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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR $Dani\ Collins$

Claiming His Christmas Wife



CHAPTER ONE

"Mr. TRAVIS SANDERS?"

"Yes," he confirmed shortly, willing the woman to hurry to the point. His PA had interrupted a high-level meeting with this "extremely important" call. "What is this about?"

"Imogen Gantry. She's your wife?"

Memory washed through him in a rush of heat and hunger. He tensed against it and glanced around, lowering his voice. That broken teacup had been swept firmly under the rug four years ago.

"We're divorced. Are you a reporter?"

"I'm trying to locate her next of kin. I'm at..." She mentioned the name of one of New York's most beleaguered public hospitals.

Whatever old anger had sent him soaring at the mention of his ex-wife exploded in a percussive flash. He was blind. Falling. Wind whistling in his ears. Air moving too fast for him to catch a gulp.

"What happened?" he managed to grit out. He was

dimly aware his eyes were closed, but she was right there in front of him, laughing. Her green eyes glimmered with mischief. Her hair was a halo of flames licking at her snowy complexion. She swerved her lashes to cut him a glance. So enchantingly beautiful. Gaze clouding with arousal. Sparking with anger. Looking so wounded and vulnerable that last time he'd seen her, his heart still dipped thinking of it.

He'd quickly learned it was a lie, but that didn't make any of this easier to accept.

Gone? He couldn't make it fit in his head. He had told her he never wanted to see her again, but discovered he had secretly believed he would.

From far away, he heard the woman say, "She collapsed on the street. She's feverish and unconscious. Do you know of any medication we should be aware of? She's awaiting treatment, but—"

"She's not dead?"

He heard how that sounded, as if that was the outcome he would have preferred, but leave it to Imogen to set him up to believe one thing, contort his emotions to unbearable degrees, then send him flying in another direction. That betraying, manipulative— If he could get his hands on her, he'd kill her himself.

"And she was taken to that hospital? Why?"

"I believe we were closest. She doesn't seem to have a phone and yours is the only name I've been able to find in her bag. We need guidance on treatment and insurance. Are you able to provide that?" "Contact her father." He walked back toward the door to his office, saying to his PA behind her desk, "Look up Imogen Gantry's father. He's in publishing. Maybe starts with a *W.* William?" He hadn't met the man, only heard her mention him once or twice. Hell, they'd only been married fifteen minutes. He knew next to nothing about her.

"Wallace Gantry?" His PA turned her screen. "He appears to have died a few months ago." She pointed to the obit notice that said he was predeceased by his wife and eldest daughter, survived by his youngest daughter, Imogen.

Perfect

He knew better than to let himself get sucked back into her orbit, but what else could he say except, "I'll he there as soon as I can"

Imogen remembered sitting down on the curb. It hadn't been a nice, rain-washed boulevard of freshly mown grass beneath century-old elms with a stripe of sidewalk, then an empty canvas of manicured lawn to her mother's rose garden, ending at the wide stairs to the double-door entrance of her childhood home.

No, it had been a freezing, filthy inner-city curb where the piles of snow had turned to a layer of lumpy muck atop a century's worth of chewing gum and other disgusting things. The damp chill on the air hadn't squelched any of the terrible smells coming

off the grate at her feet. She shouldn't have touched the post she had braced herself against and she had thought a car would likely run over her legs as she sank down. At the very least, one would drown her with a tsunami of melt from the puddles.

She hadn't cared. The side of her head had felt like it was twice as big as the rest. Her ear, plugged and aching, had begun screaming so loud the sound had been trying to come out her mouth.

She had tried to pretend she didn't have an ear infection because those were for children. Her sister had got them, not her. She hadn't gone swimming recently. She hadn't known how it could have happened, but there she'd been like a damned toddler, nearly fainting with the agony of it, dizzy and hot and sick.

She'd had to sit down before she fell down. A fever was nature's way of killing a virus, so why hadn't this run its course? And who passed out from such a silly thing, anyway?

Her vision had dimmed at the edges, though. She had felt so awful she hadn't cared that the wet snow had been soaking through her clothes. Her only thought had been, *This is how I die*. She'd been okay with it. Her father would have loved this for her, dying like a dog in the gutter a week before Christmas. Even Travis would probably conclude that she had got what she deserved. If he ever found out, which he wouldn't.

It had been a relief to succumb. Fighting was hard, especially when it was a losing battle. Giving up was so much easier. Why had she never tried it before?

So, she had died.

Now she was in—well, this probably wasn't heaven, not that she expected to get in *there*. It might be hell. She felt pretty lousy. Her body ached and her sore ear felt full of water. The other one was hypersensitive to the rustle of clothing and a distant conversation that bounced painfully inside her skull. Her mouth was so dry she couldn't swallow. She tried to form words and all she could manage was a whimper of misery.

Something lifted off her arm, a warm weight she hadn't recognized was there until it was gone, leaving her with a profound sense of loss. She heard footsteps, then a male voice.

"She's waking up."

She knew that voice. Her eyes prickled and the air she'd been breathing so easily became dense and hard to pull in. Her chest grew compressed with dread and guilt. She couldn't move, but inwardly she shrank

She had definitely gone to hell.

A lighter, quicker footstep came toward her. She opened her eyes, winced at the brightness, then squinted at a tastefully sterile room in placid colors that could have been the one her father had occupied the last months of his life. A private hospital room.

For an ear infection? Seriously? Just give her the pink stuff and send her on her way.

"I—" I can't afford this, she tried to say.

"Don't try to talk yet," the kindly nurse said. Her smile was stark white and reassuring against her dark brown skin. She took up Imogen's wrist to check her pulse, the nurse's hand soft and warm. Motherly. She checked her temperature and said, "Much better."

All the while, Imogen could almost but not quite see him in her periphery. She was afraid to turn her head on the pillow and look right at him. It was going to hurt and she just didn't have it in her yet.

"How am I here?" she managed to whisper.

"Water?" The nurse used a bendy straw, the kind Imogen had never been allowed to use because they were too common. A gimmick.

She got two gulps down her parched throat before the nurse said, "Easy now. Let me tell the doctor you're awake, then we'll give you more and maybe something to eat."

"How long...?"

"You came in yesterday."

A day and a half in a place like this? When her bank balance was already a zombie apocalypse running rivers of red?

The nurse walked out, sending a smile toward the specter on the other side of the bed.

Imogen closed her eyes again. So childish. She was that and many more things that were bad. Maybe

her father was right and she was, simply and irrevocably, bad.

A shoe scuffed beside the bed. She felt him looming over her. Heard him sigh as though he knew she was avoiding him the only way she could.

"Why are you here?" she asked, voice still husky. She wanted to squirm. In her most secretive dreams, this meeting happened on neutral turf. Maybe a coffee shop or somewhere with a pretty view. She would have had a cashier's check in hand to pay him back every cent she'd been awarded in their divorce settlement—money she knew he felt she'd conned out of him. Somehow, in her fantasy, she found the words to explain why she'd taken it and he had, if not forgiven her, at least not despised her any longer.

Maybe his feelings toward her weren't that bad. He was here, wasn't he? Maybe he cared a little. Had he been worried for her?

She heard a zipper, which made her open her eyes out of curiosity—

Oh, no.

"You went through my things?" She clamped her eyes shut against the small red change purse that had belonged to her mother. It held Imogen's valuables—her driver's license, her debit card, her room key, the only photo she had of her with her sister and mother, and the marriage certificate stating Travis Sanders was her husband.

"The nurse was looking for your next of kin." Oh,

this man had a way with disdain. It dripped from a voice which was otherwise deep and warm with an intriguing hint of Southern charm.

She was a connoisseur of disparaging tones, having experienced a lot of them in her lifetime. Neighbors. Teachers. Daddy dearest. Inured as she ought to be, this man cut into her with scalpel-like precision with his few indifferent words.

He didn't care if he was the only person left in this world whom she had any connection to. He found his brief association with her abhorrent when he thought about her at all.

"It's my only other piece of identification."

"Birth certificate?" he suggested.

Burned after an argument with her father ages ago. *So* childish.

She wanted to throw her arm over her eyes and continue hiding, but her limbs were deadweights and the small twitch of trying to lift her arm made her aware of the tube sticking out of it.

She looked at the IV, the ceiling, him.

Oh, it hurt so badly. He had somehow improved on perfection, handsome features having grown sharper and more arrogantly powerful. He was cleanshaven, not ruggedly stubbled and human-looking the way she remembered him when she dared revisit their shared past—hair rumpled by her fingers, chest naked and hot as he pressed her into the sheets.

Whatever warmth she had ever seen in him had

been iced over and hardened. He wore a tailored three-piece suit in charcoal with a tie in frosted gray. His mouth, capable of a sideways grin, was held in a short, stern firmness. Flat gray eyes took in what must appear like soggy laundry dumped out of the washer before it had even been through the rinse cycle. That's about how appealing she felt. While he was...

Travis.

Just thinking his name made her throat flex in an agony of yearning. Remorse.

Why was she always in the wrong? Why was she always falling down and getting messy and driving people away when all she wanted was for someone, anyone, to love her just a little? Especially the people who were supposed to.

Oh, she really was a mess if she was going to get all maudlin like that.

Pull it together, Immy.

"Is there someone I should call?" Flat silver dollars, his eyes were. When she had met him, she had thought his gray eyes remarkable for being so warm and sharp. The way he had focused his gaze on her had been more than flattering. It had filled up a void of neglect inside her.

Today they were as emotionless and cold as her father's ice-blue eyes. She was nothing to Travis. Absolutely nothing.

"You've done enough," she said, certain he was

the reason she was in this five-star accommodation. She flicked her gaze to the window. Snow was falling, but the view was likely a blanket of pristine white over a garden of serenity.

"You're welcome," he pronounced derisively.

Oh, was she supposed to thank him for saving her life by further impoverishing what was left of it?

"I didn't ask you to get involved." She ignored the fact that she kind of had, carting around their marriage certificate instead of their divorce papers. Where had those ended up, she wondered.

"Oh, this is on me," he said with unfettered scorn. "I came here thinking—well, it doesn't matter, does it? I made a mistake. *You*, Imogen, are the only mistake I have ever made. Do you know that?"

