

## Making Her Nights - Excerpt

By Keri Ford

### Chapter One

Mike turned the wheel of his boat and rounded the final bend before Dutch Row Sandbar. He sighed. God only knew what he might find there. Drunks doing drunk things. Drunk things never turned out well.

The shimmering silvery blue of the river gleamed from the early summer sun on the surface and had him pushing his sunglasses farther up his nose. It'd been a peaceful day so far. A few fishermen here and there. A couple of skiers and a few inner tubes. Aside from Dutch Row Sandbar, he really didn't mind taking a rotation patrolling the waters. Enjoyed it even.

The bend narrowed as he pulled out of the turn and he edged back to the center of the river. The sandbar was just ahead on the right and, as expected, covered in people. Drunken idiot people by the hooting he was already hearing over the whine of his outboard motor. But at least they were on land and not joyriding the river and doing stupid shit like unofficial boat races.

Instead they likely had their asses in the sand while filling their empty beer cans with water before tossing them out in the river to sink and disappear. He shifted forward in his seat, droplets of sweat slithered down his spine as he pulled back on the throttle and slowed the boat. Just a slow cruise by was all that was necessary and then he was done for the day. Well, done on the river. There was still work to be checked at the offices. He glanced ahead for oncoming traffic and his belly dropped to the seat of his pants.

A flash of neon pink cut through the still water surface. With knots twisting his belly, he urged the boat a little faster to the dumb idiot trying to swim the width of the river. He'd been close to getting out of there with no complications. As if attempting the swim wasn't dangerous enough with the current and trash floating down stream, plus just the sheer length of the swim—no less than 200 yards—this one didn't even have a life vest on. And dollars to donuts, this swimmer was likely half drunk. Because it was always the drunks attempting this sort of thing. Anyone else in their right mind would know better.

Just as he was nearly to the white female, she sat up and treaded water. A smirk took her full lips and Mike nearly ripped the leather from the steering wheel.

*Tiffany McBride.*

“Tiffany!” he yelled a warning for her to wait. The sweat on his body was now a blanket of cold dread. His blood fired through his veins in a mix of worry and plain old pissed off. Anybody but her. Why couldn’t it have been anyone but her? He’d rather deal with a mean-ass fighting drunk than what he knew would be a completely sober Tiffany.

She dropped under water and continued her strokes. Of course. Of course that’s what she would do. Because damn Tiffany McBride always knew what was best. ...best to get herself in trouble, that he wouldn’t argue with.

Fuck. He slowly powered the boat forward until he was alongside her. She continued to swim and he reached over the side and tapped her on her smooth, warm back, startling her into sitting up and treading water. A brow rose on her wet oval face. Water dripped from the tip of her perfect little nose. Her breasts rose with her deep breaths, cresting and bobbing out of the dark water. A teasing temptation of showing just enough, but never enough.

“Do you mind?” Her voice was breathless and the gasping sound ripped through him. Not that he needed her out of breath for her voice to wrap all the way down his spine. She, like always, didn’t seem to notice. “Trying to go for a swim here.”

He held out his hand, one part knowing it was a mistake to touch, another thirsting for just a gentle swipe of her hand. He ignored the thickening in the back of his throat and every other thing she put his body through with simple looks. It shouldn’t be possible for one woman to turn his tail in knots, but she did it. All the damn time. He’d spent years hiding and tucking away how she pushed him to the edge of his control while she, never once seemed bothered by his presence. Or at least, bothered to a state of distraction like him. She did make it clear often enough she wished he’d go away.

He gestured with his fingers for her to take his hand. “Get in the damn boat.”

This wouldn’t be easy. It never was easy with Tiffany. Not with anything. By the smirk on her lips, this was going to be no different. “Since when is it illegal to take a swim, Chief?”

