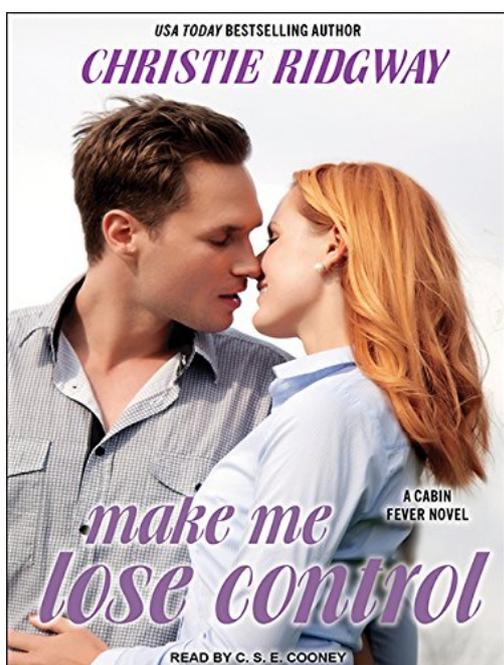


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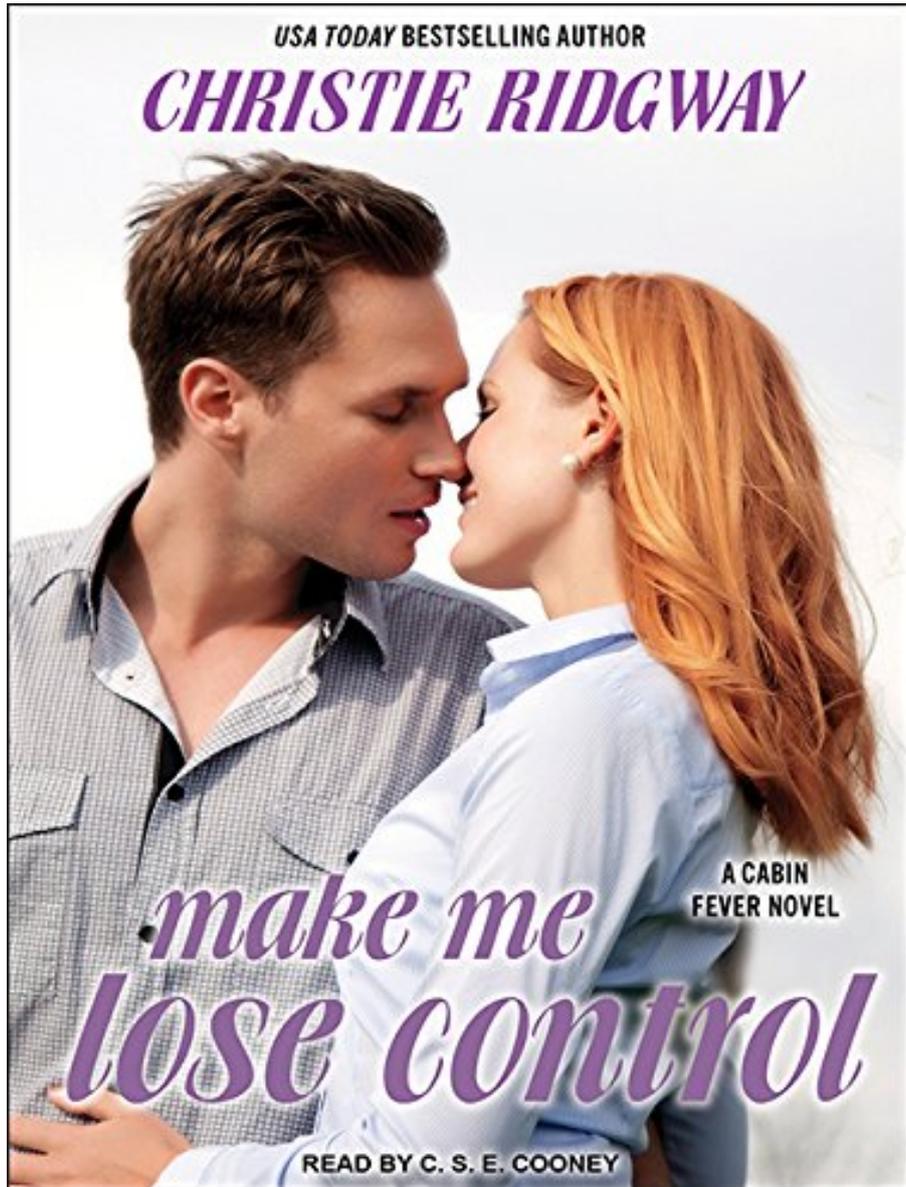
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## Review

"An adorable five-year-old and a smart teenager-in-progress steal the show in this delightful tale that is both sizzling and heartwarming." ---Library Journal

## About the Author

Christie Ridgway is the award-winning, USA Today bestselling author of more than forty-five contemporary romance novels. A six-time RITA finalist, she writes sexy, emotional reads starring determined heroines and the men who can't help but love them. Christie lives in Southern California. Visit her at [christieridgway.com](http://christieridgway.com).