CHAPTER TWO

Travis Heard Her breath catch and watched her eyes widen in surprise at how ruthlessly he'd thrown that direct hit.

He didn't feel particularly bad about knocking her when she was down. He was speaking the truth, and she was showing an annoying lack of appreciation for his helping her when he could have hung up at the sound of her name.

He should have. Imogen Gantry was the epitome of a clichéd, spoiled New York princess. Self-involved, devious and intent on a free ride.

She didn't look like much right now, of course. What the hell had she been up to that she had wound up in an overcrowded, understaffed emergency room, unable to speak for herself?

"Be happy I had you transferred. Do you know where they took you, when they scraped your frozen body off the sidewalk? What were you doing in that part of the city anyway?" "If I told you, you wouldn't believe me." Her green eyes met his briefly, glimmering with indecision as she wavered toward telling him something, then decided against it. The light in her gaze dimmed and she looked away.

Drugs, he had surmised darkly when he'd heard where she'd been picked up and seen how gaunt she was. It seemed the only explanation. Blood tests hadn't found anything, however. No track marks or withdrawal symptoms, either.

She'd been raging with fever, though. Had a terrible ear infection that had thankfully responded to the intravenous antibiotics. It was something that should have been dealt with sooner, the doctor had said. She could have lost her hearing or wound up with meningitis. He'd looked at Travis as though it was his fault she was so ill.

That had been when she'd been transferred here to this enormously better-equipped private hospital. Travis had been trying to remember her birthday and searching for her details online only to discover she didn't seem to exist anywhere but in the flesh. He'd found a handful of very old posts, selfies with other socialites at whichever clubs had been the it spot around the time they'd married, but aside from her father's obituary, which was short and stated no service would be held, there was nothing recent about her online.

Her father's house had been sold, he quickly dis-

covered, and Travis hadn't been able to find her current address. He'd had to write down his own. He had acted like her husband and approved her treatment, underwriting the cost. What else was he supposed to do?

Whatever they'd given her for the pain had knocked her out for almost twenty-four hours. Given how bedraggled she'd looked, he'd deduced she needed the sleep.

She still had dark circles around her eyes and an olive tinge in her normally ivory face. The hollows in her cheeks he put down to some women's desire for a skeletal frame in the name of fashion, but she was overdue for a manicure and her hair was limp and dull.

Looking at her, all he felt was pity at her condition. Tired anger. He had known he was making a mistake even as he married her, so why had he gone through with it?

The doctor came in at that moment, along with the nurse who elevated her bed. The doctor wanted her to finish her course of antibiotics orally and said she was anemic. Needed iron.

"You're run-down. Burnt out. I'm prescribing a few weeks off work, along with high-potency multivitamins and proper eating. Get your strength back."

"Off" from what? Travis wondered acridly. She hadn't held down a real job in her life.

"Thanks," Imogen said with a tight smile, fold-

ing the prescription in half once, then held out her hand to Travis.

He gave her the worn silk bag that was all she'd had on her when she collapsed, like she was some kind of runaway. It might have been good quality twenty or thirty years ago, but it was frayed and faded now. Ugly.

"So, I can go?" She indicated the needle still feeding medication and fluids into her arm.

"Oh, goodness no," the doctor said. "You'll have another dose of antibiotics and an iron infusion. We'll talk tomorrow about discharge, but I would think later in the week—"

"I can't afford this," she cut in. "Please." She lifted her arm. "I'd rather you remove this even if I have to pay for it. I'm squeamish."

"Mrs. Sanders—"

"Gantry," she said at the same time Travis said, "We're divorced"

The doctor sent a perplexed look between them.

"My ex-husband isn't paying for my treatment. I am."

Travis had to raise his brows at that, but was far less surprised by her next words.

"And I can't. So." She crossed her arm over her body toward the nurse. "Please get me out of here as quickly and cheaply as possible."

"You're not well," the doctor said firmly. "She's

not," he insisted to Travis, causing an annoying niggle of concern to tug on his conscience.

Why did she get to him like this?

Her stupid arm was too heavy to hold up and even her head needed to flop back against the pillow. "Is this pro bono, then?"

She knew it wasn't. She knew suggesting it put Travis in a tight spot. He'd brought her here. He would be liable if she refused to pay.

"I'll pay for her treatment," Travis ground out, tone so thick with contempt she cringed. His next words, resounding with sarcasm, sawed right through her breastbone to scratch themselves into her heart. "You can pay me back."

"I'll pay for my own treatment," she said, capable of her own pointed disdain. If she knew nothing else, she knew that she would not go deeper into his debt. "But my bills stop now. Bring me whatever forms I need to fill out and get this needle out of my arm. Where are my clothes?"

"I threw them away," Travis said.

"Are you serious? Who—Well, that's just great, isn't it? Thanks." She looked at the nurse. "I'll need some pajamas. Heck, throw in a hot meal, since I'm spending like a drunken sailor anyway."

"Like an Imogen Gantry," Travis corrected under his breath, just loud enough for her to hear it.

She glared at him. "Don't let me keep you."

He had the nerve to look at the doctor and jerk his head, ordering the man to confer with him outside the room.

"Don't you talk about me," she said to their backs. "Did you see what just happened?" she asked the nurse.

"Let's finish this dose of medication before we talk about removing your needle. I'll bring you some soup."

Imogen fell asleep in the time it took the nurse to come back, but felt a little better after a bowl of soup and a glass of vegetable juice. Half her weakness in the street had been hunger, she realized. Apparently, the human body needed to eat every day, and sneaking a few maraschino cherries from the bar while she scrubbed the floor behind it didn't count. #ThingsTheyDon'tTeachYouInSchool.

The nurse removed her needle after giving her some pills to swallow, then helped her shower and dress in a pair of drawstring pajamas and a T-shirt with yellow birds on it.

After all that activity, even finger-combing her hair was too much. Imogen used a rubber band she begged off the nurse to gather her wet hair into a messy lump, then sat in the chair, trembling with exertion, pretending she was fully on the mend, fishing for the thin slippers that would no doubt cost her a hundred dollars apiece.

She signed forms that promised the hospital both

her useless arms and legs and tried to be thankful Travis hadn't thrown out her boots with her jacket. She snuck a blanket off a linen cart on her way to the door, but it was still going to be a long, hellish walk home, looking like one of New York's finest. It would be dark soon and was still snowing, growing dusky at three in the afternoon. Her debit card would combust if she so much as tried to put a subway fare on it. She had no choice.

"Bye now," she said as she passed the nurses' station with a wave. "Add this to the bill," she added with a point at the blanket. "Thank you."

"Ms. Gantry," the motherly nurse said in protest. "You really should rest."

"I will," she lied. "Soon as I'm home." She would swing by to see one of her employers on the way, though. See if she still had a job with the biker bar's janitorial staff after blowing her shift last night with this unplanned excursion to the right side of town.

She walked out of the blasting heat in the space between the two sets of automatic doors, and winter slapped her in the face. It immediately sapped 90 percent of her energy, making her sob under her breath as she began putting one foot in front of the other. The cold penetrated before she took ten steps, but she pushed on, doggedly following the looped driveway toward the gilded gates that suggested this place was heaven after all.

It began to look like a really long way just to get

to the road. She had to stop and brush snow off a bench dedicated to a hospital benefactor, rest there a moment. She felt so pathetic her eyes began to well. At least her ear didn't hurt like it had. It was just a dull ache.

There was always a bright side if she looked for it. Nevertheless, panic edged in around the meditative breaths she was blowing like smoke in front of her face. She was shivering, teeth chattering. How was she going to carry on?

One day at a time, she reminded herself, closing her eyes. One footstep at a time.

Before she could rise, a black car stopped at the curb in front of her. The chauffeur came around and opened the back door. She already knew who would get out and tried to pretend she was bored, not so very close to beaten.

Even her father hadn't crushed her as quickly and thoroughly as one irritated look from this man did. He wore a fedora and a gorgeous wool overcoat tailored to his physique. His pants creased sharply down his shins to land neatly on what had to be Italian leather shoes.

"You look like a gangster. I don't have your money. You'll have to break my knees."

"Can those knees get you into this car or do I have to do that for you, too?"

The air was so cold, breathing it to talk made her lungs hurt. "Why do you even care?"

"I don't," he assured her brutally.

She looked back toward the hospital doors. As usual, she'd come too far and had to live with where she had ended up.

"I told the doctor I would get you home if you insisted on leaving and make sure a neighbor checks on you."

The drug dealer across the hall? She would *love* for him to come and go.

She clutched her purse against her chest, inside the blanket she clenched closed with her two hands. She stared at the flakes appearing and melting on her knees so he wouldn't see how close to tears she was.

"I'll find my own way home," she insisted.

Travis, being a man of action, didn't say a word. He swooped so fast she barely had time to realize he had picked her up before he shoved her into the back of his car and followed her in. Abject loss struck before she'd even had time to process the safe feeling of being cradled against his chest.

Dear *God* it was deliciously warm in here. She bit back a moan of relief.

"Now," he said as he slammed his door and sat back, shooting his cuffs. "Where is home, exactly?"

"Didn't the hospital tell you? They seemed so keen to share everything else about me. What is my blood type, anyway? I've never bothered to find out."

He only nodded toward his driver, indicating the

man was waiting with more patience than Travis possessed.

They were really doing this? *Fine*. A perverse urge to let him gloat over his pound of flesh gripped her. Maybe if he saw she was being thoroughly punished, he might quit acting so supercilious and resentful.

She stated her address.

The driver's frown was reflected through the rearview mirror, matching Travis's scowl.

"Would you be serious?" Travis muttered.

She shrugged. "You wanted to know what I was doing in that neighborhood. I live there."

"What are you doing, Imogen?" he asked tiredly. "What's the game? Because I'm not letting you screw me over again."

"No lift home, then?" She put her hand on the door latch

He sighed. "If I drive you all the way over there, what happens? You get into the bed of some sketchy thug your father didn't approve of?" His lip curled with disgust. His eye twitched, almost as if the idea of it bothered him. "Does he spank you the way you've always needed?"

"Hardly necessary when you're doing such a fine job of that." She glared at him, but holding his gaze was hard. It felt too intimate. They had never played erotic games, but suddenly they were both thinking about it. While she grew hot, she watched him shut down, locking her out, jaw hardening and a muscle ticking in his cheek.