She pulled in a deep breath and dropped back under water. He reached, but only caught the cool river flowing through his fingers. He groaned and crossed to the other side of the boat

and waited, already knowing this was her destination. Right on cue, she crested the dark depths, a tempting, frustrating laugh rang out with her heaving breath.

He shook his head and hooked his hands under her arms. Her chuckles died as he hefted her in the boat.

“Mike, damn it!” She kicked out and twisted as he finished pulling her from the water. “Let me go.”

“No.” As she twisted and turned, he had little choice but to keep his hands on her, feeling down her trim arms and catching her wrists in his grasp, all the while forcing his mouth closed. He’d never voiced his thoughts. If he never voiced them, he could keep ignoring this attraction when she wasn’t around. She made him crazy enough, he didn’t need her to hold this desire over his head too.

He tugged her to the back of the boat and held tight to make sure she wouldn’t jump overboard. That’s just the kind of shit she would pull, if for no other reason than to piss him off. He sat down behind the wheel and turned the key. Just get to the sandbar, get to the fucking sandbar and he could get his hands off her. Get her out of his boat. Out of his breathing range so his dick would stop tenting his loose cargo shorts. “You’re welcome for saving your life.”

Her wrists still in his grasp, she sat impossibly straight next to him. Her long, tanned legs crossed over one another. The sun caught on all the nicks and scars marring her shins and knees from over the years. Half of those he knew what happened because he’d pulled her out of dozens of situations when she’d gotten them. Shoving her through a barbed wire fence to get her off private property, forcing her to haul ass through a plowed field before she was caught, even hiding her in the bottom of this very boat once. He’d wanted to wring her neck every time he’d gotten her to safety but then he’d see she was bleeding from more cuts and scraps on her knees, shins, elbows. Hell, there’d even been busted lips and one time a black eye.

She never did anything but shrug off the damage she was doing to her perfect body. “I must have missed the part where I was dying.”

“Do you know how many people die swimming the width of the river like that?”

“Let me guess.” She rolled her head back, giving only the smallest hint that she wasn’t paralyzed with pissed off rage. “One in a million. I probably have higher odds of getting struck by lightning while showering during a storm.”

He frowned. “You shouldn’t take a shower while it’s storming out.”

“And you should mind your own damn business.” She tugged at her arm, but he didn’t release her soft wrist. They weren’t close enough to the bank yet. “It hasn’t rained in some six weeks, the river is down by feet, there’s no current, no trash floating to sweep me by. All you did was cost me sixty dollars.”

Sixty bucks. She put her life on the line for sixty fucking dollars. He forced a calming breath and it eased the anger out of his jaw enough so he could speak. All these nonstop bets of hers were going to send him to a grave before he reached forty. “And what about boats flying down the river? Didn’t think about them, did you? Someone could have hit you and never even known.”

Looking uninterested as she stared toward the sandbar, she lifted her bound hands and popped the shoulder of her neon pink bikini. “You didn’t have any trouble seeing me.”

As if he could ever miss her anywhere. Ever.

He gave up years ago trying to fight what was surely an unnatural and unhealthy attraction and just realized he needed to acknowledge what he couldn’t risk having. It seemed to take the edge off. Or at the very least, he was able to hold a conversation with her without feeling like the jolly Green Giant was standing on his chest. Most of the time. It worked, until she pulled stunts like this, which happened more often than not here lately. “And if you got tired halfway across?”

“Well, gee, Mike, I guess I would have flipped to my back and floated for a bit.”

He shook his head and turned his boat for the sandbar. “People get out here and they don’t realize how wide it is until it’s too late.”

“I’ve swam it four times, when the water was higher than this. I know exactly how wide it is.”

He stroked a hand over his face. *Four times?* “Tiffany, you’ve got to start thinking better than this.”

She jerked her arm away. He didn’t immediately free her, but when she pinned him with a hard stare, so much intensity and life radiated off her, he released her. Not out of fear, but because it burned all the way through him. That Tiffany look with her ferocity and hunger and this nonstop thirst for testing and trying everything. She never half-assed anything, always seemed to like the hard, complicated road.

