

*Kyle and Alanna*

*First Kiss*

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# Chapter One

Kyle shifted in his suit and tugged at the collar. He didn't know why his dad was making him wear it. Didn't he have to wear enough suits when he was with his mom in England? He thought visits with Dad were supposed to be fun. But no, his dad had to remarry to a woman with two other kids.

He watched the little girl race down the stairs, her fluffy white dress bouncing around her legs as she skidded to a stop at the bottom.

"Look," three-year-old Alanna said. "Look how pretty." She grabbed her skirt and held it out, twirling in circles to show off. She stumbled and nearly fell over, but he caught her.

"Careful. You'll get hurt." Little sisters were such a pain. It was good they wouldn't see each other often.

"Kyle," his dad called from the other room. "Where are you? Have you seen Alanna? We need to be going to the church."

"She's in here." He grabbed her arm to tow her to the room where his dad and her brother, Gregg, waited. "Let's get this over with."

Lorna, the woman his dad was marrying, was all right, and Gregg was his age so they played together outside and made blanket forts and stuff. The past week or two was fun, even considering the little girl who was always around.

She looked up at him and smiled brightly. "You'll be my brother."

"Yeah. Lucky me." He had no use for girls.

# Chapter Two

## Thirteen years later

It had been a while since Kyle had made it to Colorado to visit his dad. He'd been wrapped up in school and activities, and didn't know how long it would be until he found out about the internships he'd applied for. The mountains were green and verdant, patches of snow still peeked out from areas of deep shade, and water splashed and bounced in the creek that paralleled the windy mountain road for several miles.

He pulled into the drive at the house his dad had occupied since he remarried. Nothing seemed to change here. The two-story log home was nestled into the trees, a broad sweep of lawn surrounding it while bright spring flowers popped up in abundance. It was less manicured than his mom's estate in England, but it was so much easier to breathe here without the expectations weighing on his chest.

Kyle pushed open the car door and stepped out, sucking in a breath of the clean, cool air, scented lightly by the nearby pine trees. His plans for the next few weeks included a mountain bike, hiking boots, his camera, and lots of summer sun. He snagged his bags out of the back seat and started for the front porch.

The door flew open and little Alanna—the girl who had irritated him by hanging around and always wanting to do what the boys did—stood in the opening. Only she wasn't so little anymore. It took him by surprise, though it had only been a year since his dad had nagged him home for her high school graduation.

When had she gotten so pretty? And grown up? And... pretty? Her long brown hair hung in a smooth cascade down her back as she

came down the steps toward him. “How are you, Kyle? Welcome home.”

“Thanks.” He felt like his tongue had swollen and was too big for his mouth, and his brain shut down. Wasn’t he supposed to be a suave college graduate? “Did you rush out to help me with my bags?”

She laughed. “You wish. No, I have a date and I’m running late.” She grabbed him for a quick one-armed hug hello, then took off for the faded red car he’d parked beside.

A date? She had a date on the day he returned? Not that he’d even thought about it one way or the other before. What did he care whether she was around? She’d been around more often than he’d wanted, her big brown eyes gazing up at him with hero worship. But there she was today, running away, smiling and excited about another guy.

He turned his face resolutely back to the house. She was his step-sister and ought to be off limits anyway. He’d just put those long legs and that perfect figure out of his mind. He would only be here for a couple of months.

Lorna greeted him at the door. “We’re so glad you’re here for a long visit. We’ve missed you.” She pulled him into a hug, then led him back to the room he always used when he stayed in town.

“So Alanna’s got a boyfriend now? Things change, don’t they?” he asked, unable to help himself, though he hadn’t meant to ask.

“No boyfriend, just a group date with friends. Are you hungry?”

Though he’d told himself he didn’t care, Kyle was relieved to hear Alanna wasn’t seeing anyone special. He cut off that thought. She was still sort of his sister. Too bad he’d never thought of her like a sister. Somehow he didn’t think he was about to start.

# Chapter Three

Alanna had done her best not to hang around Kyle too much, to make a nuisance of herself or let him know how much she still watched him when he wasn't looking. She thought he had paid more attention to her than before, and that he'd had a look of interest in his eyes on more than one occasion, which had made her a little breathless.

He'd gone hiking with her and a bunch of her friends the previous week, so it wasn't a huge surprise when she announced that she was taking her mountain bike out for the afternoon and he asked to come along.

Still, she'd prepared their picnic lunch with shaking fingers and a zing of excitement in her chest. It was almost like a date. Neither of them had called it that, so he probably didn't think of it that way, but it was just the two of them going for a long ride on their bikes, taking a meal and a big tablecloth to spread out for the food. Was she crazy for feeling like it meant something more? Maybe the crush she'd had on him since the first time she met him—barely more than a toddler—had finally made her crazy.

Kyle came through the kitchen a few minutes later and grabbed the backpack of food she'd prepared and kept chilled with ice packs. "Ready?"

"Sure." She grabbed a light jacket in case a cool breeze started up later, and followed him outside. Kyle slid onto Gregg's mountain bike and she settled on her own, then led him to the trail a few streets over.

