appreciate it if you'd rescue me. Besides, you're so quiet all the time, I don't know you and I'd like to change that. Would you do me this favor, please?"

Monica decided to check his sense of humor. If she reversed what a favor was, would he rise to the bait?

"What would I have to promise?"

Brad was instantly serious.

"What do you mean, 'promise'? Nothing; you only need to come. I'll pay for the pizza. I just don't want to be on my own, that's all."

"'On your own'; hmmm. If I come, there'll be eleven people counting the two of us. That's not quite 'on your own' is it?"

Brad flushed again.

Monica's smile widened before she explained. "A 'favor' usually has strings attached, as in 'I'll do this for you, if you'll do that for me'; I want to know both sides of this promised favor before I agree to it. And I'll pay for my own pizza, but thanks for offering."

"Then you'll come?" His smile hit the 1000-watt mark in less than a wink.

She had to swallow before she could speak. "We'll have to see. I haven't heard what the whole promise is yet."

"Nothing; you don't have to do anything, just come and sit next to me and eat at my table. Just talk to me."

"For not having to promise anything in this favor, I've already got several assignments. The way I count, that's not 'nothing'." Her grin widened.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you call 'sit next to me, eat with me, and talk to

me'? That's three separate actions and all are a part of this favor, aren't they?"

Brad looked steadily at her and caught on she was teasing. He grinned. "They are, and my part's buying you pizza. Could you see your way clear to agreeing with the infamous triple favor to help me out?"

She could feel a tug of warmth coming from him, and her breath caught. She didn't want a wobbly voice letting him know how he affected her, so she nodded her head.

Brad took a deep breath and let it out in a huff. The huge smile that broke over his face now eclipsed the 1000-watt one and stole what little breath was still in her lungs.

He took a step closer, as if to kiss her.

She took a big step back, tripped on the stair and fell on her behind.

He reached for her, but she held out a hand to stop him. "I'll be fine, just give me a bit of space."

He backed up a step and stuck his hands in his back pockets. "Thank you, Monica. Sure you're all right?"

Monica nodded, got up, and brushed her seat while she carefully backed away from him. "What time do I need to be ready?" she asked to cover her fall.

"We're meeting at the fireplace at five."

"Great. See you then." She stepped around him and continued toward the equipment shed.

She reached the curb and looked back. He was standing where she'd left him, a smile on his face. Her heart picked up speed and she nearly tripped over air as she hurried away.

Chapter Two

Monica walked away from him, down the sidewalk toward the equipment shed. He knew he had a stupid grin on his face because his cheeks felt stretched to their limit, but he couldn't seem to stop smiling. Talk about *score!* He felt he'd just been voted King of Devil's Ridge. She was going with him. He couldn't believe he'd talked her into it. Wow!

As he watched her walk away, he thought about the past five minutes. He'd been putting up with Suzie and Elaine. Suzie had made some stupid remark and, as usual, Elaine laughed like a braying donkey. She seemed to think if she laughed at Suzie's words, he'd see the humor and join in. Truth to tell, it was all Brad could do to keep a polite smile pasted on his face.

If Suzie hadn't been a relative of Lulu, wife and partner to Milt Miller, his great friend, surrogate dad, and owner of the lodge, he'd have told Suzie where to go eons ago.

While Elaine brayed her delight at Suzie's joke, Brad watched Monica at the counter. She looked up at him, frowned and headed outside. He made a quick excuse to the gigglers and hurried to catch up with Monica.

As he passed the counter, he'd noticed her yellow ski jacket. It would give him an excuse to talk with her. He grabbed it on his way. It became a good luck charm; he'd been able to open a conversation, and now she was going to the party with him. Unbelievable! He was still grinning as he watched her walk down the sidewalk.

When Monica got to the corner, she turned, looked back at him and took a misstep, nearly falling on her face. He loved it that she seemed ungraceful without her skis. It let him know she was human after all. When she was on skis, she was an angel flying down the mountain, utterly at ease and in her natural environment.

The first time he'd seen her, she all but fell over the treadmill. He managed not to laugh, but it had been a near thing. He wondered what Milt was thinking to have hired a ski instructor that uncoordinated.

The next morning, he caught sight of her on the slopes. That old song about poetry in motion must have been written after watching Monica on skis. Milt was exonerated at that moment.

Did Monica realize he was serious when he'd said she was too quiet and he wanted to change that? It didn't matter, because Brad planned to find out about her while they were at the pizza party – that was, if he could get her by herself.

He'd questioned Carolee and Paula, but they didn't know anything about her, either. Not even Ginny had been able to get close to her, and she was the friendliest person at the lodge. He felt marginally better knowing she wasn't keeping just him at arms' length, but all of them.

Once Monica had safely entered the equipment shed, Brad turned and went back into the lodge.

