

DREAMWEAVER TRAIL
EXCERPT

Chapter One

Valentine's Day
Eternity Springs, Colorado

"I've never seen so many hot men in one room at the same time," Gabriella Romano muttered over her champagne glass. Wasn't it just her luck that they were all either married or related to her?

Earlier today, her brother Lucca had married the love of his life, Hope Montgomery, and now their wedding reception was in full swing at the new event center at Angel's Rest Healing Center and Spa. Gabi was thrilled for her brother and his wife and the new family they'd formed. Hope's daughter, Holly, was a sweetheart and with a new baby due to arrive this summer, Lucca's world was as bright as sunshine on snow atop Murphy Mountain.

Gabi just wished that Lucca's happiness didn't make her so aware of her own world's gray skies.

A wave of melancholy rolled over her as the music switched to something low and romantic and guests paired off with their spouses and significant others. Gabi watched her brother Zach give his wife Savannah a twirl. She sighed when sexy Jack Davenport nibbled at his Cat's ear and again when Cam Murphy stroked a finger down the path of his Sarah's spine while they swayed with the music. When Richard Steele let his hand slide south of her mother's hip, Gabi turned away and gazed out at the snow-covered

grounds of Angel's Rest standing silvered in moonlight. I'm a wallflower. "Maybe I should draw a big W on my forehead."

"W for what?" her brother Max asked, his green eyes dancing with amusement as he moved to stand beside her. "Whiner?"

She shot him a glare. "I don't whine."

He arched a cynical brow, but wisely remained silent. Gabi's scowl deepened for a long moment before she relented. "Do I whine?"

"Not usually. Lately..." He shrugged. "You're obviously unhappy, Gabriella."

"Not unhappy," she defended. "I'm...drifting."

Since leaving the sheriff's department last fall, she'd helped with her mother's project—turning a dilapidated old house into Aspenglow Place Bed and Breakfast. The B&B had opened for guests two weeks ago, and Maggie Romano had the running of her new business well in hand. "I need a job."

"So you've definitely decided not to work with Mom at Aspenglow?"

"I'm not cut out to be an innkeeper."

Max grabbed two flutes of champagne from a passing waiter and handed one to his sister. "Lucca says you've been out of sorts since you resigned from the sheriff's department. Why don't you go back?"

"No," she swiftly replied.

Max sipped his champagne and studied her. "You know, honey, there's a reason most departments require an officer to see a counselor after a shooting. I know Zach said his department would pay—"

“No.” Gabi cut him off. “I’m not against further counseling, and I promise I’d see someone if I thought I needed it.”

“But—”

“That’s not the problem, Max. I have no regrets for killing Francine Vaughan.” The memory of that moment flashed through her mind and she repressed a reflexive shudder before continuing, “Killing her saved Zach’s life, and that’s the best thing I’ve ever done. However, I don’t want to carry a weapon anymore. It’s as simple as that.”

“There are jobs in the field that don’t require you to carry a weapon. I hate to see you give it up for good, honey. I remember how much grief Dad gave you and how hard you fought to go into the police academy after college. You wanted a law enforcement career so bad.”

That much was true. “Eternity Springs isn’t London, Massimiliano. Our police carry guns.”

“Maybe it’s time you come back to Denver.”

“Maybe,” she said, the word rife with doubt.

Max’s expression clouded. “Look, honey, if you’re worried about Sobilek, you can give me the green light to have that talk I’ve been dying to have with the lying, cheating bastard. He won’t bother you. I can promise you that.”

She couldn’t help but smile. Most of the time, big brothers acting like big brothers cramped her style. Upon occasion, however, she basked in their love. “No, Max. Frank Sobilek has nothing to do with this. Maybe I did leave Denver because of him, but I stayed in Eternity Springs because of me. Besides, if I decided I needed to be in

Denver, I wouldn't let him stand in my way. I won't give him that power. My broken heart has healed and it's stronger than ever before."

"Good for you."

Yeah, well, that's what I tell myself, anyway. She wasn't certain she'd pass a lie detector test.

She heard Nic Callahan laugh and smiled wistfully. "I don't think Denver is where I need to be at this point in my life. I don't really want to leave Eternity Springs. I love it here. I love the people here."

"Don't you miss your friends back in Denver?"

"Friends come and go," she said lightly, burying the twinge of pain.

"That doesn't sound like you," Max observed. When she didn't respond, he added, "Speaking of friends, what's the news about Cheryl these days? I guess she's still jetting off to Hollywood to be interior designer to the stars? Now there's someone who never had any career doubts. Every time she came over she brought more furniture and accessories for your Barbie Dream House. Though, I would have expected her to make her mark working for politicians the like rather than actors."