She shook her head and the anger in her straight shoulders collapsed. “Why do you have to do this all the time?”

“Look out for you? ‘Cause you won’t do it on your own and that’s part of my job.”

“I’ve been looking out for myself for over eight years now, starting before you were chief deputy of the county and put in charge of Apple Trial. I’ve done fine so far. So just stop it.”

Like hell she had. *He’d* been the one pulling her out of more hairy spots in the last eight years than he cared to think about. She knew that too, but of course that damn McBride Pride running through her veins would never allow her to say differently. Just like her daddy. The bow rammed into the sand and she hopped over to the side before he could even get the engine cut.

Drunk bastard and average pain in Mike’s ass, Rory Christoff, ambled over, silver can in his hand with a scraggly three week old beard clinging to his face. Sand dusted his tan, leathery skin clinging for his bones as if it would fall off otherwise. Except for his gut. That part was ample and full.

“Thanks, Mike.” Rory slapped him on the back as if Mike had saved her for his sake. “Pay up, Tiffany. You didn’t make it all the way across before coming back.”

She groaned and marched toward a green bag on the sand. “I’ve got it.”

Mike’s gaze dropped to her swaying ass juicily displayed in her bathing suit bottoms as she crossed the thick sand. Mistake, holy-fucking-hell, disaster mistake. He ripped his gaze from her tanned curves and turned to Rory with a swallow surely half full of dirt with the way it rasped down. “She could have been killed doing that.”

Rory laughed in that obnoxious way that only a drunk knew how to do. Loud, spitting, and did he mention loud? “Ain’t illegal to go swimming in the river, officer.”

He glanced around and thankfully didn’t see Rory’s pickup. There were a number of boats though. “Who’s your ride?”

“I’m being ‘sponsible.” He gestured with his can. “Riding with Jacob and his old lady. She ain’t drinking.”

*Christ.* Not drinking, but he knew damn well Jacob owned a two-seater, topless jeep. The backend was usually filled by a couple ice chests and people using them for seats. He had a feeling here old Rory had sat his hairy ass down on one of them for the trip here.

“And even still, Tiffany came down with us and she’s keeping things in line too.”

A headache, starting low and deep in the back of his skull just shot to cripple his entire forehead and stab behind his eyes. Any ideas making his cock tent the front of his shorts were gone.

Tiffany crossed back to them and handed out a fold of twenties. "Here you go."

Rory took the money and turned away. "Thank ya, m'dear. Probably couldn't have done it anyway. We're lucky Officer Mike came along when he did, else I probably would have had to swam after you."

"*Mmm-hum* and it's Chief Deputy Gable." But Rory had turned away and if he heard her correction, he didn't show it. She faced Mike again. Fire and passion and whole hell of a lot of anger burned in her brown eyes. "I'm going to have to win that back from him later somehow. It'll take me all night waiting for him to drink himself into memory loss. Hope you're happy."

"Not even close." He glanced down either side of the sandbar, unable to stop himself from checking people, seeing how close they were to the water, looking for litter. Watching the kids who looked to be their own babysitters.

It was an automatic list he couldn't stop himself from checking off. Every person on this sandbar failed in some form or another. He jerked his sunglass off his face and rubbed his eyes. He couldn't deal with them and Tiffany. He couldn't deal with *anything* when he was also dealing with Tiffany. "I can't believe you rode down here with Jacob and Rory. Son of a bitch, Tiffany, are you just asking for more trouble than usual?"

She rolled her eyes and walked up the bank. "It's fine, but don't worry, I'm not riding back with them."

He followed after. "How are you going to get home?"

"I'll catch a ride with someone so responsibly boring, you won't be able to complain."

He doubted that. For some reason, when it came to Tiffany, there were very few he trusted her not to wrap around her finger. None of those people would be on the sandbar on a Sunday afternoon.