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Ralph leaned on the counter, checking the schedule book. He looked up as Brad got closer, then shook his head, looking back at the book.

Brad joined him and chuckled.

Ralph eyed Brad and made a noise in his throat that sounded rude before he spoke. "From the stupid grin on your face, I'm thinking you did the impossible and she accepted your invite to go for pizza."

"I'd say you're right. I asked, she accepted." If anything, he felt his own grin get bigger.

Ralph stared at him before he finally asked, "You're kidding. Really? She really said she'd go?"

Brad nodded.

"Crap." Ralph frowned.

Brad reared back. "What do you mean, 'crap'? I thought you wanted her to come with us."

"I do."

"Then why say crap?" Brad rubbed the bottom of his chin with his knuckles.

"I'd rather not say."

"Tough; say it anyway. Why the crap?"

Ralph looked up at Brad and grinned his own stupid smile. "Because it means I've lost a bet."

Brad laughed. "Let me guess; you bet Phil she wouldn't go, so now you've got to pay up."

"Something like that."

Brad kept laughing, and soon Ralph joined him.

After they quieted, Ralph confessed, "At least it's only going to cost me Phil's dinner. It's a good thing he didn't ask me to bet my whole paycheck. I'd have probably done it, and that would've been so much more expensive because I really

thought she'd turn you down." Ralph shook his head.

Brad chuckled. "She did turn me down, but I wouldn't take no for an answer and my natural wit and charm prevailed and in the end...she caved." Theatrically Brad sucked in some air and smugly huffed it out, wiggling his eyebrows like a vaudeville bandit.

"Ha! I was right! She refused you." Ralph laughed as he closed the schedule book and put it beneath the counter where it belonged.

"But I talked her into going with me, so Phil gets a free dinner after all." Brad huffed on his fingertips and pretended to polish his fingernails on his jacket front.

"Oh yeah, and what did it cost *you*?"

Brad laced his fingers together, turned his hands over, stretching his arms out their full length, and cracked his knuckles like he didn't have a care in the world. He unfolded his hands again, then slouched against the counter. "Just her pizza on Monday night."

"You got off cheap, my friend. Too cheap, in my estimation." Ralph's grin told more than his words.

Suddenly serious, Brad stood tall and looked at his friend without further teasing. "I'd willingly pay a lot more to spend an evening in her company."

Ralph's grin disappeared. "I know you would. I can see it in your face every time you look at her when you think no one's watching."

Brad's stomach dropped through the floor. To give himself some time to think straight, he slowly unzipped his ski jacket and removed it. He hoped nobody else had noticed his interest in Monica; that would not be in his best interest—or hers. His thoughts were spinning; he swallowed. "Really?"

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Ralph tapped his finger on the countertop to emphasize his words. "Really, so you need to be careful if you don't want trouble from certain quarters I could name but won't." He shook his head.

Brad looked around to make sure they weren't being watched now. "I'm already being extra careful around those 'certain quarters' because I don't want to cause Milt more trouble like he had last year. I'd still like to know what evidence she gave Lulu that made Milt have to fire Ella."

"It was lies, that much I'm sure of. Ella wasn't the kind of person to do anything wrong."

"I agree with you." Brad's voice was low.

"She did do one thing, though, that was totally unacceptable to your girl."

"Suzie's *not* my girl, and I hate you teasing me about her."

"I know; that's why I can get a lot of mileage out of it." Ralph grinned.

"Well, quit it. If you know so much, though, what was it Ella did that was bad enough to get her fired?"

"She was sweet on you."

Brad shook his head. "You're nuts. We were just friends."

"You know that, and I know that, but Suzie thought you'd fallen for Ella and she just couldn't let that happen. So she manufactured evidence of some kind and voila! No more Ella and no more worries about the preoccupied state of your heart."

An involuntary snort escaped Brad, but a cold feeling entered his guts. He didn't want to think Ralph might be right, however, he felt there was a lot of truth to his words.

"I'm just telling it like it is, Man." Ralph frowned, rubbing his fingertip on the top of the counter, his eyes watching

the motion as if it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

“It’s garbage, that’s what it is.” Brad shook his head.

Ralph looked up at him. “Yeah, it may well be a whole truck load of garbage, but once Suzie gets wind Monica’s going with you, we’ll need to keep a close eye on Monica.”

“For what?”

“For ‘accident’ or ‘illness’ or ‘manufactured evil evidence’ would be my answer, just in case anybody asked me for my best three guesses about what Suzie had up her sleeve besides her elbow.”

Brad sighed. “I sure wish Lulu knew the real nature of her niece. It would go a long way to making life easier around here.”

“But our dear and very trusting Mama Lulu is pretty hamstrung because her sister is Suzie’s mother. With family, you tough it out no matter what just because they’re family, after all.”