At the mention of Cheryl Oliver, Gabi's heart twisted. "I don't think they've been a good influence on her, but yes, she's still living in Aspen and traveling to California quite a bit. I got a postcard from her last week from Italy."

"Maybe you should hire on as her assistant."

"I don't think so." Gabi would rather work for the devil himself. Once upon a time, she and Cheryl had been inseparable, best friends who'd played Barbies and experimented with make-up and sung along to the Backstreet Boys together. Cheryl had

been the sister Gabi didn't have. Those days were over. Their friendship was over. Gabi couldn't let go of the hate.

Her gaze drifted back to the couples on the dance floor and she changed the subject. "You're not with anyone these days, Max. Don't you ever get lonely?"

"Sometimes," Max said, a shadow crossing his face. Just why the shadow, Gabi didn't know. Of all her brothers, he was the least sharing about details of his private life. "Not enough to brave the Denver dating scene, though."

At least Denver had a dating scene.

Perhaps Max was right. Perhaps it was time for a change of scenery. Gabi had never been one to sit back and wait for life to happen. She believed in being proactive. When she wanted something, she went after it.

"I want passion."

Max winced. "Too much information, little sis."

"Not that kind of passion. Well, okay, maybe that kind of passion, but not only that kind of passion. I want more than a relationship and more than a job. I want a life that I'm passionate about."

"That's a good goal. Though it's a little weird to be thinking about it at our brother's wedding."

"This is the perfect time to be thinking about it," Gabi protested. "Look at Lucca and Hope. Don't they inspire you? They've both gone through so much emotional pain and heartache, but they fought their way through it and triumphed. Now they glow. They're euphoric. They show us what life should be."

Max affectionately thumped the tip of Gabi's nose. "For a tough broad, you are such a starry-eyed girl."

"Bite me, brother. Look, Lucca and Hope and Zach and Savannah and shoot, even Mom and Richard are actively living their lives. Somewhere along the way, I quit living mine. I've been simply marking time. That needs to stop. I need to find my passion."

"If you want it, you'll find it, Gabriella. Of that, I have no doubt. You're as hardheaded as they come."

"You say the nicest things to me, Max," she dryly drawled.

"I'm about to do something nice for you."

"Oh yeah? What?"

"Hold on." He set down his champagne glass on a nearby table, then moved to intercept a waiter. A moment later, he returned with two dessert plates filled with pieces of the Romano family Italian cream cake that had quickly reached legendary status in Eternity Springs.

He handed one plate toward her. Gabi eyed it wistfully. "Mom said we're only supposed to have one piece."

"I thought you wanted to live a little."

"By ignoring Mom's rules? That's a death wish."

Max took a big bite of cake, then tauntingly licked the tongs of his fork. "Live dangerously, little sis."

Laughing, she did so. After finishing her cake, she accepted the groom's invitation to dance and managed to hold her melancholy at bay for the rest of the celebration. But later, as yet another Valentine's Day drew to a lonely close, she crawled into bed with a

paperback that couldn't hold her interest because her thoughts kept drifting back to the wedding reception and her big revelation.

It was time to live. Time to search for her passion. How? Where? What did she do to get the ball rolling?

Maybe she should begin with baby steps, get out of town, do something fun and spur-of-the-moment. Unfortunately, the sad state of her bank account limited her options. What she needed was another gig like she'd had last fall for the Thurstons, the uber-wealthy owners of a vacation house outside of Eternity Springs who had taken her along on their Mediterranean vacation to babysit their beloved dog. A girl could do a lot of thinking while walking a dog along a beautiful beach.

As first one hour, then two ticked by, the thought wouldn't leave her alone.

First thing the following morning, she looked up the phone number for the Thurstons and made the call. The Thurstons didn't need her, but they had friends who had friends who were desperate for a caretaker for their four month old puppy.

By the end of the week and having packed light, Gabi boarded a plane in Gunnison. Thirty-six hours of bumpy flights, boring layovers, and a harrowing boat ride later, she arrived at her home-away-from-home for the next four months—a small, sparsely populated Caribbean island—Bella Vita Isle.

After meeting her employers, the Fontanas, and her charge, a Newfoundland puppy with a solid black coat and a playful disposition name Bismarck, she explored the house where she'd be staying for the next four months and had to pinch herself to be sure this wasn't just a fantasy. Oceanfront view? A swimming pool? An electric massage chair in her bedroom?

Paradise wasn't lost. She'd found it on Bella Vita Isle.