And that included him.

Small amounts. Little doses was the only way he knew how to be around her without losing his mind and control and putting his hands in places he had no right to be touching.

"Who's that?"

She lifted her bag on her slim shoulder and stared at him. "You."

His dick liked that idea. A lot by the way it jumped and filled his mind with her honey scent and hardened with thoughts of licking and suckling her well, everywhere.

A quick boat ride and an agonizing trip to her house where he would keep his hands on his steering wheel to see her safely home or leave her at the mercy of all these drunk bastards? Thinking wasn't even required. He'd deal. He'd make it. He'd be too busy driving to do anything stupid he didn't have any business doing. He would simply do what he had been doing for years. He would again survive Tiffany McBride. "Then let's go."

"Let me change. I don't want to be wet in your truck."

He glanced around the sandbar. There were no buildings. Not a hut. Nothing. "Where?"

She rolled her eyes and walked toward the tree line. Her ass once again swayed and damn near looked like it winked at him as she walked the thick sand. Winked! The fucking tease.

"Tiffany."

She didn't stop.

No. Surely not. Tiffany paused at the edge of the woods and dropped a pair of white flip-flops and slipped them on her feet. Feet with matching neon pink paint on her toes. Feet Mike wanted to hold in his hands and massage until she moaned and her muscles puddled. He groaned and followed after.

She walked through a circling of pines just off the sandbar.

He peeked in the little area, thankful she hadn't stripped down. "You can't just change your clothes on the sandbar. That is illegal. It's called public nudity."

"Are you going to arrest me, Chief?"

The bag fell from her hand and flopped to the pine straw covered ground. She hooked her thumbs in the thin strips of her bikini bottoms and didn't wait a split second before she bent and started shoving them down.

He dropped his gaze immediately. If he saw any more of her creamy skin, he'd lose his mind there on the spot. It wasn't possible for his blood to pump faster without giving him a heart attack or stroke or whatever the hell it was you got from your heart beating too fast. He couldn't fucking think with her around, what the hell was he supposed to do with her around and *naked*.

He closed his eyes and pulled in a breath. He needed to clear his mind. Work. Work always kept him occupied. He surveyed the area of pines. By the bits of litter on the ground, people used this spot a lot. By the used condom two feet away from him, they used it for more

than a dressing room. He made a mental note to see about sending someone down here to clean up and post a warning about trash.

And that was all he could come up with. Any other thoughts came from his dick about the woman standing in the center of the circle.

He dared a peek, hoping she was done. Big mistake. A huge, mind blowing, cock hardening, lust-creating, monster-sized mistake. Her back was to him, but she was stark naked. Her ass, one he'd seen often enough barely covered in her little swimsuit was bare. It just wasn't the same at all without the bottoms. The bottoms had been hiding things like the delicate curve of the top of her ass. Disguising the generous swells of her cheeks. Covering the small dimple that matched the one on her cheek—her face cheek. God, he wouldn't be able to look at her again without remembering this.

He swallowed and tugged at the front of his pants for relief that would not come.

“I'm going to take that as a no on the arresting?”

He blinked and looked away from her ass to see she was staring over her shoulder at him as she fastened her bra.

Laughter hooted from the sandbar and broke him out of the strongest erotic lust haze he'd ever been in. The people on the sandbar stared at a skier going by. But if Mike could clearly see them down there, then a pretty much naked Tiffany could be seen up here. He jerked her towel from the ground and held it out as a curtain.

He stared at the ground, trying to memorize the crisscrossing pattern of the pine straw scattered around. “You can't just strip like this.”

“If I can't, then how come I did?”

“You *shouldn't*.”

“Relax, Mike. No one is looking.” Her voice was soft, but still chiding. Still teasing like always. Tempting him out of his barely held control. “You're less than a foot away and you're not even looking.”