She swallowed. "I plan to crawl into my own bed and hope I never wake up."

"Tell me where you really live," he said through his teeth.

"I just did." She didn't bother getting emotional about it. It was the doleful truth that her life was so firmly in the toilet, she was barely surviving it.

She let her head rest back and must have dozed, because suddenly he was saying, "We're here," snapping her back to awareness of being in his car.

"Okay. Thanks," she said dumbly, looking behind her to see if it was safe to open her door against traffic

"You're going through with this, then." Travis swore beside her and went out his side, then motioned her to come out his side. He had to lean down and help her climb to her feet.

She clung to his hand, shaking, longing to lean into the woolen wall of his chest. Longing to beg, "Don't leave me here." She was scared *all the time*, not that she had the dim sense to show it. It might be a different neighborhood, but the apprehension was the same as she'd always felt in her childhood. Weakness would be pounced upon. She never showed it if she could help it.

She had never been this weak, though. It took a

superhuman effort to release him from that tenuous connection of grasping his hand—not just physically, but because she felt so lonely. So adrift.

Why was it so freaking cold out?

Shivering, she fumbled her key from her purse and moved to the door of her building. It wasn't locked. Never was. The entryway smelled like sauerkraut soup, which was better than some of the other days.

Travis swore as he came in behind her and set a hand on her upper arm, steadying her as she climbed the stairs. His looming presence, intimidating as it was, also felt protective, which made her heart pang.

"Hey," one of her neighbors said as she passed them on the stairs. She was off to work the streets in her thigh-high boots, miniskirt and fringed bra beneath a faux fur jacket. "No tricks in the rooms."

"He's just bringing me home."

"Don't get caught," the woman advised with a shake of her head. "You'll get kicked out."

Imogen didn't look at Travis, but his thunderous silence pulsed over her as she pushed her key into the lock and entered her "home."

It was the room where she slept when she wasn't working but so depressing she would rather work. It was as clean as she could make it, given the communal broom was more of a health hazard than a gritty floor. She didn't have much for personal effects, having sold any clothes and accessories that would bring in a few dollars.

There was a small soup pot on the only chair. It usually held a bag of rice and a box of pasta, but she had dumbly left it in the shared kitchen overnight a few days ago. She was lucky to have recovered the dirty pot. Payday wasn't until tomorrow, which was why she hadn't eaten when she collapsed.

Sinking onto the creaky springs and thin mattress of her low, single bed, she exchanged the damp blanket she'd been clutching around her for the folded one, giving the dry one a weak shake. "Can you leave so they don't think I'm entertaining? I really can't handle being kicked out right now."

"This is where you live." His gaze hit her few other effects: a battered straw basket holding her shampoo, toothbrush and comb, for her trips to the shared bathroom; a towel on the hook behind the door; a windup alarm clock; and a drugstore freebie calendar where she wrote her hours. "The street would be an improvement."

"I tried sleeping on the street. Turns out they call your ex-husband and he shows up to make you feel bad about yourself."

His "Not funny" glare was interrupted by a sharp knock and an even sharper, "No drugs, no tricks! Out!"

"Would you go?" she pleaded.

Travis snapped open the door to scowl at her landlord

"He's not staying—" she tried to argue, but of course she was on the bed, which looked so very bad.

"We're leaving," Travis said, and snapped his fingers at her.

She flopped onto her side with her back to both of them

"Imogen."

Oh, she hated her name when it was pronounced like that, as if she was something to be cursed into the next dimension.

"Just go," she begged.

"I'm taking this," he said, forcing her to roll over and see he held her red purse.

"Don't." She weakly shook her head. "I can't fight you right now. You know I can't." She was done in. Genuinely ready to break down and cry her eyes out.

"Then you should have stayed in hospital. I'll take you back there now."

She rolled her back to him again. "Take it, then. I don't even care anymore." She really didn't. All she wanted was to close her eyes and forget she existed.

With a string of curses, he dragged the scratchy gray blanket from her and threw it off the foot of the bed. Then he gathered her up, arms so tense beneath the thick wool that her skin felt bruised where it came in contact with his flexed muscles. He was surprisingly gentle in his fury, though, despite cuss-

ing out the landlord so he could get by and carry her down the stairs.

"Travis, stop. I'll lose all my things."

"What things? What the hell is going on, Imogen?"

CHAPTER THREE

In the five minutes they'd been upstairs, a handful of jackals had begun circling to case the car. His chauffeur stood ready to open the back door and Travis shoved her into it, wondering why he'd got out at all.

To see how far she would carry her charade, of course, never dreaming she would take him into a dingy firetrap of a room that was where she *actually slept*.

He couldn't even comprehend it.

Snapping a glare at her, he saw there was no fight left in her. Her mouth was pouted, her eyes glassy with exhaustion, her hands limp in her lap.

If she weighed a hundred pounds right now, he'd be stunned. It wasn't healthy, even for a woman barely hitting five and a half feet tall.

"I can't afford the hospital. Can you please just tell my landlord I'm sick, not stoned, and let me sleep?"

"No." He slammed his door and jerked his head at his driver to pull into traffic, wanting away from here. As far and fast as possible. "Do you have gambling debts? What?"

"Oh, I backed the wrong horse. That's for sure." She rolled her head on the back of her seat to quirk her mouth in an approximation of a smile. "What's that old song about not being able to buy love? Turns out it's true."

"Which means?"

She only sighed and closed her eyes, almost as if she was trying to press back tears. "Doesn't matter," she murmured.

"Explain this to me. You had a lover who stole all your money? Tell me, how does that feel?" He ignored the gas-lit inferno that burst into life inside him as he thought of her with other men, feigning great interest in her reply instead.

Her brow pleated and she turned her nose to the front, eyes staying closed. Her lashes might have been damp.

"You seem obsessed with my many lovers. Accuse me of anything, Travis, but not promiscuity. You, of all people, know I don't give it up easily."

That took him aback a little. He didn't understand why. They were divorced. It shouldn't matter to him how many lovers she'd had, so why was he needling her about it? He *presumed* she'd taken some. With her libido?

Sexual memory seared through his blood, lifting

the hairs on his body and sending a spike of desire into his loins.

He ignored how thinking of other men enjoying her passionate response put a sick knot in his gut. He had long ago decided he was remembering it wrong, anyway. He'd been high on personal achievements when they'd met, which had lent optimism and ecstasy to their physical encounters. Whatever had been roused in him hadn't been real or wholly connected to her. It certainly hadn't been worth all she'd cost him

As for what she'd felt?

"Right," he recalled scathingly. "You want a ring and a generous prenup before you sleep with a man. You haven't found another taker for that? Of course, you only have one virginity to barter, and sex without that sweetener?" He hitched a shoulder, dismissing what had felt at the time like an ever-increasing climb of pleasure as she grew more confident with him between the sheets.

His ego needed her to believe his interest had already been waning, though. He still felt embarrassed for going blind with impulsive urgency in the first place, unable to let her get away. He had married her in a rush, on the sly, because he'd known deep down that they wouldn't last. A fire that burned that high, that fast, guttered just as quickly, which was exactly what had happened. A blur of obsessive sex

had quickly dissolved into her walking away with her prenuptial settlement and a demand for a divorce.

"Wow," she said, voice husky. "That's hitting below the belt, isn't it? You're welcome, then, for releasing you to enjoy much better sex than I was able to provide."

He wasn't sure how her remark caused his own to bounce back and sting him so deeply. Maybe it was the fact that, try as he might to claim disinterest, he'd never found another woman who'd inspired such a breadth of sexual hunger in him.

That was a good thing, he regularly told himself. Maybe he hadn't erased her from his memory, but he didn't want or need the sort of insanity she had provoked, either.

No, he had spent the last years very comfortably dating women who didn't inspire much feeling at all, only returning to the land of turmoil when his PA had interrupted his meeting yesterday morning.

Had it only been thirty-six hours? Such was Imogen. She was a hydrogen bomb that cratered a life in seconds, completely reshaping everything around her without a moment's regard.

He remembered her prescription and drew the paper from her purse, handing it to his driver, instructing him to drop them in the front of his building before filling it.

When they arrived at his Chelsea building, however, the doorman was busy corralling paparazzi away from the entrance. It was a common sight when one of his celebrity neighbors had just arrived home. The sidewalks were teeming with Christmas shoppers, too. Even some carolers dressed in olden days' garb.

"Take us to the underground," Travis instructed, beginning to feel weary himself. He had only been home for a few hours of sleep last night, arriving late and leaving early, wanting to get back to the hospital. The urgency to do so had been...disturbing. Now he was compelled to get Imogen into his apartment so he could finally relax, which was an equally unsettling impulse.

"You don't want to be photographed with an escapee from the psych ward? Weird," she murmured. "You realize I don't just *look* like a homeless person? I am one. My landlord will have my stuff on the stoop and my room let to someone else by now. Thanks for that, by the way."

"Still have some spit and vinegar, though."

"Literally, all I have left. Why did you bring me here? Because I'm quite sure you're not inviting me to live with you and I'm quite sure I won't take you up on it if you do."

He didn't know what he was doing, but he hadn't been able to leave her in that roach-infested garbage pail of a building. He imagined she would only discharge herself if he took her back to the hospital. Bringing her to his penthouse was his only choice.

"You're going to have that nap you're so determined to take. I'll use the silence to figure out what to do with you when you wake up."

Imogen wanted to sneer at him, but it took everything in her to open her door when the car stopped and it wasn't even her own steam that did it. The driver got out and opened it for her. He helped her out and Travis came around to slide his arm across her back, helping her into the elevator where he used his fingerprint to override a security panel and take them to the top floor.

He kept his arm around her and she couldn't help but lean into him. It felt really, really nice. For a split second, she experienced a spark of hope. Maybe he didn't hate her. Maybe this was a chance to make amends. She couldn't change the past, but the future was a blank whiteboard.

Then she caught sight of their reflection and her glimmer of optimism died. At one time, she had *almost* been his equal, when her family had had money and she had been a product—not a shining example, but at least a product—of an upper-crust upbringing.