“Right. Which is why I haven’t decked Suzie yet, no matter how many times I’ve wanted to or imagined myself doing it.”

He thought of his mother and knew she’d be disappointed if he ever hit a woman, even one as disgusting and devious as Suzie was. Moreover, she wouldn’t be happy he’d mind-named Suzie’s best friend and sidekick, ‘Elaine the Donkey’, or that he sometimes referred to her as Suzie’s ‘pet brayer’. At least he’d rarely, if ever, used either of those terms aloud. Mom had taught him better manners. Even though she was gone, he still respected her wisdom and guidance and lived the way she’d trained him.

Ralph drummed his fingers on the countertop. “I’m with you. I like my job and want to keep working for Milt and

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Lulu.”

“Well, if you can help me keep an eye on Monica, I’d appreciate it. She doesn’t deserve anything ‘certain quarters’ can dish out. Can I count on you?”

“Absolutely, as always; we’re a team, Brad.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Uh, can I offer one other little tiny tidbit of advice?”

Brad looked long and hard at Ralph, then nodded.

“Watch your own back, too. I wouldn’t put it past Suzie to put you into some sort of circumstance that the only honorable way out is marriage.”

Brad gave a bark of laughter.

“You may laugh now, Brad, but when you’ve seriously thought about it, you’ll know I’m on the right track here.” Ralph pointed his finger at Brad’s chest as though he wanted to poke a hole right through it.

Brad shook his head, “That’s archaic. It isn’t done in this day and time.”

Ralph gave him a dark look and bounced a fisted hand on the counter. “That’s easy to say, but under the right circumstances, Milt may be forced to rethink a few things about your relationship.”

“No way; he’s practically my dad.”

“I happen to know it was one of the reasons Kenny enlisted...to get away from Suzie’s continual onslaught.”

That sobered Brad immediately.

“But that couldn’t legally have happened. They’re first cousins.”

“Suzie told him she had some evidence that proved they weren’t really related, so he *could* marry her. A week later,

he'd enlisted." Ralph knocked a knuckle on the counter's hard surface making a hollow sound.

"But it was what he'd intended to do throughout high school. It's why he was in ROTC."

"Maybe Suzie didn't know that. All I know is what he said when we had that party for him two days before he left."

Brad was silent, chewing on his inner cheek while he thought about Ralph's words. He finally looked up at Ralph. "So now that Kenny's dead, she's transferred her fixation onto me."

"Exactly. That's why I rarely let you out of my sight. You needed a protector, so I nominated myself for the job."

"But what makes her think I'd inherit the lodge? I'm no blood relation to Milt or Lulu. It will go to their daughter, Kandee, won't it?" He waved a hand in the air in the direction of the ocean.

"It should, but you're the best choice, since Kandee lives in Hawaii with her husband and sons and broadcasts to everybody that she hates snow."

"It still doesn't make sense, though; not from an inheritance standpoint."

"I wasn't aware Suzie was known for common sense or rational thinking."

Brad stuck out his hand to shake Ralph's. "Thanks, my friend. Don't stop watching over my shoulder now that I know, either. Unless and until we can catch her at something, though, I have to keep up the façade to protect Milt in the short run and Lulu in the long one."

"Will do."

"Thanks, Bro!"

Ralph shrugged. "I've got to go do some stuff. See you in

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a bit.”

“Yeah.”

“Watch yourself.”

“Thanks.”

Brad watched Ralph leave. He shook his head. Walking over to the office, he stuck his head in the door. Milt was on the phone. Lulu was working on her computer.

“I’ll be on the slopes for a while if you need me.”

“Okay, I’ll let Milt know.”

Milt gave him a friendly wave and turned back to his call.

Brad left, went to his room, suited up, and left for the slopes. Maybe he could work off his frustration by dinner-time. He hoped so.

About the Author

A M Jenner is a mother and grandmother who lives in Gilbert, Arizona with her family, a car named “Tardis”, and around 5,000 books. A self-professed hermit, she loves interacting with her fans online, and was last seen entering the library.

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Monica Walker expected a proposal at graduation; instead, she got dumped. Desolate, the seasonal job as a ski instructor far away from her ex was appealing. The job would have been perfect, too, if only she didn't have to contend with the gorgeous Brad Hiller and his ever-present fan club. She certainly wasn't going to fall for another pretty face...despite the fact that she tripped over dust every time they were in the same room.

Brad had been working for the Miller's ski lodge every winter since forever. The regular instructors were almost like family, and he liked it that way. He couldn't understand why the new girl was so stand-offish. He really wanted to get to know her better. Monica wasn't the only change this season. The Millers weren't their usual cheerful, easygoing selves, and there were some wild rumors floating around.

Can Brad and Monica overcome their personal differences and find a way to help the Millers keep their mountain safe from the copper mine in the next valley?

