



Forbidden (Bartlett Brothers series Book 1)

By Suzanne Brockmann

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From *New York Times* bestselling author Suzanne Brockmann comes a thrilling tale of romance and suspense, filled with all the surprise, passion, and mystery of a new love.

When Kayla Grey travels from Boston to Montana, the last place she expects to end up is huddled beneath a blanket of dirt in the middle of a fierce snowstorm. And the last person she expects to rescue her is the very man she'd come to find. Cal Bartlett was a true-blue cowboy, complete with a horse, and the most amazing eyes Kayla had ever seen. He was also the brother of the man who'd wanted to marry her. But she didn't discover that until it was too late—after they'd kissed by a roaring fire and Kayla felt a desire she'd never known. Cal could handle Mother Nature, but could he handle the news Kayla brought with her? That his dead brother might not be dead after all?

Cal couldn't imagine why he was being tested in this way—irresistibly drawn to the woman his brother had loved. Now she was insisting he might be alive, asking Cal to join her on a dangerous search based on a rumor from a stranger.... And torn between guilt and longing, Cal would do just that, hoping against hope that wanting this woman wouldn't mean losing his brother once again.

From the Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

From the Publisher

He was gorgeous as sin, but definitely off-limits....

He'd saved her from a drenching storm, had gently placed her in a steaming tub, and looked great in firelight, but was that reason enough for Kayla Grey to kiss a handsome cowboy with reckless hunger? Cal Bartlett couldn't believe he'd nearly made love to the woman who'd betrayed his brother's memory, but when she insisted that Liam might be alive, shame warred with desire. Would loving her mean losing him again?

Forbidden yet undeniable attraction is at the heart of **Suzanne Brockmann's** sizzling, sensual novel of love and sacrifice. He'd never burned for a woman, never known the wild abandon of white-hot need that marked a man and woman as soul mates, but once he'd tasted paradise, could he give her up?

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About the Author

After childhood plans to become the captain of a starship didn't pan out, **Suzanne Brockmann** took her fascination with military history, her respect for the men and women who serve, her reverence for diversity, and her love of storytelling and explored brave new worlds as a *New York Times* bestselling romance author. Over the past twenty years, she has written more than fifty novels, including her award-winning Troubleshooters series about Navy SEAL heroes and the women—and sometimes men—who win their hearts. In addition to writing books, Suzanne Brockmann has co-produced a feature-length movie, the award-winning romantic comedy *The Perfect Wedding*, which she co-wrote with her husband, Ed Gaffney, and their son, Jason. She has also co-written a YA novel, set in the world of her paranormal Fighting Destiny series, with her daughter, Melanie. Find Suzanne Brockmann on Facebook, follow her on Twitter, and visit her website to find out more about upcoming releases and appearances.

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Chapter One

The storm came out of nowhere.

Or at least it seemed to. Mikayla Grey hadn't noticed the thunderously dark storm clouds as they filled the sky, but then, she had been preoccupied. By the time Kayla checked into the town's only guest house it was five o'clock and she was too tired to face the idea of driving out to the Bartlett ranch. She'd come out here instead, out into the wide open space of the countryside to get some fresh air, to take a walk on the rolling hills, and to gaze at the mountain range that loomed in the distance.

The truth was, Kayla was losing her momentum. She was starting to wonder exactly what on earth she was doing. She'd come all the way from Boston to Asylum, Montana, without even a phone call to announce her impending arrival, simply to talk to a man she'd never met before. And what she was going to tell him was going to sound crazy.

"Hi. I was a good friend of your brother Liam's. In fact, right before he died, he asked me to marry him. I know you probably don't understand why I didn't attend the memorial service you held for him two years ago, but you see, I couldn't admit that he was dead."

It had taken months—no, nearly an entire year—before Mikayla was able to acknowledge that Liam was not, indeed, ever coming back.

She had no idea of the reception Liam's older brother was going to give her. Liam had always spoken of the man ten years his senior with respect in his usually irreverent voice. Calvin Bartlett, Cal for short, was an odd mixture of father and brother to the younger man. Cal had raised Liam after their parents were killed in a car crash when Liam was five and Cal was fifteen. A grandfather had supposedly taken charge of the two boys, but according to Liam, the old man had been an invalid, barely able to care for himself, let alone a five-year-old.

Kayla looked up at the menacing clouds as the first fat drops of cold rain began to fall, blown sideways and upside down by great gusts of wind. Slowly at first, then faster and harder the rain fell, soaking her through her lightweight shirt and hiking shorts. Her shirt was a turtleneck, with a long row of tiny buttons down the front, but there were no sleeves, and the armholes were cut diagonally toward the neckline, exposing her shoulders. Shivering, Kayla picked up her pace, hurrying back the way she'd come, toward the town and the warmth of her room. But when she reached the crest of a hill, the driving rain obscured her vision, and she realized with a sinking heart that she no longer knew in which direction the town lay.