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Liam Seagraves glanced up from the legal document he'd been reading when his lawyer stepped into his office. Matthew Wharton crossed the room and took a seat on the opposite side of the desk. "Margaret asked me to tell you that if you want your morning swim, you should do it now. Since we're leaving early tomorrow morning and she won't have time to cook, she's decided you need a full breakfast today. Can't have you wasting away any longer, you know."

"Not a chance of that. Have you seen all the meals she has put into my freezer?"

"She thinks you need to gain back those fifteen pounds you've lost." Matthew frowned and patted his bulging stomach. "And, she wishes I could give them to you. She doesn't cook like that for me anymore. I've been put on notice that carbs are not in my future."

Liam grinned at his friend's glum tone. "Why don't you leave her behind when you go home? I'll take good care of her."

"In your dreams, boss." The lawyer buffed his nails on his shoulder. "She wouldn't leave me for you. If you were a short, pudgy, balding guy, I might worry, but she's not impressed by super-rich pretty boys."

"Just my luck," Liam said as he flipped to the last page of the document. "Woman like Margaret are few and far between."

He'd learned that by bitter experience.

"Do you have any questions?" Wharton asked, nodding toward the papers, his tone shifting from teasing to all business. Serious business.

“No. It’s straightforward and clear.”

“And final. And unnecessary.”

Matthew looked like he was going to ramp up his arguments yet again, despite the fact they’d already been over this a dozen times before. Liam headed him off by picking up a pen and signing the top sheet of a stack of paper. “It’s what I need to do.”

Matthew set his teeth but didn’t comment further as Liam worked his way through the rest of the documents Wharton had brought him. When he was done, he returned them to a file folder and handed it over to his attorney. “I need a new start, Matthew. I know it’s symbolic, but symbolism matters.”

“So do patents. You are walking away from so much.”

“I walked,” he corrected, gesturing toward the file folder. “Past tense. It’s official now, right?”

“I have to file the paperwork, but yes.”

Conflicting emotions swirled through him. He was both happy and sad, relieved and disturbed and regretful. Of course, that seemed to be his default these days. “Liam Brogan,” he said, testing his new name aloud. “My mother’s father would be proud that I’ve taken his name. He told me one time that one of his biggest regrets was that since he’d fathered only girls, the name would die out.”

“From what you’ve told me about the old Irishman, he’d kick your daddy’s ass for his actions these past few months. But back to those patents...”

“No longer my property. It’s okay, Matthew. This is the way I wanted it. Don’t worry so much.”

“After the past two years, it’s a habit.” His attorney and friend shook his head. “You do know that selling your company and changing your name won’t keep the vultures away. They’ll track you down.”

“I expect they will, but living on the island won’t make it easy on them. Plus, I’m determined to be boring. They’ll lose interest and pretty soon I’ll be old news.”

“I swear, the worship of celebrity in this world is a disease.”

“Look on the bright side,” Liam advised. “If not for my celebrity status, you wouldn’t have an open invitation to visit my island paradise any time you’d like. Now, I’d better hit the pool so I have a big enough appetite to do Margaret’s efforts justice. Want to join me?”

“Are you kidding?” Matthew looked appalled. “If I exercised I might lose my pudginess, and my bride might take a second look at you.”

“Damn. You saw through me.” Liam pushed away from his desk and stood. “Do I have half an hour?”

“Forty-five minutes, I’d say. Maybe an hour. She’s still whipping up her famous breakfast casserole and it has to bake. She’s also making homemade biscuits to go with it, fruit salad, fresh squeezed orange juice, and who knows what else. That’s just what she told me about. ”

“In that case I’ll swim an extra couple of laps.”

He took the stairs two at a time to reach the master suite, and spared the spectacular ocean view out the west facing window only a glance. Despite all of the banter with his attorney and friend, today’s actions weighed upon him. He’d worked hard to build Seagrave-Laraby and he was proud of what he’d accomplished. Cutting

those ties hadn't been easy. A man didn't turn his back on his very identity without it leaving a bruise or two.

He changed into his swim trunks, looking forward to the distraction of a good, hard swim, a hearty breakfast, then a day on the water as he ferried his attorney and his wife up to Nassau so they could catch a plane back to the States. Once again, he felt conflicting emotions about their departure. A part of him hated to see them go. Another part needed to be alone to reflect and lick his wounds.

He exited the suite by way of the spiral iron staircase that led down from his bedroom verandah. A dozen varieties of tropical flowers perfumed the air and thick, green grass provided a soft path for his bare feet as he crossed the lawn toward the pool. There he discovered a couple of trespassers—two large lizards swimming in the water along with leaves and flower petals that had blown in during last night's storm. He retrieved the skimmer pole from the storage shed and set about cleaning his pool.

His thoughts returned to the stack of documents and contracts he'd handed to his attorney this morning, and with his focus on paperwork, he didn't immediately notice the noise.