He swallowed, refusing to fall for her bait and look. That was, until she moved closer. Her arms wrapped around his neck. The towel, *his* clothes, and her bra were the only things separating them. A brick wall wouldn't have been enough to block her soft curves pressing along him.

She sighed. “Why do we have to be this way? All this fighting and arguing is exhausting.”

The heat of her skin bled through the few barriers and drew him even deeper under her spell. He swallowed to clear his throat before speaking, to mask the heavy desire fogging over his mind. She’d never been this close before. Her voice never this soft. “Because I worry about the trouble you get into, since you don’t.”

“Whatever.” Her arms fell from his body like all his hairs being ripped out at once. Clothes rustled and her feet crunched the straw under her. “I’m dressed.”

He peeked and saw, thankfully, she was. He folded the towel up and handed it to her.

“You know what amuses me the most about this situation?” She packed her things in her bag.

Her back was to him, the tag of her shirt fluttered in the wind, giving him a much needed distraction. Yes, let’s think of her clothes, for god’s sake. “Something other than your shirt is on inside out?”

She looked down and chuckled. Without concern, she stripped it off, flipped it right side out and tugged it back on. She was fast, but not so fast he didn’t get another good look of her pristine white bra cupping her tanned breasts like his hands ached to do.

She flicked hair off her shoulder. “That wasn’t it. When you’re not harassing me about my behavior, you can be decently fun. Not a whole bunch, but decent enough.”

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t harass you.”

“What do you call all that clucking like a hen?”

His pulse throbbed in his head. “I. Do. Not. Cluck. The problem is you’re always borrowing trouble. If it’s not stupid shit like today, it’s hustling drunks in the bar, it’s racing or whatever else you can come up with. It’s always something with you. You can’t just grow up. Lord only knows what else you’ve gotten into that I don’t know about.”

Her mouth hardened. “I take it back, I don’t think you would know fun if it bit you in the ass.”

“Some of us have responsibilities, Tiffany. We can’t just run around all fun and games all the time.”

She slung her bag over her shoulder. “Oh, yes. That’s what life is to me. Fun and games.”

“Isn’t it?”

The corners of her eyes crinkled, jaws ticked. “You know that sixty bucks you cost me? That was the grocery bill for the next two weeks so Jessie and I could eat more than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

God. Her cousin, Jessie McBride, was part of the issue here. Tiffany wasn’t near this wild until her parents died and she moved in with Jessie. Things just feel apart then. “If it was that important, maybe you shouldn’t have risked it in the first place.”

“You just don’t fucking get it. Screw you and screw your ride. I’ll find another way home.”

She started by him, but he caught her by the arm. “Why don’t you explain it to me?”

Crossing her arms over her chest, she huffed and a hip kicked out to one side. “I made the sixty dollars last night in a card game. Doubling that money today would have gone toward the electric bill due Monday and given us a cushion at the grocery store. Now you’ve set me back. That’s how we live. All my ‘stunts’ that you find as headache are a means of staying afloat.”

That’s ridiculous. No one could live for as long as she had that way. “Find a job. Something more than loading feed sacks.”

She shook her head. “Oh, yeah. Everyone in Apple Trail is just handing out the offers for work after all the hell I caused as teenager. The tight economy is just another strike against us. The only reason I have the part-time job at the feed store is because the man who owns it was friends with my dad. The best he can afford is to only work us both part-time.”

“Things can’t be that bad that you need to resort to all this betting and stunts.”

“When’s the last time you were at the house?” When he didn’t answer, she shook her head. “It’s falling apart. Literally. Every bit of money we’re able to scarp together goes to food or more duct tape and glue to hold the house together.”

“Jessie could sell some of the land for money.”

Tiffany was shaking her head again. Her fast drying blonde hair curled around her shoulders and danced against her skin. “That’s her daddy’s land. My parents helped him buy it. The bank will have to strip it out of both of our cold, dead hands. He bought that last hundred and fifty acres just before...”

