



## Snowstorm Confessions (Conard County & Conard County: The Next Generation Series Book 39)

By Rachel Lee

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The last man that Nurse Brianna Cole expects to bring home is the one she remembers all too well—her ex-husband Luke Masters. But when he needs to recuperate from serious injury, her Wyoming cabin becomes his refuge. Though concussed and hazy, Luke is convinced someone pushed him off the snowy mountain he was evaluating for a ski resort. And though he can't remember why, he knows Bri is next.

Snowed in with her ex, Bri is blinded by old feelings, an attraction that never died. But the closer she gets to Luke, the closer she gets to murder. Because someone is watching her...stalking her...and if he can't have her, no one can!

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

Rachel Lee was hooked on writing by the age of twelve, and practiced her craft as she moved from place to place all over the United States. This New York Times bestselling author now resides in Florida and has the joy of writing full-time.

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"Luke!"

Brianna Cole stared, stunned, at the last man on earth she expected to see standing at her front door. Icy winter air, defying the spring season, swirled around her, but she hardly noticed. Luke Masters, her ex-husband, stood there with smiling gray eyes she remembered all too well. His thick parka hung open despite the cold, showing her he still pretty much dressed like a lumberjack: plaid wool shirt, jeans and work boots. Why wasn't he back at their old place in Chicago? What was he doing in Conard County?

"Hi, Bri," he said pleasantly enough.

"What are you doing here?" Shock rapidly gave way to a sick feeling, an urge to deny what she was seeing and a swamp of memories she never wanted to think about again. How dare he?

"Well, I'm on a project. I'll be around for a few weeks, and I thought it would be better for you to find out this way. Besides, I thought we might catch up."

Catch up? The idea astonished her. They had parted three years ago for a lot of very good reasons. Well, they'd started parting ways before that, but the divorce had been finalized three years ago. Unfortunately, finalizing a divorce didn't end the pain. "Why?"

"Because there was a time we used to be best friends."

What kind of excuse was that? she wondered. Suddenly becoming aware of the frigid air, she realized she had to close the door. Either invite him in or send him on his way, but as she heard her heat kick on, she considered more practical matters. Thinking of the heat at least interrupted the emotional tsunami the sight of him had caused. "Come in," she said irritably. "But don't get comfortable."

He didn't comment on her ungracious invitation, merely stamped his feet a couple times to shake off any remaining snow, then stepped inside.

She closed the door behind him. The chill from outside seemed to reach her and she hugged herself, rubbing her arms. The forced-air heat blasted away but didn't seem to warm her.

He looked good, from what she could see. Time hadn't changed him one bit, not even adding threads of gray to his dark hair. Bitterness filled her mouth. She'd always suspected that their divorce hadn't troubled him as much as it had her. He looked fit, healthy and as self-assured as ever. On the other hand, upset had cost her ten pounds she hadn't been able to put back on, and sleepless nights had made her look like a raccoon for over a year. "This is wrong," she said. "On so many levels."

"Why? We used to be married. I'm in town. I just wanted a few minutes to see how you're doing."

"Right." She pointed to her shabby living room and told him to sit wherever. Then, because she was cold, she went to get some coffee. Then, because she wasn't naturally rude, she poured a mug for him.

*Ten minutes*, she thought. *I can handle this for ten minutes*. That didn't make her feel any better. All of a sudden she was staring into a yawning abyss of old pain and desire she didn't want to freshen.

Squaring her shoulders, she walked back to the man who had twisted her heart into knots and then torn it apart.

She hoped she wasn't being stupid.

The night outside began to sprinkle big white flakes of snow, just a dusting, but the flakes glittered like jewels under the streetlights. Spring was late this year.

Jack Milkin stood three doors down from Brianna's house. He liked Brianna. She was one of the few people who seemed to go out of her way to notice him and be nice to him. Mostly he felt invisible, but not when she was around. He'd been interested in her for a long time, but was always reluctant to ask her out. He knew she didn't date much. There'd been a few guys she had gone out with but it never lasted.