The movement caught his attention.

A fluffy black dog dashed through the evergreen hedge at the far side of the yard just as Liam scooped a lizard into his net. The small dog—no, a large dog puppy—spied Liam and altered his course, heading directly toward him, yapping all the way. Liam started to grin at the puppy when another figure fought through the hedge. Liam instantly went on guard.

The woman was beautiful. Supermodel tall, tanned, and nicely curved, she wore a yellow bikini top, shorts, and flip flops adorned with a sunflower. She'd pulled her dark hair through the back of a Colorado Rockies baseball cap into a ponytail. She did not have a camera in her hands or hanging around her neck, but experience had taught Liam that didn't mean a damned thing.

"Bismarck! Get back here," the woman called as she plucked leaves from her ponytail. "You can't just...Oh." Her gaze meeting Liam's, she flashed an apologetic smile. "I'm so sorry. Bismarck and I are still establishing who the alpha is in our little pack."

The dog dashed up to Liam, then plopped down at his feet. The woman scowled down at the dog who studiously ignored her. "It's only been two days. It's bound to get better." Then she extended a hand toward Liam. "I'm Gabriella Romano. Gabi. I'll be pet sitting next door for the next few months while the Fontanas are on an extended vacation." Her lips twisted as she added, "Bismarck wasn't invited to tag along. I can't imagine why."

His neighbors were named Fontana, although he had yet to meet them. Maybe she wasn't a paparazzo after all. Maybe.

"I'm Liam." He shook her hand, then spoke his new name publicly for the first time. "Liam Brogan."

Sounds good, he decided. Not weird at all. An underlying tension about his name-changing decision that he hadn't previously recognized evaporated. He had done the right thing.

"Nice to meet you, Liam. Do you service next door, too?"

He blinked. "Excuse me?"

She closed her eyes and her cheeks stained pink. "Oh, jeeze. That didn't come out the way I intended. Pool service. Are you the pool guy for next door, too? The Fontanas overlooked leaving me the pool service info on the list with all the other numbers I need while I'm here, and I need help. There is something growing in the water, which totally stinks because I wanted to swim this morning. Once I got a good look at the pool..." She frowned and shook her head, sending her pony-tail swinging. "It's nasty. I've never owned a pool, so I'm not sure what it needs."

She thinks I'm the pool boy. If Liam was one hundred percent certain that this wasn't a set-up, he'd enjoy this exchange a lot more. "I'm afraid I don't clean the Fontana's pool."

"Oh. Well. I'll figure it out. I'm resourceful." Then she stared down at the dog and sighed. "Except when it comes to a certain Newfoundland puppy, I guess."

"He's a Newfie? I think of Newfs as cold weather dogs."

"Yes. Well." Her lips twisted in a rueful smile. "Don't get me started. He sheds everywhere. He jumps on everything. He barks constantly and chases and nips at everything that moves. He's as stubborn as my brother Max, and believe me, that's saying a lot."

"Love your job, do you?"

"I sound awful, don't I? I do love animals, dogs in particular and he's a sweet little guy...honestly...for about five minutes every hour. We're in an adjustment period. He's a puppy being a puppy. I'm sure it will get better."

She reached beneath the lounge chair for the dog, but before she could grab hold of him, he scooted out the other side. With that, he was off the way he'd come. She darted after him. "Bismarck!"

Liam should have set down the pool skimmer and attempted to help, but two things prevented it. First, while he tended to think otherwise, the dog sitter thing could be a ploy. Second, and of more immediate concern, he couldn't drag his gaze away from the lovely sight of a scantily dressed, long-legged beauty racing across his lawn.

The dog darted back through the hedge and before she dashed after him, Gabriella Romano paused and waved. "Nice to meet you, Liam. I'll be seeing you around."

Liam watched her disappear into the hedge, her voice bellowing out, "Bismarck!" He set down the pool skimmer and prepared to dive into his pool, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

Gabriella Romano. Dog sitter or snoop? It served his best interests to find out.

Of course, he could surely find out everything he needed to know in five minutes on the internet, followed up by a couple of phone calls. But where was the challenge in that? Liam was a sucker for puzzles, and one had just blasted through his hedgerow. Maybe he'd play the game a little rather than skipping ahead to the finish line.

With that, Liam executed a sleek racing dive into the deep end of the pool, and before he'd completed his first lap, he had a germ of an idea for how to conduct his investigation. By the time he finished his swim, he had a full-blown plan.

Liam showered and changed in the pool house, then strode inside wearing a gym shorts, a tee shirt, and a smile.

This was just the distraction he needed. This was going to be fun.

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