C. S. E. Cooney launched her voice-acting career narrating short fiction for Podcastle, the world's first audio fantasy magazine. She is a performance poet, singer-songwriter, and fantasy author whose collection *Bone Swans* has garnered starred reviews from Publishers Weekly and Locus Magazine.

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Shay Walker watched the twentysomething man slap a cardboard coaster on the polished wooden surface in front of her. His long sun-streaked hair hung about his shoulders in the careless style of a guy who snow-boarded on the nearby peaks in winter and kayaked on the deep lakes in summer. "What can I get you?" he asked.

"A change in the calendar?" she murmured, looping the strap of her purse over the convenient hook on the underside of the bar. The small leather bag brushed her knees, bared by the new summer dress she wore. Though the late May evenings might still be cool in the Southern California mountains, Shay had opted for the filmy floral garment anyway. It was sleeveless, and the hemline was asymmetrical, nearly mini in the front and then flowing to midcalf in the back. It also revealed a minor amount of cleavage, which even in its relative modesty seemed to be captivating the bartender.

"Um, what?" he asked, his gaze slowly lifting from her chest to her face. "I don't think I know that drink."

"I was kidding," she said. "How about a martini? Vodka. Straight up." Though chardonnay was more often her order, tonight she needed a stronger beverage.

Birthdays didn't bring out the best in her.

In no time, the boarder-slash-bartender slid the requested drink onto the coaster then watched as she picked it up and sipped. Tiny slivers of ice melted on her tongue and the alcohol pleasantly heated the back of her throat. Okay, she thought, as she took another swallow. Maybe this celebration wouldn't turn out so bad, after all.

"You here alone?" the guy on the other side of the bar asked.

"For the moment. I'm meeting a friend." She glanced at the TV mounted above the glass shelves of liquor bottles, pretending a fascination with the news program playing.

Whether Boarder Dude would have taken the hint or not, she didn't know. A waitress approached and fired off a long order that claimed his attention, allowing Shay to give up her pseudofascination with the consumer reporter's fight to get a pothole filled in a city thousands of feet below the mountains.

She glanced around, taking in the adjacent restaurant. Exposed wood, an enormous chandelier made of antlers, warm lighting. People were dressed in peaks-and-pines chic, meaning they wore everything from denim to silk. A meal at the Deerpoint Inn's grill had been her old friend Melinda's idea. She'd recently moved to a tiny cabin a couple of miles from it and said she'd heard good things about the food.

Since the place was fifteen miles of winding mountain road from where Shay was currently living, in Blue Arrow Lake, she'd decided to book one of the inn's six rooms in case the birthday blues triggered some over-imbibing. Thinking of the key already tucked away in her purse, she took a hefty swallow of her drink. No reason not to get all warm and fuzzy as soon as possible.

It beat the heck out of what she could have been doing tonight—sitting alone in a massive lakefront mansion. And didn't that just sound whiny and pitiful? But it wasn't her massive lakefront mansion—she'd always lived in much humbler abodes—and the house would seem much too empty without the presence of the teenager Shay was charged with looking after until the end of summer. For the previous three months, she'd been a governess of sorts for a girl who colored her hair inky black, who exclusively draped herself in dark shapeless garments and who walked around with the jaded air of a thousand-year-old vampire. It made for interesting times.

But the teen was otherwise occupied for the night. In a show of rare enthusiasm, she'd opted to attend the Hollywood premiere of a much-anticipated animated movie with Shay's sister, her sister's young son and her sister's fiancé. They would spend the night down the mountain, too.

So when Melinda called, suggesting a get-together, Shay had agreed.

The bartender strolled by and glanced at her glass, and she gave him the nod. Yes, sir, I'll have another. She wanted more warm and fuzzy.

Birthdays were her bane not because her age upped a digit, but because the occasion reminded her of the circumstances of her conception. She wasn't a Walker, really—not by blood. When strained finances had put a rift in Dell and Lorna Walker's marriage, Dell had headed for a mining job in South America. Lorna's subsequent affair with a wealthy visitor to the mountain resort area had ended when she found herself pregnant. But not long after Shay was born, Lorna's husband returned to the States, reconciled with his wife and accepted another daughter into the family as if Shay were his own. There were adoption papers

somewhere to prove it.