Jack figured he could make it last if she would just let him try.

So he'd been trying to learn everything he could about her so he could please her. Soon, he had promised himself, he would ask her out for a movie or dinner. Some safe little date. If she said yes, then he'd set about proving just how good he could be for her. If she didn't say yes, well, he'd find another way.

But now a strange man had just been invited into her house. A wrinkle. Competition? A possible threat? He thought he knew nearly everything about her, but she had seemed to know this guy, a guy who wasn't on his list of things he knew about Bri.

He approached her house at last, and when he was sure no one could see, he climbed the big old tree and then pushed through her attic vent. From up here, he could see what he needed to see and hear what he needed to hear.

The attic was empty, but it was not too cold. Heat from the house seeped up here. She needed more insulation on the floor, and he'd been meaning to offer to put it in.

Being quiet as a mouse, he eased toward the voices that drifted up to him. A minute later he was facedown on the attic flooring, looking through a tiny hole he had put there. One for each room. Stretched out, he could watch Bri. He could hear Bri.

He could find out everything about her life and all the ways he could please her.

Bri faced Luke in the living room. Naturally he'd settled on the sofa. That was his expansive style. She took the Boston rocker, safely across from him. The silence that ensued would have been funny if it hadn't been so tense. He'd wanted to talk, and now had nothing to say. She couldn't think of anything, either. She'd never expected to see him again, and she didn't like the way old hurts were rising in her.

Even less did she like realizing that she still found him attractive. Three years and a lot of pain hadn't changed that at all. Her hands curled until her nails bit into her palms. This was insane.

"I was asked," he said finally, "to evaluate the land that was purchased for a ski resort. Take a look at what problems we might face."

"That's going to be hard under all this snow."

"Some of it will be." He'd been sitting with his arms outflung, one on the arm of the couch, the other along its back. Now he rubbed his chin, sweeping her with his gray eyes.

"You're a little thinner," he remarked.

She battled an urge to tell him he had no right to comment on her appearance. None at all. Instead she chose to change the topic. Letting him get under her skin would be a mistake. "There's been talk of a ski resort forever. It hasn't happened yet. The land just keeps getting resold. Any reason to think it's going to be different this time?"

At that he smiled faintly. "Well, I'm on the job."

It was an old joke he'd always made, but now bitterness made her wonder if it was a joke at all. Maybe his ego really was that big. "Oh?"

He gave a slight shrug. "I'm checking it out, is all."

"It'll die like it always does. The county doesn't have the money to expand the airport to handle more than a few executive jets."

"The company I'm working for is planning on doing the airport as well."

The county could use the jobs and the tourist income. It would change things around here, although whether for the good remained to be seen. But she was in no mood to be thinking about the entire county. All she could think about was that if this project went ahead, Luke would be around for months, if not a year or more.

Longer than he'd been around at any point in their marriage. Wow. Didn't that say everything?

"How are you doing?" he asked after a moment.

"Fine." Short and unrevealing. What was he expecting? A heart-to-heart?

"Still in nursing?"

"Of course."

He nodded. "You always loved working with patients."

Nothing to say to that, either. She was definitely not enjoying the tension.

A sound from the attic above caught her attention and she looked up. "Another raccoon?" she said more to herself than him.

"Want me to look?"

"No. I have someone who takes care of that for me." She couldn't climb ladders because she had a bad knee. Wrapping it properly allowed her to work, but climbing? Not since she'd been knocked off her bicycle by a careless motorist.

"Is it a common problem? Raccoons in the attic?"

"It happened last fall. Jack, the guy who takes care of it for me, put up some chicken wire to keep them out, but it might have worked loose."

"Raccoons are pretty smart. They could figure it out."