Since then, however, he had skyrocketed from wealthy architect who dabbled in real estate to international corporate mogul, taking on prestigious projects around the globe. An honest-to-God tycoon who lived in the city's best building on its top floor. He was way out of reach for the black-sheep daugh-

ter of a paper publisher and far, far beyond taking up with a match girl—which she could aspire to be as soon as she stole some matches.

She had thought dying in the street was rock bottom. Then Travis seeing how broke she was and the way she had been living had felt like rock bottom. But this was rock bottom. Riding an elevator up to what might have been her life if she'd played her cards differently, while she faced how completely and irrevocably she had fallen down in his estimation, was beyond demoralizing. It was shattering.

Until this moment, her life had been a mess, but her heart had held some resilience. She had possessed some spirit. Some hope that one day she would be able to face him and make amends. That belief had got her out of bed and off to her many awful, minimum-wage jobs. But that was gone now.

The doors of the elevator opened to a foyer of marble and mahogany. Floating stairs rose on the right with a bench tucked beneath. A side table stood on the other side. An impressionist painting the size of Central Park hung above it.

From inside the lounge, out of sight but not out of earshot, Imogen heard an excited voice cry, "Papa!"

As tiny footsteps hurried toward them, Imogen began to disintegrate, each particle of her breaking away and sizzling agonizingly into utter despair.

She was such a fool. *This* was rock bottom.

* * *

Travis bit back a curse as Imogen pulled away from him, swinging a look on him so betrayed and shattered, it cut like a scalpel directly into his heart.

He had to look away to his niece, Antonietta, as she appeared from the lounge. She came up short at the sight of them, recovered in the next second and continued her pell-mell run at him, arms up and wearing a wide smile.

"Zio!"

He picked up the three-year-old sprite.

She threw her arms around his neck and made a production of kissing his cheek with a loud, "Mmmwah!"

Gwyn, his stepsister, appeared with a sleeping Enrico drooped on her shoulder. She faltered as she took in that Travis had a woman with him, one who didn't exactly look like his usual type. She wasn't the judgmental sort, though. She quickly recovered with a welcoming smile. "Hi."

"I completely forgot what day it was," Travis told her.

"No problem. I'm Gwyn." She came forward with her free hand extended.

Imogen's gaze sharpened with recognition, but if she said one wrong word to Gwyn...

"You're Travis's sister." Imogen unfolded one arm to shake hands. "Nice to meet you. I'm Imogen."

"Good timing. I've just made coffee," Gwyn said toward Travis. "Let me put Enrico down. I'll be right back"

* * *

Imogen's brain was reengaging from its tailspin, where she had briefly been convinced Travis was married with children. She occasionally stalked him online, as one did with an ex. He dated a lot but hadn't seemed serious about anyone, so, for a moment, she had been struck nearly dead with shock. By a loss so acute, she hadn't been able to withstand it.

Shut up, misguided girlish fantasies.

She and Travis were so over.

As for his sister, when Gwyn had had a spot of trouble a few years ago with an international bank scandal and a global leak of nude photos, Imogen had followed it for different reasons than the rest of the world's lurid curiosity. While she and Travis had been married, he hadn't even *mentioned* he had a stepsister. It had been a shock to see his name associated with the headlines not long after their split. Imogen had combed every story she could find then, trying to figure out why he'd been so secretive about his family.

At the same time, she had drawn a line in the sand for herself. She hadn't told her father that she had an in with that particular story. She and Travis had been firmly on the outs by then, her father's business failing miserably, but she refused to exploit him. Between her divorce settlement and her mother's trust fund, Imogen had been sure they were only a few short months from having her father's company back on its feet

The core of her reluctance to use Travis, however, had stemmed from the deep agony of rejection Travis's letting her go had rent through her. She hadn't even told her father she'd been married, fearful of his reaction.

He would have approved of Travis, of course, but there was no way she'd wanted Travis to meet her father. Then, when her marriage fell apart...well, who needed that sort of scathing disappointment added to her pain? Her father's derision would have expanded exponentially under the news she had failed to hold on to him. It was bad enough she had deluded herself into believing Travis had had real feelings for her.

The entire thing became so humiliating she had preferred to be as secretive about their marriage as Travis had been.

He led the way into the lounge. It was tastefully decorated for the season with festive garlands around the windows, fairy lights winking in the potted shrubs from the terrace and a tree that looked and smelled real. The presents beneath were professionally wrapped but with cartoonish paper that would appeal to children.

"Mama said I have to ask you if those are for me," the little girl said, one arm still firmly around Travis's neck as she fixed her gaze on the gifts.

"And Enrico, yes."

"Can I open them? *Per favore*, Zio?" she asked very sweetly.

"Not yet."

She gave a little pout of disappointment.

Italian? Imogen sank down on the sofa so she wouldn't fall down.

"You never mentioned your sister," she commented. All he'd told her was that he was close with his father, who lived in Charleston, and didn't see much of his mother, but she also lived in that city.

"Gwyn's mother married my father while I was at university, but passed away soon after. Gwyn and I didn't grow up together."

They seemed close now, if he was giving the woman access to his apartment when he wasn't even here. He'd been cautious about letting his *wife* into his personal space, constantly picking up behind her and uptight that the few things she'd brought with her hadn't fit with his existing decor. At the time, she had put it down to the shift from bachelorhood to living with someone, but she knew now it had been more than a territorial thing. He hadn't wanted her there at all. It still made her throat raw to think of it.

"This is Antonietta." He was still holding her. "We call her Toni."

The little girl cupped her hand near his ear and whispered something.

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Toni Baloney." Toni giggled and hunched her shoulders up to her ears. "What's your name?"

"Imogen. My sister used to call me Imogen the Imagination Magician."

Toni widened her eyes in excited wonder. "I love that name."

He didn't just have family, but a fun and loving one. Huh. Why would he have felt a need to hide that from her?

"Come eat your apples and cheese, *topolina*," Gwyn said as she returned, waving Toni toward the snack at the elegant glass-topped pedestal dining table.

Travis set the girl on her feet and she skipped across to climb up and kneel on a velvet-upholstered chair.

Imogen hadn't been allowed at the grown-up table until she was twelve.

"The doorman let us up because you left notice that we would arrive today." Gwyn came over with coffee, cream and sugar, then seated herself where she could watch Toni. "I thought that meant you remembered we were coming. I was going to text, but I got busy with the kids. If we're imposing, I'll ask Vito to move us to a hotel."

"It's one night. I forgot, that's all." Travis seemed to blame Imogen for his absentmindedness with the cool glance he flicked her way as he sat.

Imogen lifted her brows, wondering how he was going to explain her presence now that his worlds had collided.

He didn't bother, only sat back with his black coffee. "Vito had meetings?"

After a beat of surprise, Gwyn nodded. She smiled at Imogen. "We just got in from Italy. My husband

often has business in New York, so we make a stop here, adjust to the jet lag, let the kids leave fingerprints all over Zio's furniture, then head to Charleston."

"To see Travis's father?"

"Henry, yes. And the bank has offices there. Vito checks in and works on and off while we visit Nonno. For the last few years, Henry has been coming to us for the holidays, but this year is his seventieth birthday. It's right before Christmas and he's having a party, so we came to him."

"Sounds fun." Imogen deliberately offered nothing about herself.

"It should be."

Silence reigned as they all blew across coffee that was too hot to drink.

The corners of Gwyn's mouth wore the tiniest curl. She was clearly dying to pry, but was far too polite to ask. Or knew Travis would talk when he was ready and not before. Imogen had come up against that perversely closed-off side of him herself. In fact, the things Gwyn had just told her were probably the most she'd ever learned about his personal life.

"Toni, do you see an elephant in this room?" Imogen turned her head to ask.

Gwyn snorted and almost spilled her coffee.

Toni sat up on her knees and swung her head this way and that. "No."

"Mmm... My mistake. I thought there was one." Travis sent her a warning look.

"We've taken up both guest rooms, but the kids can come into our room if need be," Gwyn said mildly.

"Is there an aquarium?" Imogen asked Toni. "Because I feel like someone is fishing."

Gwyn had to scratch her nose to hide the laugh she suppressed.

Toni cocked her head, sensing opportunity. "We can pretend to fish in the pool."

"It's too cold, *topolina*," Gwyn said. "When Papa gets back and Enrico is awake, we could maybe go to the indoor one downstairs. You and I are going to have a little sleep first, though. Soon as you finish your snack."

"And Imogen?"

Imogen plucked at the pajamas she was wearing, certain that was what had prompted Toni's question. "I'm going to nap, too, but by myself."

Travis looked at Gwyn. "Would you have something that Imogen could wear when she wakes?"

"Of course. I'll find something right now."

Gwyn took Toni upstairs and Travis finished his coffee, watching Imogen while wishing for something stronger in his cup. He knew he should check his phone. He'd been ignoring it since walking out of that meeting yesterday. Finding Gwyn here reminded him he had a life beyond Imogen. A trip to Charleston in a few days for his father's birthday and the family Christmas celebrations.

He couldn't think of anything, however, except the woman who had had a way of consuming his thoughts from the moment he'd met her. She had walked into his brand-new offices here in New York four years ago, as he'd been expanding beyond Charleston, starting some of his most prestigious architectural projects to date.

She'd introduced herself as a writer for one of the cornerstone publications in New York and proceeded to interview him. Her auburn hair had rippled in satin waves as she'd canted her head at him, listening in a way that had made him feel ten feet tall.

"Let's talk more over dinner," he had suggested after an hour of growing ever more fascinated by her engaging curiosity and earnest little frowns. Her legs were lithe stems beneath a black miniskirt, propping up a notebook where her handwriting looped in big swirls and t's that she crossed with a sweep of her slender wrist. Her breasts had looked to be the exact fit for his palms. Everything about her had looked like a perfect fit. She had been, not that he had had confirmation that first night. Dinner had turned into an invitation back to his old apartment, which was when she had confessed to being a virgin.

"At twenty?" he'd chided with skepticism. "How is that possible?"

"Probably because I don't know what I'm missing," she had shot back, laughing at herself yet surprising him into laughing, as well.

That quick wit, that unvarnished honesty, had convinced him she was exactly what she appeared—a journalism student from a good family with a bright mind and a cheeky wit that would keep him on his toes. There was absolutely nothing to dislike in that package.