Still, she'd always felt a step or two outside the family circle, even though her older brother, Brett, and her big sisters, Mackenzie and Poppy, had never once made her feel like only half their sibling.

She lifted the fresh martini and took a swallow. Maybe her throat was numb now, because the burn there was gone. Instead, the drink sparked a bright idea in her brain. She should locate those adoption papers! Frame and display them as a daily reminder that she was actually one of the Walkers. Legally anyway.

With her parents deceased, however, she didn't know how to find the documents. Maybe Brett would have a clue where to look, she thought, digging her phone from her purse. When he didn't answer, she sent him a text, realizing her fingers were a little clumsy on the tiny keyboard.

Another swallow of mostly vodka eliminated her concern over it.

She'd nearly drained the second martini when the phone buzzed in her hand. The display read Mel.

"Where are you?" Shay demanded through the device. "It's my birthday and I'm all alone."

"Your birthday's tomorrow," Melinda pointed out.

"Oh, yeah." Shay had been going glum a whole day early. But that was okay, she decided, tilting back her head to shake the last drops of her drink into her mouth, because there was enough glum to spread across the calendar. Not all of her sibs could do cake and ice cream—their usual tradition—tomorrow so that was being postponed to yet another time.

Poor Shay. Poor Shay, who was not really a Walker.

"Uh-oh," she said to Melinda, signaling the boarding bartender that she needed a refill. "You better speed over here, stat. I'm drinking martinis and getting morose."

"About that..."

"Noooo." Shay began to shake her head, then quit, because the movement made her dizzy. When had she eaten last?

"I'm sorry, but—"

"This was your idea, Mel. I need an un-no, a mun-mo. An un-moroser!" She finally spit out the made-up word with a note of triumph.

The bartender replaced her glass with a fresh one. She pointed at him with her free hand. "I bet you really tear it up when you're shreddin' the gnar," she said to express her appreciation of how he'd anticipated her need. "And you never biff, do you?"

"Are you talking to me?" Mel said in her ear.

"Nope." Probably her friend didn't understand snowboard lingo any better than Shay, but that didn't stop her tonight. "That was to BB—Boarder Bartender."

"Oh, dear." Mel sighed. "You are drunk. And alone in a bar, where I can't get to you."

"Which I'm still waiting to hear what for." Shay frowned. "How. I mean, why."

"A wildfire has caused local road closures," her friend said. "They're diverting cars from the highway, too."

Shay blinked, somewhat sobered by the news. Fire was a constant danger in their mountains. "Structures threatened?"

"Not so far. But the closed roads mean I can't reach the inn...and you can't get home, either."

"I booked a room here." She drew the martini closer, and, thinking of fire, took it up for a hefty swallow.

"So's all's good."

"You're slurring," Melinda said.

"I'll order food. What goes with martinis?"

"Olives?" Mel suggested.

"Oh." Shay inspected her glass. "Mine came with those twisty lemon peels."

"I was kidding," the other woman said. "Get something with protein. And order bread. That's good to absorb the alcohol."

"But I'm enjoying the alcohol," Shay protested. Her gaze shifted to the TV screen as the bartender upped the volume. The picture was from a helicopter and showed the dark mountains and a glowing orange snake of flames. A shiver rolled down her back. Fire had taken a lot from the Walkers and she didn't appreciate the reminder of it.

Again, she brought her glass to her lips, hoping to drown her discomfort.

"Shay?" her friend called.

"Oh." She'd forgotten about Mel. "I wish you were here."

"Me, too." The other woman's voice went stern. "Now promise me no more martinis."

"Um..." Shay closed one eye to better inspect the clear liquid left in her glass. The yellow curl of peel was so delicate and pretty. Who needed olives? "No more martinis." Maybe.

"And try to have some fun tonight," her friend said. "That's an order."

Fun? All alone and with no more martinis? That wasn't the way to make Melinda's command come true.

The volume of noise from the patrons of the Deerpoint Inn amplified as more of them became aware of the fire and tuned into the coverage on the TV over the bar. The manager struck a glass with a fork and when the voices around him died down, he announced which roads were blocked. New people trickled in, having been

rerouted from the now closed highway. The longhaired bartender got busy filling drink orders as many guests figured out they likely wouldn't be driving anywhere that night.