*They all died.* Her parents and Jessie’s parents had been in a car accident together, leaving the two teenagers to figure things out.

She cleared her throat. “It doesn’t have too much left on it.”

“How much?”

She bit her lip.

“How much, Tiffany?”

“Two and half years.”

“And you plan to keep your behavior going for that much longer.” Over *his* dead body. He couldn’t take this for another two years. It had been going on now for, fuck, eight years? Nine already?

She shrugged. “I’ve been doing it for years now.”

“Not at this level.”

She shook her head. “We had a lot of rain this spring. Most of our garden that we usually sell or trade things for was ruined. Riley Hamilton has been very gracious in giving us beef, even though we don’t have near the fruits and vegetables we normally give him in return. Jessie and I have been helping him where we can to make up for it, but it’s not near the compensation for the amount of meat. Without that, I don’t know what we would be doing right now.”

“You have a lot of acreage that’s loaded in deer.”

She nodded. “We sure do. And pigs. And squirrels. And rabbits and all the meat a person could eat. But the only guns we have were our daddy’s and they kick so hard, Jessie and I both liked to have broken our noses when we tried firing them.”

He raked a hand through his hair, unbelieving. It wasn’t possible they had slipped through cracks like this right here under his nose. “I’ll find something for you at the station.”

She stared after him for a long moment. “No.”

“There’s something. You can help Mary Sue. She needs the extra hands right now with her pregnancy advancing.”

“No.”

“It’s easy. You can do it.”

“I’m not worried about being able to do it, I’m worried about doing it with you around.”

His brow rose and she released a disgusted sounding noise, ending any sort of stupid ideas he’d started imaging.

“Not because I can’t work around you, asshole. I’m not going to have you over my shoulder all day telling me how I’m doing something wrong.”

“I won’t.”

“That’s all you ever do.”

“I do no—”

Her look cut him off short. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“So you’re going to stay in the situation you’re in because you don’t want to be told what to do.”

“I can’t handle you telling me what to do twenty-fours a day. Not like you do. Not with this nagging disapproving tone over every single step I make. Hell, Mike, I think I bent over and checked the ties of my shoes once and you jumped all over me.”

He straightened, the memory jumped to mind in full clarity. Of her blue skirt blowing in the sudden strong breeze, the curves of her ass barely covered by orange panties right there on display. “That’s cause you were flashing the entire street!” He pulled in a breath. “I won’t be over you all the time. Just for working hours.”

“No. It wouldn’t work anyway. Three-quarters of this town would have a heart-attack if they found out I was working in the Sherriff’s office.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

She shook her head, her eyes heavy and sad. “No it’s not.”

“If you do what I say, the—”

“Uh-huh. There you go again.”

He cursed himself for the slip. “It’s the best I can do.”

She sighed, the bag slipped down her collapsing shoulders. “I didn’t tell you all this for your pity. In a month and a half, we’ll have melons. We were able to salvage a bit and we planted more things for the fall. Pumpkins and stuff that we’ll sell.”

“And until then?”

“Until then we’ll make it on hope. We’ve done it so far.”

“You’re just being stubborn.”

“I’m being sensible. I’m liable to murder you in your sleep if I work for you.”

“Tiffany.”

She rolled her eyes, her body straightened. Any bits of vulnerability disappeared. “How does this sound, I work for you, take your nonstop correction, for half the day, but the other half of the day, after business hours, you’re all mine. You do what I say, when I say, how I say. Period. Sounds like a nightmare, doesn’t it? To be trapped at my beck and call.”

His fingers curled and he watched her walk away. Years more of keeping her neck in line or a few uncomfortable evenings. He pulled in a deep breath. "Deal."

She stopped and turned around. Her eyes wide on her face. "*What?*"

"I said, deal." He swallowed. "During the day, you're mine. You do what I say. At night, I'm all yours."

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