The packaging had been the lie, of course. Mislabeled. Ingredients not as advertised. Definitely looking shopworn these days.

Finishing her coffee, she set down her cup, bringing him back to the present.

"You don't want me here. I'll go." She looked around, frowning. She was probably looking for her purse, which was in the pocket of his overcoat. He'd hung it in the closet at the door. It could stay there for now.

"Where to?" he prompted. Goaded. He was fed up with her thinking she had options when clearly neither of them did.

She swallowed. "I'll talk to my landlord—" "No." he cut in.

She turned a look on him that sparked with temper. "What do you want from me, Travis?"

"Let's start with an explanation. Where did all my money go?" He waved at the fact her worldly possessions consisted of pajamas she hadn't been able to pay for out of her own pocket. "Where did *yours* go?" She hadn't been rich, but she hadn't been destitute.

She blew out a breath and sagged into the sofa, pulling a tasseled cushion into her middle.

He braced, waiting to see if she would tell the truth or lie yet again. Wondering if he would be able to tell the difference.

"I was trying to save Dad's business."

"Publishing," he recalled.

"Newspapers and magazines." She gave him a pained smile. "Print media."

He recalled what she'd said in the car. "The wrong horse."

"Such a dead one, yet I beat it like you can't even imagine. Your money, my trust fund. Dad sold the house and liquidated anything that wasn't already in the business. We threw every penny we had at it. Then he went into care, which was another bunch of bills. My name wound up on everything. I couldn't declare bankruptcy while he was alive. It was too humiliating for him. We were pretending it was all systems go while I sold furniture and clothes and Mom's jewelry to make ends meet. His cremation was the final straw. I was behind on rent and got evicted. I wasn't really keeping up on friendships by then and owed money to the few friends I had left. I wanted to start over on my own terms, so I found something I could afford and that's what I'm doing."

"That roach-infested brothel is your idea of a fresh start? Why didn't you come to me?"

"Oh, that's funny," she said with an askance look. "What would you have said?"

Everything he was saying now, but he wouldn't have let her get to where she was passing out on the street from neglecting her health.

"You married me to get your hands on your trust fund. Didn't you?" She had never admitted it, but he was convinced of it.

She hesitated very briefly before nodding, eyes downcast. Guilt? Or hiding something?

"I wanted access to it so I could help Dad." She had the humility to shake her head and quirk her mouth in self-contempt. "Not exactly an economist over here. I knew better. Digital publishing was all I learned at school, which he thought was useless." She shrugged. "I tried to convince him to start doing things online, but old dogs..." She smiled without humor. "It would have been too little, too late, even if he'd bought in."

"So, you're broke."

"I'm in a hole so deep all I see is stars."

"You're telling me the truth? Because if it's addiction or something, tell me. I'll get you help."

"I wish it was. There would be pain relief, at least. Escape." Her smile was a humorless flat line.

He drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, frustrated by what sounded like brutal honesty. Nevertheless, he muttered, "God, I wish I could trust you."

"What does it matter if you do or don't? I mean, thanks for the hospital, I guess. I'll try to pay you back someday, when I can afford a lottery ticket and happen to win the jackpot, but—" she flicked a helpless hand in the air "—our lives won't intersect after today, so..."

Her heart lurched as she said those words, trying to be laissez-faire about it.

He narrowed his eyes. "That would be nice if it were true, but I've just taken responsibility for your hospital bills. For *you*. What am I going to do? Turn you out on the street? In the middle of winter? I happen to possess a conscience."

"Meaning I don't?"

"It was pretty damned calculating, what you did."

"You're the one who set the terms of the prenup," she reminded him. "That was all you. All I did was sign it."

"And took the money after three weeks of marriage."

"Oh, I should have given you my virginity for the bragging rights of saying I was once Travis Sanders's lay of the day?" She blinked her lashes at him, pretending her shields were firmly in place when she was silently begging him to contradict her. To say she had meant more to him than that.

She *had* been willing to give it up without a ring in the heat of passion, if he would only remember.

He was the one who had proposed and led her to believe he cared.

A muscle pulsed in his jaw. "I'm surprised you haven't sold our story, if you needed money so badly."

She pressed her lips together, but he was quick enough to read her expression.

"Considered it, did you? I cannot believe I thought we had a shot," he muttered.

"Oh, did you?" She leaped on that. "Did you really? How about you step off your high horse a minute and be honest about your own motives. Why did *you* marry *me*?"

"You know why. You refused to sleep with me until I put a ring on it."

"And you wanted in my pants so bad, you wanted bragging rights to my virginity so bad, you made our quickie marriage happen." They'd known each other a *week*. "Then what? Did you take me home to meet this wonderful family of yours, all flushed with pride in your darling bride? You didn't even tell me you had a sister." She thumbed toward the stairs. "She hasn't got a clue who I am. Does your dad?"

His stony expression told her that was a hard no.

"At no point did you think we had a shot." The words were coming out thick and scathing, but they tore up her insides, sharp as barbed wire, seeming to affect her far more than him. "You were mortified that you'd succumbed to marriage. Every time I said, 'Let's go out,' you said, 'Let's stay in.' The

one time we ran into someone you knew, you didn't even introduce me. You didn't just skip the part that I was your wife. You didn't acknowledge me to them at all."

His cheek ticked and he looked away, not offering an explanation, which scored another fresh line down her heart.

"You wouldn't let me change my status online and said it was because you wanted me to yourself. Then you went to work every day, leaving me alone in that big apartment where I wasn't allowed to touch anything."

"You claimed to be writing for your father, if I recall. Why did I never see any of those articles?" So scathing.

Her face stung, but she wasn't about to get into her father's lack of love for her. One spurn was all she could relive at a time, thanks.

"You were planning our divorce before you said, 'I do.' That's why you drew up the prenup. All you cared about was keeping the damage to your reputation at a minimum. You invested *nothing* in our relationship except what I took when I left, certainly not your heart. Our marriage was as much a transaction on your side as mine. I bruised your *ego* by walking out before you told me to leave, not your feelings. Tell me I'm wrong."

Please. She silently begged him to give her a rosier view of their flash-in-the-pan romance. Her whole

body tingled, ions reaching out for a positive against this negative charge consuming her.

"Fine," he bit out. "You're right. I knew it was a mistake even as I was saying the words."

His words skewered into her. She swallowed, wishing she had died in the gutter, rather than survive to face this

"You're welcome for remaining your dirty little secret, then," she snapped. "For what it's worth, you're one of thousands of mistakes I've made. Not unique or special at all."

"You don't know when to quit, do you?" he said in a dangerous voice. "Aside from the day you walked out, of course."

"Oh, you started that. You know you did."

"A husband is allowed to ask his wife why he needs to top up her credit card before it's a month old," he said through his teeth.

"Your exact words were, 'I don't care where it went.' You didn't want to know about my life any more than you wanted to share details about yours. I quit kidding myself at that point. It wasn't a marriage if you were suffering buyer's remorse. I did you a favor by walking out."

"That's one way to frame it."

"Yeah, well, I keep trying to do you the favor of walking away again, but you keep forcing me to sit my butt back down. Why is that?"

"Because you owe me, Imogen." He leaned for-

ward, hand gripping the arm of his chair as though trying to keep himself in it.

"I owe a lot of people. Get in line."

The sound of the elevator had them both holding their stare but clamming up while the animosity cracked and bounced between them.

A superbly handsome man appeared in a bespoke suit. Little sparkles came off him where snowflakes had melted across his shoulders and in his dark hair. He was clean-shaven, calm and confident, not taken aback in the least by the sight of an orphan in hospital pajamas huddling on Travis's designer sofa.

"You must be Imogen," he said with a heartmelting Italian accent, coming forward to take her hand in a gentlemanly shake. "No, don't get up. Vittorio Donatelli. Vito, per favore."

"Gwyn texted you?" Travis surmised.

"And the photographers downstairs inform me that Imogen is your wife. *Congratulazioni*," he said to Travis with a blithe smile. "They asked for a comment. I told them I'm very happy for you, of course."

"Are you kidding?" Travis closed his eyes and Imogen was pretty sure steam came out his ears.

"I didn't say a word," she swore.

"You didn't have to, did you?"

"My passport lapsed! My student card was long gone. Sometimes you need more than one piece of ID. Why would anyone give a care who I was married to? I'm nobody and you're just one more businessman in a city of—" She cut herself off as she saw a look pass between the men.

Gwyn, she remembered. Travis's sister was notorious clickbait.

"It's not her fault," Travis said to Vito.

"I will assure her of that, but you know what she's like." Vito's smile was pained as he rubbed the back of his neck and excused himself to go upstairs.

"For what it's worth, that's one of the reasons I never told a soul you and I were married," Imogen said. "Once I saw what the online trolls were doing to her, I not only didn't want to be part of it, but I had enough people willing to pile on me. It would have only made things worse for her to be associated in this direction."

He stared at her. "You really want me to believe you were thinking of her?"

And him, but what was the use in trying to convince him? "You either believe me or you don't, Travis. I can't make you do anything."

It hurt to acknowledge his mistrust. All of this was even more excruciating than being one more anonymous hard-luck story in a building full of society's rejects.

"It's actually your fault that our marriage has been exposed, you know," she pointed out. "Some orderly probably saw you acting like a big shot, transferring your wife to Celebrity Central. You in your tailored suit, flashing your gold-plated phone. You should

have left me at the first hospital and none of this would be happening."

He picked up his phone and said, "It's last year's model. Off the shelf."

"Whatever. You made me look important. I wasn't trying to be."

"Let's skip the blame shifting and get to mitigating the damage. You really owe me now." He tapped and rolled the phone along its edge on the arm of his chair, thoughts hidden behind an expression gone granite hard. "This is going to be all over the gossip sites. Maybe the financial pages and television news outlets. I imagine they'll dig up the date of our marriage and the divorce settlement."

As much as she had rationalized taking that settlement, she had always felt ashamed of herself for demanding it.

He had been contemptuous in fulfilling it, making clear that whatever physical infatuation he'd felt toward her had firmly run its course. She repulsed him on every level.

She had dreamed ever since of paying him back, just to soften his harsh opinion of her, but she knew from her childhood what a lost cause that sort of aspiration was.

"It won't be long before my father is calling me, asking whether this report of my marriage is true."