Trying to tamp down her nerves, Shay sipped at the last of the third martini, ordered a plate of chicken quesadilla appetizers, then threw caution to the wind and asked for another alcohol concoction.

Mel had told her to have fun, hadn't she? When the front door of the restaurant opened once again, bringing with it the disconcerting scent of smoke, Shay didn't hesitate to reach for her new glass.

She needed to block the fire from her mind.

A body slid onto the bar stool beside her. Shay looked over, the glance automatic, but her response was anything but.

As she took in the man on her right, it was as if a cold pail of water had been dumped on top of her head—an icy surprise. Following that, a rush of heat crept up from her toes all the way to the roots of her hair.

He was gorgeous.

And no boy, she thought, with a mental apology to BB, the boarder-bartender who had, after all, been so ably supplying her with vodka and a splash of vermouth. The newcomer was tall, his build rugged, with heavy shoulders and muscled arms, a broad chest, lean waist and strong thighs, all signaling a more than passing familiarity with manual labor. Linking his fingers on the bar, he ordered a beer, and Shay directed her gaze to his hands. They were big, too, and wide-palmed. She could see tiny white scars scattered on the tan skin.

Then, under the cover of her lashes, she took a second look at his face. At the same time, she tilted her head, just a little, as if trying to get a better view of the television and not his fine, fine features.

Wow.

His hair was mink-brown, thick and straight. It was shorn fairly tight, revealing a broad forehead. His cheekbones were high, he had a straight blade of a masculine nose and his lips were full. His strong jaw was edged with just a hint of dark stubble.

She stifled the urge to fan herself, afraid to draw his attention. What would she say to someone like him?

And then, before she could redirect her eyes, his head turned. His gaze cut straight to her face.

Like a lion's, his irises were golden. Also like a lion's, they seemed preternaturally aware of the weaker creature—Shay—in the vicinity. The tiny hairs on her body lifted, her senses warning he was supremely aware of her tripping heartbeat and all the delicious warm blood rushing below her skin.

Though her belly fluttered, she remained as she was—frozen, and feeling like an impala just now singled out by the biggest predator on the savannah. One of his dark eyebrows winged up.

And Shay blurted out the first thing that came into her head. "I'm supposed to be celebrating my birthday tonight but my friend couldn't get here."

The corner of his mouth twitched as the second eyebrow joined the first. "Okay."

"This is my third martini." She gestured toward her current glass, then frowned. "Or my fourth."

"All right."

"I've had nothing to eat yet." At that, she ran out of things to say. None of what she'd already shared, she realized, gave any rational explanation for why she'd been staring at him. Damn.

"Is it a four-martini birthday, then?" he inquired conversationally. He murmured thanks as his beer was placed before him. His gaze turned assessing. "I can't imagine it's one of the more painful ones."

"Oh, um, well." She shifted her attention to her drink and drew it closer. "Maybe it's the fire."

"Aren't we safe?" He sipped from his beer. "The highway patrol seemed to know what they were doing when they shuttled me in this direction. They said I might be stuck here for as little as a few hours, though possibly longer."

"We'll be fine." There was no need to pass along her skittishness. "The fire protection people and the other authorities have a lot of experience."

Her quesadillas arrived and the smell of them tickled her taste buds. She could feel the man at her side eyeing them with interest. Enough interest that she felt compelled to offer, "Help yourself. There's too much for me to eat all by myself."

"Oh, I—"

"Go on," she said. "We're fellow refugees of a sort, after all."

There was another moment's hesitation, then she saw his hand reach toward the platter. She pushed half the tall stack of paper napkins that had been delivered with the food toward him.

What she didn't do was look at him again.

Never before had she found a man so attractive, Shay decided. She wasn't a nun; she'd dated and had been in a couple of longish relationships. But one-night stands were on her Not Ever list.

Living in a small tight-knit community meant that everyone knew everyone's else's business. Since Shay was the product of an extramarital affair and the father of her sister Poppy's son had hightailed it at the words positive pregnancy test, there was more than enough Walker tattle for people to tittle over. Shay had never been tempted to add to it with a casual hookup.

Not that the man on the next stool was in the market for a hookup with her. He could have anyone. Though he didn't wear a ring, for all she knew he was married to the most beautiful woman on the planet.

"Hey, birthday girl," the man at her side said. "You really are down in the dumps, aren't you?"

She risked a look at him. Whoa. Still unbelievably handsome. His golden gaze swept her face, dropped just briefly, then came back up to meet her eyes.

That was good, because her nipples were tingling as they tightened into hard buds just from that quick

glance. With masterful effort, she resisted squirming on her seat.

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