Her short blond hair was dripping into her eyes, and she pushed it out of her face as she turned in a slow circle. She'd climbed through the barbed-wire fencing that lined the road and had wandered away from town, assuming she'd simply be able to wander back.

She'd been wrong.

The wind blew harder, colder, and Kayla shivered again. At least it wasn't an electrical storm. At least there was no lightning.

Then a huge fork of lightning split the sky. Kayla dropped flat to the ground as the thunder roared around her.

She was in big, big trouble.

The phone rang.

Cal almost didn't hear it over the roar of the rain on the roof. And then when he did hear it, he wasn't so sure he wanted to answer it. These days the phone rang only when someone wanted something from him. And on a night like tonight, with the wind sending sheets of icy rain blowing slantwise across the hills, he'd just as soon not have anyone want anything from him.

But Thor lifted his head from between his front paws and gazed inquisitively at Cal with his brown, intelligent eyes. Aren't you going to answer the phone? the dog seemed to ask.

Cal picked it up. "Yeah."

"Good, you're there." It was Bob Monroe, the sheriff of Asylum.

"I am," Cal said. "Didn't you get that notice in your last phone bill, saying how it wasn't a good idea to make a phone call during an electrical storm?"

"Yeah, well, this is an emergency."

An emergency. Something told Cal he was about to get very, very wet. He was silent, waiting for Bob to go on.

"Tourist girl went out for a hike about an hour before the storm hit," Bob told him. "I just got a call from Ned over at the hotel, saying that she hasn't come back yet. She's out there somewhere, Cal, caught in the storm, probably lost."

"You want me to join one of the search parties," Cal said evenly. "All right. I'll be right—"

"No, no, son, I want you to be the search party," Bob interrupted. "You and that crazy dog of yours."

Cal didn't say a word. He just looked again out the window at the deluge and waited for the sheriff to explain.

"Lightning hit Matt Tucker's barn," Bob told him. "It was full of dry hay, and despite this rain, we've got damn near everyone in town working to keep the blaze from spreading to the house. I can't spare a single deputy, and Matt's neighbors aren't willing to leave him shorthanded either, not for some fool stranger who didn't have enough sense to stay indoors with a storm brewing." He paused.

"That leaves you folks who live a bit outside of town, and unfortunately we've just had a report that the road washed out about a quarter mile past your place. You're it, Cal. You and Thor."

Cal glanced over at his dog. The animal's tail thumped and he seemed to smile. His ears were up, alert, as if he were listening to Bob's request for help.

"Anna Henrikson said she saw the girl out on one of your pastures," Bob continued. "We think she's probably still on your land."

"I got six hundred acres of land," Cal pointed out. He pulled the telephone's extension cord as far as it would go, taking it with him into the mud room. He pulled on his boots and shrugged into his long duster.

"I'm counting on you to find her," Bob said. "Weather report says this storm's gonna get worse before it gets better. We may even get an early snow. Dress warm and wear your hat, son."

"Right." Cal jammed his cowboy hat on his head as he hung up the phone. He gave a whistle for Thor and stepped out the kitchen door and into the driving rain.

It had stopped thundering and lightning, but now there was ice mixed in with the rain. The wind howled and Kayla shivered uncontrollably. She was going to freeze to death. It was only September, technically still summer, yet she quite possibly was going to die of exposure. But not if she could help it.

The side of the hill she was huddled against actually felt warm to the touch. Of course, anything would have felt warm to her—with her arms and legs bare and icy cold. But still, it gave her an idea. She was carrying a pocketknife, and with freezing, fumbling fingers she pried the biggest blade open. She

stabbed down at the sod, cutting the tough roots of the grass, exposing the dirt beneath. The soil was warm. It had been sunny for most of the day. The sun had heated the earth, and it still retained that warmth.

Kayla dug. She used her knife, her hands, a rock she found. She tried to keep the sod intact, peeling it back from the dirt sort of like a blanket.

Exactly like a blanket.

The exertion should have been warming, but the wind stole any heat from her body as it ripped past her.

The hole wasn't nearly big enough, but Kayla climbed into it anyway, curling into a ball. She refused to think about bugs and spiders and worms. She focused instead on the warmth of the soil as she covered herself with the sod and the dirt.

The possibility that she had just dug her own grave crossed her mind, but she pushed it away. Thinking that way wasn't going to get her any warmer. Thinking that way wasn't going to keep her alive.

Thor had found something.

Cal nudged his horse forward, peering through the curtain of rain that poured off the wide brim of his hat.

The dog barked again, dancing happily back and forth, leading Cal forward, unmindful of the tempest around them.