"What do you want me to do?" She held up her powerless hands.

"I'll tell you what I want you to do. *Don't humiliate me again*."

Was that what she had done? Because when she had been standing there, wanting to make explanations about her father's business and how painful her relationship was with him, she'd felt pretty damned humiliated to realize Travis didn't care one iota that she had reasons and responsibilities and that she suffered. He had decided she was a faithless spendthrift well before she'd returned from her father's office that day.

"This is what you're going to do," he said in a voice so hard it couldn't be scratched. "You're going to say our marriage was youthful impulse and we parted ways when we realized our mistake. After your father passed, you began doing charity work, which is how you happened to be on skid row when you needed medical attention. I'll make suitable donations to back that up. Then we're going to show the world that we might have parted over artistic differences, but I had the taste and sense to marry very well. You're going to stay with me, pretend we're reconciling and act like the kind of wife you should have been."

Bad girl. I didn't say you could come out of your room. Get back up there.

She swallowed back the bitter pill in the back of her throat. "Is that what I'm going to do?"

"Unless you're ready to start making a living the way your neighbor appeared to earn hers, you are going to do exactly what I tell you to do."

"You don't see the irony of introducing me to your friends and family now, when I'm not actually married to you, when you were ashamed to call me your wife before?"

"It galls me," he assured her, leaning back and catching at his pant leg as he crossed one over the other, flinty expression belying his relaxed pose. "But the cat is out of the bag. We're going to groom it and put a pretty collar on it and keep it from scratching up the furniture."

"And somehow this pays off my debt to you."

"It keeps it from getting worse."

Oh, she doubted that.

The walls were closing in another inch. They'd been compressing on her for months. Years, even. No options. It was a trapped, helpless feeling and she could only sit there with her hands knotted into fists and breathe.

"You don't have anywhere to go," he pointed out, as if she wasn't sickeningly aware. "How do I look if I put you on the street? No, we're rediscovering each other. At *Christmas*. It's very romantic," he said with thick sarcasm. "The press will be very positive."

He said the last in a way that was more of a threat. *Mind yourself, Imogen, or you'll stay in your room.* "How long will this last?"

"Until I feel the attention has died down enough we can part without it being noteworthy."

"But I'll still owe you for the hospital bills." She flicked nonexistent lint from her pajama pants. "Too bad you won't have sex with me. Otherwise, I could pay that down *exactly* the way my neighbor does."

"I didn't say I wouldn't sleep with you. I said you need to work harder to make it interesting."

For a moment, all she heard was a rush in her ears. Her face grew hot. She wanted to believe it was anger, but it was embarrassment. Acute insecurity. No matter what she did or how hard she tried, she was never enough. It was a hot coal of humiliation that burned a hole in her belly every single day.

"Well." She clung fiercely to what shredded dignity she had left, but she was dying inside. "I've only had one lover and he taught me all I know, so blame yourself. But after that remark, I'd rather give it away to strangers on the street than sleep with you again." She stood.

He shot to his feet, arm jerking as though he would stop her in her tracks.

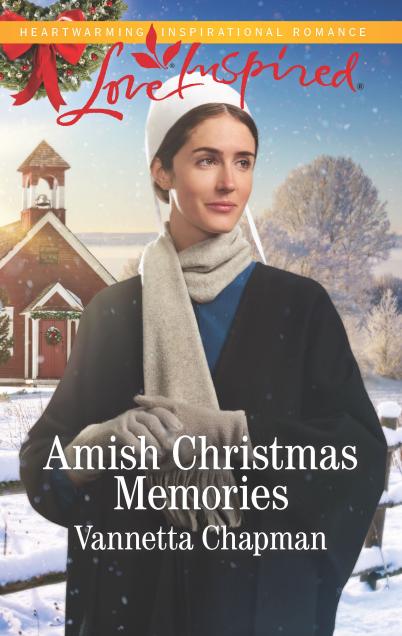
She wasn't walking out, though. As he had pointed out so ruthlessly, she had nowhere to go.

She tucked her elbows into her sides, avoiding his touch. "Powder room?"

He gave a brief nod toward the far end of the kitchen.

She locked herself inside, then splashed cold water onto her burning eyes.

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Chapter One

Caleb Wittmer glanced up from the fence he was mending. Something had caught his eye—a bright blue against the snow-covered fields that stretched in every direction. There it was again, to the north and west, coming along the dirt road.

He stepped closer to the fence. His horse moved with him, nudged his hand.

"Hold on, Stormy." Caleb squinted his eyes and peered toward the northwest, and then he knew what he was seeing—he just couldn't make sense of it. Why would a woman be walking on a cold December morning with no coat on?

Goose bumps peppered the skin at the back of his neck. As he watched, the woman wandered to the right of the road and then back to the left.

Something wasn't right.

He murmured for the gelding to stay, climbed the fence and strode toward her. He'd covered only half of the distance when he noticed that she was wearing Amish clothing, though not their traditional style or color. She was a stranger, then, from a different community. But what was she doing out in the cold with no coat? More disturbing than that, she wore no covering on her head. All Amish women covered their hair when outside—Swiss, Old Order, New Order. It was one of the many things they had in common. The coverings might be styled differently, but always a woman's head was covered.

He was within thirty feet when he noticed that her long hair was a golden brown, wavy and thick, and unbraided.

At twenty feet he could see the confused look on her face and that she was holding a book.

At ten feet she tumbled to the ground.

Caleb broke into a sprint, covering the last distance in seconds. The mysterious woman was lying in the snow, her eyes closed. Dark brown lashes brushed against skin that still held a slight tan from winter. Freckles dotted the tops of her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. A small book had fallen out of her hands. Her hair was splayed around her head like a cloak she'd thrown on the ground, and a pale blue scarf was wrapped around her neck—but no coat.

Where was the woman's coat?

He shook her gently, but there was no response.

Looking up, he saw Stormy waiting for him at the property line. He'd never be able to take her that way, unless he was willing to dump her over the fence. He couldn't begin to guess why she had fainted, but throwing her over barbed wire and onto the ground wouldn't be helpful.

No, he'd have to go the long way, by the road.

Caleb shook her shoulders one more time, but still there was no response. He clutched her hand. Her fingers were like slivers of ice. How long had she been outside? Why was she wandering down their road?

Scooping her up, he turned toward the house.

She weighed little more than a large sack of feed, which he'd been lifting since he was a teenager. Carrying her was not a problem, but now his heart was racing and his breath came out in quick gasps. What if he was too late? What if she was dying?

He strode toward his parents' house, pulling her body closer to his, willing his heat to warm her, whispering for *Gotte*'s help.

Stormy kept pace on his side of the fence.

The farmhouse seemed to taunt him, as it receded in the distance, but, of course, that was impossible. It was only that he was scared now, worried that he should have seen her sooner, that he might be too late.

Snow began to fall in earnest, but he barely noticed. Tucking his chin to keep the snow out of his eyes, he increased his pace.

"She just collapsed?" His mother had taken the sight of him carrying a nearly frozen woman into their home in stride. She'd told him to place her on the couch as she'd grabbed a blanket.

"Ya. She teetered back and forth across the road and then fell into the snow as I was watching."

"No idea who she is?"

"Obviously she's not from here."

Ida nodded. Her dress was of a bright blue fabric, while their community still wore only muted blues and greens, blacks and browns. They were a conservative Amish community, a mixture of Swiss and Pennsylvania Dutch, which was why they lived in the southwest-

ern part of Indiana. They weren't a tourist destination like Shipshewana. And unlike some more liberal Amish communities, they didn't abide solar panels and cell phones and *Englisch* clothing. Not that the woman's dress was *Englisch*. It was obviously plain in style, but that color...

He didn't normally notice the color of a girl's dress, but in this case...well, the blue fabric seemed obscenely bright. She remained unconscious, though she seemed to be breathing. Caleb pulled off his knit cap, shrugged out of his coat and tugged off his gloves. Squatting in front of the couch, he watched his mother as she attempted to revive the woman.

She murmured slightly, tossing her head left and right. Almost of its own volition, his hand reached out and touched her face. Her skin felt like satin.

Still she didn't wake.

"She had nothing with her?"

"Nein."

"No purse or coat or—"

Caleb jumped up, snapping his fingers. "A book. She was holding a book when I first saw her."

"You best go and get it. Perhaps her name is written inside. Maybe there's someone we can contact."

Caleb snagged his coat from the floor where he'd dropped it and hurried back outside. Fat snowflakes were still falling. It looked as if the current snowfall was going to be a significant accumulation for only the third of December. Already the front path was completely obscured, any trace of his previous trek across the yard erased. At this rate they would have a Christmas to remember. It was unusual, as most of their snow usually came in January.

He jogged back the half mile, passing the place where he had been mending the fence. His tools were still there. He'd need to return them to the barn, but that wasn't an emergency. The woman? She was. He slowed when he reached the tall pine tree and scanned the ground. Nothing, not even his footprints from earlier.

He'd forgotten his hat and the snow was cold and heavy on his head. He shook the snow off his head, wiped his eyes and walked up and down the fence line—a hundred feet in both directions. There was nothing, but he was sure that she had been holding a book of some sort. He closed his eyes, saw it fall from her hand as she dropped to the ground. She'd wandered off the east side of the road, closer to the fence.

This was not the way his Monday was supposed to go. He didn't mind helping a neighbor, or a stranger, but he'd had an entire list of chores to complete. Farm life, his life, worked better when he stayed focused on the things he'd committed to doing. When women entered his life, trouble often followed. He pushed that thought away as soon as it formed. This wasn't about him. He needed to find the book. He hadn't opened his eyes that morning knowing he would save a stranger from freezing to death, but now that he had there was nothing left to do but see this thing through.

They'd find out who she was and where she belonged.

They'd return her, and he could get on with his life. But first he needed to find the book.

He turned east, walked back and forth between the road and the fence, making a zigzag type of pattern. Then just when he was beginning to think he'd imagined the entire thing, that he'd return home and find

there was no mysterious woman on their couch, he spied it—a lump of snow where there should have been flat ground.

He dropped to his knees and brushed the snow away. The book had a green-and-gold cover with a photograph of a snowy path going through the woods, and beneath that the words *The Road Not Taken and Other Poems*. Had he read something like that in school? He was twenty-five now and that had been many years ago. He shook his head, picked up the book and hurried back home.