"Probably." This conversation was pointless. He must have come for some reason other than to warn her that he'd be around. "Luke, what's the real purpose of this visit? Not to talk about raccoons."

He rose from the couch, and she recognized that they were about to get to the meat of the matter. He could never hold still while discussing something important. Funny that she remembered him so well when she had spent so long trying to forget him.

"As much as it hurt when you left me, I can live with it. What I can't live with, even after all this time, is you thinking I'm a liar and a cheat." He faced her, and his gray eyes seemed to flame. "I never lied to you and I never cheated on you."

He'd said that before. "You think I want to beat this horse all over again?" she demanded, rising to her feet. "It's dead. It's in the past. We went our separate ways."

"Because you believed I lied to you. That I cheated. And that matters to me."

God. How was she supposed to handle this? Old hurts were returning, opening wounds she had thought healed. All because...because why? "What difference does it make whether I believe you now?"

"It does."

Bald, uncompromising, no excuses or wiggle room. "Okay. Whatever. You didn't lie and you didn't cheat. Feel better?"

"Why don't *you* try telling me the truth? You don't believe that."

Her hands had begun to ache from being clenched for so long. She tried putting them on her hips to ease them. Man, she could barely stand to look at him right now, as refreshed emotional agony tore into her. "Just leave, Luke. There's no point rehashing this. You said you didn't do it back then. You say now that you didn't do it. You can't prove it. And I'm the one who got the phone call telling me otherwise."

"And you believed a woman you barely knew over me. Damn that Barbara."

"How did you know it was Barbara?" She leaped on the name as if it were evidence. "I didn't tell you who called."

"She did. Eventually. When she realized I wasn't going to rebound into her arms after all. You could say the only pleasure she got out of her little escapade was knowing that she'd killed our marriage."

Something else burst out of her then, maybe the most important thing of all. She didn't know, but it rose to the surface and exploded. "You were never home. We didn't have a marriage, we had an occasional affair!"

He froze. Despite herself she looked at him and saw his face shutter as if it had turned to steel.

"I see," he said quietly. "I won't bother you again."

She listened to him leave, standing frozen herself. Where had that come from? Was it as true as it had felt when it burst out of her? Had she been harboring that kind of resentment without knowing it?

She realized she was trembling and forced herself to move stiffly to the kitchen. She hadn't had supper yet, and the tension and anger had drained her. She had to eat. She had to carry on. Her life was here now, among family and friends, not in some big city where she'd felt so lonely sometimes when Luke was away. She never really felt lonely anymore.

But looking back, she remembered how badly she had ached every time he left on another trip. She'd never gotten used to it. So maybe she'd been a fool to marry him in the first place. His absences had been built in, but she'd faced them with so much confidence, sure she could handle them.

Time had proved her wrong. Whether he had cheated or not, they had probably been doomed anyway.

She managed to make a chicken sandwich on melba rye bread, then poured herself fresh coffee before sitting at the kitchen table. As she lifted the sandwich, she realized she was still shaking.

She needed someone. Someone to talk to and let her vent. Twisting on her seat, she reached for the wall phone and called Diane. Her best buddy. The one who shared both good times and bad.

Diane said she'd be right over. Help was on the way.

Jack crawled out of the attic, content. The man was an ex who had cheated on her. No threat there. And tomorrow or the next day, Bri would call him to get rid of the raccoon. How long it took him to catch the animal would depend on whether he could afford to stay away for a few days or a week. Once he "caught" the animal, he couldn't risk making noise up here for a while. Time would tell.

In the meantime, he was sure he could let her talk to her best friend without listening in. Diane would be on his side, after all, wanting only what was best for Bri.

Jack closed up the attic, checked to make sure it was safe, then shinnied down the tree. Amazing what you could learn just by listening. He hoped that soon he'd have a chance to comfort Bri.

But first, maybe, it would be best to ensure that her ex didn't hang around for long. Better safe than sorry.

## **Users Review**

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