"What you got, boy?" Cal called, dismounting from his horse. He held tightly to the reins as he walked forward, well aware that his mount was skittish in this kind of weather. He couldn't blame the animal for wanting to make a beeline back to the warmth of the barn. Hell, he wanted to head straight to the barn himself.

Thor barked again, digging at the ground.

What the hell . . . ?

A booted foot protruded from the earth. And a hand.

Sweet Jesus, they found the girl. She'd gone and dug herself under the sod!

Quickly, Cal hobbled his horse, then slid and skidded down the slick slope to where Thor was waiting.

He pushed back the grass and dirt, revealing drenched curls and a dirt-smeared face. She was shaking, shivering from the cold. Her eyes opened slowly, as if she were too cold to lift her lids. She looked up at him. She had eyes the color of the hillside—green with flecks of gold and brown. Cold. Her mouth formed the word, but she made no sound.

Thor was beside himself with happiness. "Good boy," Cal said to the dog as he pulled the girl up and out of the dirt. "Good dog."

Lord, underneath a layer of dirt, the girl was dressed in summer clothes—a light sleeveless top and a pair of ridiculously short shorts. He had to get her warm, but how? He was closer to town than he was to his ranch house. It was probably better to take her there anyway, in case she needed the doctor.

Cal drew her up into his arms. She was taller than he'd first thought from the way she'd been curled up under the sod. Her legs were impossibly long, her skin smooth and soft against his hands. When was the last time he'd touched a woman? Damned if he could remember. Not since the kid had died, and that had been two years ago this past summer.

Still holding the girl, Cal easily unhobbled his horse. Getting them both up and into the saddle was a different story. He had to sling her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Once on the horse, though, he positioned her in front of him, holding her close, wrapping his big duster around them both, ignoring the dirt that was smearing across his own clothes.

Cal dug his heels into his horse, heading at a gallop toward town.

It would take five minutes at the most. Five short minutes. But five minutes had never felt so blasted long. Cal tried his best to warm the girl. But he was starting to feel the chill of the rain and wind himself. He was trying not to think about how soft she felt against him, or the way she was burrowing her face into his chest, or the arm she'd weakly thrown around his neck, or those incredibly long, graceful legs.

Or the beautiful greenish-brown color of her eyes.

Cal reined in his horse at the southernmost gate of his ranch, unhooking it on horseback and pulling it shut after he and Thor went through. He took his horse more slowly on the paved road into town.

Cal could tell that Thor was mystified. He didn't know why his master was riding into town during a stormy evening. But he was a good-natured dog, and he trotted gamely alongside Cal's horse.

The rooming house was dark, but so was the rest of Main Street. The power had gone out. Still, Cal gave a shout for help as he slid down off his horse. He tossed the reins around a hitching bar and carried the girl up the wooden steps to the porch. The door was unlocked, so he pushed it open, bringing the girl inside. Thor followed, obediently curling up on the tile floor beside the door. Cal shut the door behind him with his foot.

"Ned!" he called. "Irma?"

There was no answer.

Dripping water and mud, he carried the girl down the hall to the kitchen. But the big room was empty, as was the dining room and the parlor.

"Is anyone here?"

There were no candles lit, even though Ned and Irma kept enough of them on hand. Power outages were frequent occurrences in Asylum, Montana. But the owners of the rooming house wouldn't have left candles burning if they weren't going to be around. And they weren't around. There was no one here at all. They were all probably out at Tucker's, fighting the barn fire.

Cal picked up the telephone, but the line was dead.

It wasn't a big surprise. When the power went, the phone lines usually went too. So now what? He was still

on his own. And he couldn't just leave the girl there. He had to figure out some way to get her warmed up.

A hot bath.

Ned's heating system ran on gas and solar power. He could run the girl a hot tub of water, warm her up that way.

Cal carried her up the stairs to the guest bedrooms. It didn't matter which one. He opened the first door he came to and brought the girl inside. He took her straight into the big bathroom and set her down on the floor. He peeled off his duster and wrapped it around her. It was dark in there, but he got the water started running into the deep old-fashioned tub, sealing the drain with a stopper.

There was an array of candles on the wide counter that surrounded the sink. Cal found his matches and lit them all, and the room was filled with a golden glow. A thermostat on the wall controlled the little radiator that sat in the corner, and he turned the heat up as high as it would go, shutting the bathroom door to keep the warmth inside.

The girl was trying to untie her boot laces. She saw the tub, saw what he was intending to do, but her fingers weren't cooperating. Cal knelt down next to her.

"I'll get that," he said.

She nodded, pulling the duster more tightly around her.

Like a little kid, she'd double-knotted the laces of her boots. When Cal finally got them untied, he slipped them off her feet, pulling her socks off too.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jerry Rivera:

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