When he walked back into the living room, his father was there, and his mother was placing a cup of hot tea into the woman's hands. She was sitting up now, looking around with a dazed sort of expression.

"I think this is yours." Caleb placed the book on the couch beside her.

"Danki."

That one word confirmed what he'd suspected earlier. She wasn't from their part of the state. The Daviess County Amish had a distinctive Southern twang. This woman didn't.

Caleb's father sat in the reading chair. His mother perched on the edge of the rocker. Caleb folded his arms and stood behind them both. Across from them, the woman stared at the tea, then raised her eyes first to his *mamm*, then his *dat*, and finally settled her gaze on him.

"What happened? Where am I?"

"You don't know?" Caleb glanced at his parents, who seemed content to let him carry the conversation. "You were walking down the road, and then you collapsed."

"Why would I do such a thing?"

Caleb shrugged. "What's your name?"

The woman's eyes widened and her hand shook so that she could barely hold the mug of tea without spilling it. She set it carefully on the coffee table. "I don't—I don't know my name."

"My name is John Wittmer," Caleb's father said. "This my *fraa*, Ida, and you've met Caleb."

"How can you not know your own name?" Caleb asked. "Do you know where you live?"

"Nein."

"What were you doing out there?"

"Out where?"

"Where's your coat and your *kapp*?"

"Caleb, now's not the time to interrogate the poor girl." Ida stood and moved beside her on the couch. She picked up the small book of poetry. "You were carrying this, when Caleb found you. Do you remember it?"

"I don't This was mine?"

"Found it in the snow," Caleb said. "Right beside where you collapsed."

"So it must be mine."

"Perhaps there's something written on the inside." Ida tapped the cover. "Maybe you should look."

Caleb noticed that the woman's hands trembled as she opened the cover and stared down at the first page. With one finger, she traced the handwriting there.

"Rachel. I think my name is Rachel."

Rachel let her fingers brush over the word again and again. *Rachel*. Yes, that was her name. She was sure of it. She remembered writing it in the front of the book—she'd used a pen that her *mamm* had given her.

She could almost picture herself, somewhere else. She could almost see her mother.

"My *mamm* gave me the pen and the book...for my birthday, I think. I wrote my name—wrote it right here."

"Your mamm. So you remember her?"

"Praise be to *Gotte*," John said, a smile spreading across his face.

"Is there someone we can call? If you remember the name of your bishop..." Caleb had sat down in the rocker his mother had vacated and was staring at her intensely.

They all were.

She closed her eyes, hoping to feel the memory again. She tried to see the room or the house or the people, but the image had receded as quickly as it had come, leaving her with a pulsing headache.

She struggled to keep the feelings of panic at bay. Her heart was hammering, and her hands were shaking, and she could barely make sense of the questions they were pelting at her.

Who were these people?

Where was she?

Who was she?

She needed to remember what had happened.

She needed to go home.

Instead she dropped the book into Ida's lap and covered her face with her hands. "I think—I think I'm going to be sick."

She bounded off the couch and dashed to the kitchen, making it to the sink just in time to lose whatever she'd eaten. Unfortunately, the sink had been full of breakfast dishes. She turned on the tap and attempted to rinse off a plate, but her hands were shaking so badly that she kept knocking it against the side of the sink.

"I'll take care of that." Ida's hands slid over hers, taking the plate and setting it back into the sink. She pulled a clean dish towel from a drawer and handed it to her. "Come and sit down."

She sank into a chair at the table and pressed her fingertips to her forehead. If only the pounding would stop, she could think.

"We best take her to town," John said.

"I'll get the buggy." Caleb brushed past her.

She remembered being in his arms, the way he'd pulled her close to his body, the way he'd petitioned *Gotte* to help them. Or had she dreamed that? But then he turned, and his blue eyes met hers, and she knew she hadn't imagined it. She could smell the snow on his coat, remember the rough texture of the fabric, hear the concern in his voice.

"We best wrap her in a blanket," Ida said. "And bring the book. There might be other clues in it."

And then they were bundling her up and helping her into the buggy. The ride passed in a blur of unrecognizable farms and stores and hillsides. The only thing familiar was the clip-clop of the horse's hooves and the feel of the small heater blowing from the front of the buggy.

Had she been in a buggy just like it before?

Caleb directed the horse under a covered drop-off area, next to a door marked Emergency.

"I don't think—"

"That it's an emergency? *Ya*, it is." He helped her from the buggy. Ida had rushed in ahead of them, and John said he'd park the buggy and meet them inside.

The next few hours passed in a flurry of hospital forms and medical personnel and tests. Finally, the doctor who had first examined her walked into the room, computer tablet in hand. She was a young woman, probably in her thirties, with dark black hair, glasses and a quick smile. Something about her manner put Rachel at ease, though another part of her dreaded hearing what the woman was about to say.

John had left to find them coffee and a snack, but Ida and Caleb both stood when the doctor walked into the room.

"Thank you all for your patience." She motioned for them to sit back down. "I know the barrage of tests we put a patient through can be trying, but trust me when I say that it's important for us to collect as much information as we can."

She turned toward Rachel.

"Hi, Rachel. Do you remember me?"

"Ya. You're Dr. Gold."

"Great. Can you tell me what day it is?"

Her eyes darted to the whiteboard that listed the name of her nurse and orderly. "December third."

"Very good." Dr. Gold laughed. "We know you can read."

The doctor placed her tablet on the table next to Rachel's bed. "Mind if I check that bump on your head one more time?"

Rachel leaned forward and jerked only slightly when the doctor gently probed the back of her head.

"Still tender."

"Ya."

"Still no memory of what happened before Caleb found you?"

"Nein."

"And you can't remember how you got this bump?"

"The first thing I remember is...is Caleb carrying me to his house."

The doctor plumped the pillows behind her, waited until Rachel had sat back and then shone the penlight in her eyes again.

"I'm sorry. I know this is uncomfortable."

"It's just the headache..."

Dr. Gold nodded in sympathy and then clicked off the light. "Rachel, you have a slight concussion, which is why you're experiencing a sensitivity to light, a blinding headache and nausea."

She remembered vomiting in Ida's sink and grimaced.

"How long will that last?"

"In most cases, symptoms improve in seven to ten days."

"That's gut."

"But the actual healing of your brain could take months."

"I don't understand."

"Most often a concussion occurs when you've sustained a blow to the head. In this case, you have a sizable knot at the back of your head and toward the top. Can you remember anything at all that led up to your accident?"

Rachel shook her head and spikes of pain brought tears to her eyes.

"I'm not surprised. You have what we call retrograde amnesia caused by a concussion. Often in such a situation, patients have problems remembering events leading up to an accident."

"I still don't understand."

"Retrograde amnesia or a concussion?"
"Both"

Dr. Gold smiled and patted her hand. "Concussions happen all too often. The brain itself is rather like Jell-O. When a concussion occurs, your brain slides back and forth and bumps up against the walls of your skull. Basically the brain is bruised, and like all bruises it takes time to heal."

"What would cause such a thing?" Caleb asked. His expression had turned rather fierce. "Does it mean that someone hit her?"

"Not necessarily." Dr. Gold cocked her head, studying both Ida and Caleb for a few seconds. Then she turned her attention back to Rachel. "You could have been in a car accident, or fallen off a bicycle or simply tripped, and hit your head against the ground."

"And that would cause a concussion?" Ida asked. "Just falling?"

Caleb sank back into the chair and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, fingers interlaced. "Did it happen when she fell in the snow?"

"Not likely," Dr. Gold said. "I suspect that Rachel sustained her injury before you ever saw her. It's why she was meandering back and forth across the road. Concussions often result in vertigo."

"Can you tell how long it's been?" Ida asked.

"I can't. There was no bleeding from the wound, so I rather doubt that someone hit her. More likely it was a simple accident."

"What about my memory?" Rachel asked. "When will it return?"

"Memories are tricky things. You remembered my name, and you know who these people are. Correct?"

"Caleb." She met his gaze, remembered again being in his arms. "And Ida, his *mamm*."

"Which is a good sign. This tells us your brain is still working the way it should."

"But I wouldn't have remembered my name if it hadn't been written in that book, and I still don't know where I live or who I am."

"In most cases those memories will return in time."

"How much time?"

"Remember what I said earlier? You don't just have a concussion. You also have retrograde amnesia."

"And what does that mean?"

"That it may be a few days or weeks or even months before you regain your memories."

Rachel felt as if she was falling into a long, dark tunnel. She stared down at the cotton blanket covering her and grasped it between both of her hands. "That long?"

"I'm afraid so, but the good news is that your memory is working now, and it will continue to work. You may not be able to remember what happened before the accident, but you can create new memories. Plus you're healthy in every other way."

"But what am I to do? Where will I live?"

"If you'd like, we have a social worker here at the hospital that can meet with you and find temporary housing for you. We'll also put you in contact with a liaison with the Daviess County Sheriff's Office. Perhaps your family has reported you missing. It could be that they're looking for you even now."

"What do I do until they find me?"

"Be patient. Give your brain time to heal. Live your life."

"I don't have any money, though."

"There are charities that provide funds for those in need. You don't need to worry about money right now."

"She doesn't need to worry about where to live, either." Ida stood and moved to the side of the bed. She was about Rachel's height but looked a bit shorter, owing to her weight. She wasn't big exactly, but rounded, like a grandmother should be. She was probably close to fifty with gray and brown strands of hair peeking out from under her prayer *kapp*. "Rachel, we would be happy to have you stay with us. We have an extra room. It's only Caleb and John and myself, so it's a fairly quiet environment. You can rest and heal."

Rachel didn't know if that was a good idea. Ida and John seemed like a nice couple, and Caleb had saved her, but she wasn't sure they wanted a brain-injured person living with them. Then again, what choice did she have?

She didn't want to go to a police station.

She didn't want to wait on a social worker.

"Stay with us," Ida repeated.

"Ya." Rachel nodded, wiping away the tears that had begun to slide down her cheeks. "Okay. Danki."

Dr. Gold was pleased with the arrangement, and Ida was grinning as if Christmas had come early, but when Rachel glanced at Caleb, she wasn't sure if she saw relief or regret in his eyes.