"Hey, slowpoke, can't you go any faster?" he teased, coming up right behind her.

“Sure, but why rush? The day’s gorgeous.” She loved the wind on her face, the warmth of the sun, dappled by leaves of the aspens towering over them. The sound of the breeze blowing through the leaves, and the light scent of pines mingled with wild flowers that was always in the air. There was nothing like Juniper Ridge in summertime.

They wove between trees, down steep grades, and back up again, laughter on their lips and a little awe in Alanna’s heart as she saw a herd of elk with their offspring following behind. When she started to get hungry, she watched for a glade to spread out their food. When she found a sunny spot, not far from a creek, she pulled to the side.

“You ready to eat?” she asked when he walked his bike beside hers.

“Yeah, for a while now.” His grin was carefree and open. “This is brilliant, really brilliant. No wonder you came home for the summer.”

“Having a job waiting for me was a nice bonus.” Alanna leaned her bike against a tree and moved out to the sunlight, turning her face upward. “I love it here. Don’t get me wrong, I can’t wait to get out and see places and do things, see the whole world, but long summer visits are definitely on the agenda.”

He pulled off the backpack and began unloading it while she spread the tablecloth. “There’s nothing like travel. I’ve been all over Europe and a few spots in Africa, the Bahamas, and of course here.” He sat beside her when the bag was empty and took the sandwiches she offered.

“Tell me about it.”

He did, adding the kind of details that made her feel almost like she was seeing it along with him. The sun caught his red hair, shooting out glints of copper and making his blue eyes shine even

more than usual. She knew this was a day she would never forget. How could she when she'd never been so happy before?

When they finished eating, Kyle pulled out his camera and started shooting photos, turning it on her after a while.

"Why are you wasting your film on me?" she asked, though she was flattered that he thought her worthy of his not inconsiderable talent.

"It's digital. I can take all I want and it doesn't cost me anything." He punctuated this comment with several shutter snaps.

She chuckled and tossed an apple core at him. He scooted out of the way, laughing.

"I don't know how you manage to keep track of all the settings on that thing. I can barely manage my point and shoot camera.

"Come here and I'll show you how to set up a picture." He held out a hand to her.

A little thrill slid up her spine as she stood. They stood close while he explained what all of the little marks on the camera were for and how it worked.

"Okay, now time to take a few." Kyle held it out, the back of the camera facing her.

"Are you sure."

"You'll be fine." He showed her how to hold it, his fingers gliding over hers.

As she lifted it to her face, he stepped right behind her shoulder so his cologne reached her. His arm brushed against her shoulder and his voice was low in her ear as he gave her instructions.

"Like this?" she asked after she took one shot.

"Just like that. Do a few more."

Alanna turned the viewfinder a little to the left, settled on a tree that was half in light, half in shadow, with a glimpse of the creek

bubbling beside it, and shifted the image into the left half of the viewfinder as he'd told her to. She took a few shots, then passed the camera back to him so he could see the images.

"Very good. You'll be a pro in no time," Kyle said when he'd clicked through the frames. "You have a natural eye." His gaze lifted to hers again.

The power of his gaze and their closeness hit her hard, making it difficult to breathe as a lump formed in her throat.

He slung the camera strap around his shoulder, then lifted his hand to pick up a lock of her hair. "You have the prettiest hair. It shines in the sun like mahogany."

No one had ever said anything so nice to her. "Thanks." She felt like a stupid school girl who didn't know what to say as he gravitated a little closer. The sound of bird song gilded the air, and the gurgling creek added to the symphony.

His hand slid from her hair to rest lightly on her arm and he pulled her closer. "I've been blind, haven't I? How did I miss really seeing you before this summer?"

"No idea. I've been here all along." Wanting him to notice. Alanna took one more step toward him, narrowing the gap as his other hand came up to her elbow. Her lips tingled with anticipation.

"Your mouth has been driving me crazy."

"Is that a good thing?" Her voice was barely a whisper now as he shifted closer.

"Oh, yeah." Then he covered her mouth with his, the touch light at first, as if experimenting to see if she would respond, then growing firmer as her hands slid onto his waist and she leaned against him.

Her knees felt weak, though she'd always figured that was just a figure of speech until this moment. She tipped her head in a bid for more. She'd kissed boys before but nothing had prepared her for this:

the sweep of joy that raced through her system, the way it pulled her in, a sharp yearning for more tugging at her.

After a long, long moment, he moved back, letting out a shuddering breath. “Did I really waste the past three weeks *not* kissing you?”

She chuckled and set her forehead on his shoulder, trying to catch her breath. “You must be awfully thick to make us wait.”

“I’ll never be that stupid again.” His arms went around her, holding her tight.

# *About This Story*

This story was originally written as bonus material for my book *Homecoming* when it was first released in paperback, and is also available at the end of that book in print and ebook. If you haven't read that book yet, I hope this interests you enough to want to find out what happened next. Kyle and Alanna hit a rough patch after this, but as always, true love and two people who really want to make things work, eventually triumph in the end—otherwise, what would be the point? Happy reading!

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