Chapter Two

They returned to Ida and John's house. The snow had stopped, but it sat in heaps on the side of the road. The clouds had cleared, the sun was shining and Rachel suspected the snow would melt completely by the next day. The *Englisch* homes they passed already had Christmas decorations out on the lawn. Rachel wasn't sure what Amish homes did to celebrate for the season. She wasn't sure what her family had done in the past.

The rest of the day passed in a blur.

She met with the local bishop, Amos Hilty, a kind, elderly man as round as he was tall with tufts of white hair that reminded her of a cotton ball.

She learned that the local community was a blend of Swiss Amish and Pennsylvania Dutch Amish, but she couldn't tell them which she had been. From the style and color of her dress, they guessed that she came from one of the more progressive districts. Amos assured her that he'd contact the local districts to see if anyone had reported a young woman missing.

"We'll find your family, Rachel. Try not to worry. Trust that *Gotte* has a plan and a purpose for your life."

She wasn't sure how *Gotte* could use her accident, her loss of memory, for His good, but she smiled and thanked the bishop for helping her.

Several times that afternoon she had to excuse herself and lie down because of the vertigo and nausea, and bone-deep exhaustion. Ida's cooking smelled wonderful—it was a meat loaf she'd thrown together and served with mashed potatoes, canned squash, gravy and fresh bread. Rachel thought she could eat three plates, but when she'd taken her first bite, the nausea had returned, and she'd fled to the bathroom

Now it was ten thirty in the evening and everyone was asleep, but she was starving. Pulling on the robe Ida had loaned her, she padded down the hall to the kitchen. She pulled a pitcher of milk from the icebox and found a tin of cookies when Caleb walked in.

"If you'd eaten your dinner, you wouldn't be so hungry late at night." When she didn't answer and just stood there frozen, as if she'd been caught stealing, he'd walked closer, bumped his shoulder against hers and said, "I'm kidding. Pour me a glass?"

So she did, and they sat down at the table together. She could just make out his outline from the light of the full moon slanting through the window. Oddly, the darkness comforted her, knowing he couldn't see her well, either. She felt less exposed, less vulnerable.

"I can't remember if I thanked you...for finding me in the snow. For bringing me here."

"You didn't."

"Danki."

"Gem Gschehne."

The words slipped effortlessly between them and

brought her a small measure of comfort. At least she remembered how to be polite. Surely that was something.

"You owe me, you know."

Her head snapped up, and she peered at him through the darkness.

"You scared at least a year off my life when I saw you out there."

"Lucky for me you did."

"I'm not sure luck had anything to do with it. *Gotte* was watching over you, for sure and certain."

"If He was watching over me, why did this happen? Why can't I remember anything? What am I supposed to do next?"

"I'm not going to pretend I have the answers to any of those questions."

"Might be a good time to lie to me and say you do."

Caleb's laugh was soft and low and genuine. "We both would regret that later."

"I suppose." She sipped the cold milk. At least her stomach didn't reject it. Maybe she would feel better if she could keep some food down. She hesitantly reached for an oatmeal cranberry cookie.

"Your mamm's a gut cook."

"*Ya*, she is."

"So it's just you? You're an only child?"

"Ya, though my mamm wanted to have more children."

"Why didn't she?"

"Something went wrong when she had me, and the doctors said she wouldn't be able to conceive again."

"Gotte's wille."

"She always wanted a girl, too, so I suppose you're an answer to that prayer, even if you're a temporary answer"

"When you marry, she'll have a daughter-in-law."

"So they keep reminding me." He laughed again, but there was something sad and bitter at the same time in it. His next words had a serious, let's-get-down-to-business tone. "How are you feeling? I know you keep telling my parents that you're fine, but it's obvious you aren't."

"Lost. Confused. Sick to my stomach."

"Food should help settle your stomach."

She bit into the cookie, which was delicious but could use a little nutmeg. "I just remembered something."

"You did?"

"Cookies need nutmeg."

Caleb reached for another. "It's a beginning."

"Not much of one."

"The doctor told you this could take a while."

"I know...but can you imagine what it's like for me? I don't know who I am."

"You know your name is Rachel."

"Only because you found my book."

"Not many Amish girls read Robert Frost. That narrows the prospective field of candidates down a little."

"Perhaps we could advertise somewhere..."

"The Budget." Caleb nodded and ran a thumb under his suspenders. "Actually that's not a bad idea. If you write something up in the morning—"

"What would I write? I don't remember anything."

"Okay. *Gut* point, but perhaps your family will post there. We'll watch the paper closely."

"Danki."

"Gem Gschehne."

And there it was again—an odd familiarity that bound them together.

"Are you always this nice?"

"Nein. I'm on my best behavior with you because you've had a brain injury."

"Oh, is that so?"

"My normal personality is bullheaded and old-fashioned, which are both apparently bad things. And that's a direct quote."

"From?"

"My last girlfriend."

"Oh. Well, I can't remember my last boyfriend, so you're still a step ahead of me."

Caleb cleared his throat, returned the pitcher of milk to the refrigerator and then sat down across from her again. When he clasped his hands together, she knew she wasn't going to like what he was about to say. She suddenly felt defensive and bristly, like a cat rubbed the wrong way.

"My parents wanted to give you a few days to adjust, but I think there are some things you should know."

"There are?"

"Our community is quite conservative—we're a branch of the Swiss Amish, as Bishop Amos explained."

"He's a nice man."

"As long as you're staying...well, this is awkward, but..."

"Just spit it out, Caleb." She'd had this sort of conversation before, though she couldn't remember the details. Somewhere in her injured brain was the memory of someone else trying to set her straight. Why did people always think they knew what was best for her?

"Our women always keep their heads covered—always."

"Oh." Rachel's hand went to her hair, which was unbraided and not covered. "Even in the house?"

Caleb glanced at her and then away. Finally, he shrugged and said, "Depends, but my point is that for some reason you weren't wearing a *kapp* when I found you."

"Maybe I lost it."

"And your hair was down—you know, unbraided, like it is now."

She pulled her hair over her right shoulder, nervously running her fingers through it. "Anything else?"

"Your clothes are all wrong."

"Excuse me?"

"Wrong color, wrong...pattern or whatever you call it."

"The color is wrong?"

"We only wear muted colors—no bright greens or blues"

"Because?"

"Because it draws attention and we're called to a life of humility and selflessness."

Rachel jumped up, walked to the sink and rinsed out her cup. When she had her temper under control, or thought she did, she turned back to him. "Any other words of wisdom?"

Caleb was now standing, too, but near the table with his arms crossed in front, as if he was afraid she'd come too close. "Not that I know of...not now..."

"But?"

"Look, Rachel. I'm not being rude or mean. These are things I think you'd be better hearing from me than having people say behind your back."

"Is that what type of community you have? One that talks behind people's backs?"

"Every community does that, and it's more from curiosity and boredom than meanness."

"All right, then, tell me. What else do I need to know? So I won't incite gossip and all."

"It's only that you're obviously from a more progressive district."

"Oh, it's obvious, is it?"

"And so you might want to question your first instinct for things, stop and watch what other people do, be sensitive to offending others."

"You are kidding me. That's what you're worried about?"

"I'm worried about a lot of things."

"I've lost my entire world, everyone I knew, and you're concerned I'll *offend* someone?"

"I've hurt your feelings, and I didn't mean to do that."
"That's something, I suppose."

"But you'll thank me tomorrow or the next day or a week from now."

"I'm not so sure about that, Caleb, but there is one thing I do know." She stepped closer and looked down at her hair, which was still pulled forward and reached well past her waist. When she glanced back up at him, she saw that he was staring at it. She waited for him to raise his eyes to hers.

He swallowed and shifted from one foot to the other. "There was one thing you wanted to say?"

"Ya. Your old girlfriend?"

"Emily?"

"The one who told you that you were stubborn and old-fashioned."

"That would be Emily." He reached up and rubbed at the back of his neck. When he did, she smelled the soap he'd used earlier, noticed the muscles in his arm flex. His blond hair flopped forward, and it occurred to her that he was a nice-looking guy—nice-looking but with a terrible attitude and zero people skills.

"Between you and me—she was right. You are stubborn. You are old-fashioned, and you should keep your helpful hints to yourself."

And with that, she turned and fled down the hall, feeling better than she had since Caleb had rescued her from the snow.

The next morning, Caleb took as long with his chores as he dared. There was really no point in avoiding Rachel. She lived in their house now, and he would have to get used to her being around.

His mind darted back to her long hair. It wasn't brown exactly, or chestnut—more the warm color of honey. It had reminded him of kitten fur. As she'd stood next to him in the kitchen, he'd had the irrational urge to reach out and comb his fingers through it. The moonlight had softened her expression, and for a moment the look of vulnerability had vanished. Sure, it had vanished and been replaced with anger.

He remembered her parting words and almost laughed. He'd only been trying to help, but he'd never been particularly tactful. The fact that she'd called him on it...well, it showed that she had spunk and hopefully that she was healing. He decided to take it for a good sign rather than be offended.

When he walked into the kitchen, he noticed that her hair was properly braided, and she'd apparently borrowed one of his mother's *kapps*. Unfortunately, she wore the same dress as the day before. She gave him a pointed look, as if daring him to say something about it, but what could he say? It really wasn't his business. He'd done his duty by warning her. The rest was out of his hands.

Everyone sat at the table, waiting on him, so he washed his hands quickly and joined them. After a silent prayer, he began to fill his plate. He heaped on portions of scrambled eggs, sizzling sausage, homemade biscuits and breakfast potatoes, which were chopped and fried with onions and bell pepper.

"Someone's hungry this morning," Ida said.

"Ya. Mucking out stalls can do that to a man." He noticed that Rachel was eating, and she looked rested. "How are you feeling this morning, Rachel?"

"Better. Thank you, Caleb." Her tone was rather formal, and the look she gave him could freeze birds to a tree branch.

He nodded and focused on his plate of food. When he was nearly finished, he began to discuss the day's work with his father. They had a small enough farm—only seventy acres—but there was always work to do.

"Ya, gut idea."

His mother jumped up and fetched the coffeepot from the stove burner. She refilled everyone's mugs, starting with Rachel's. Usually his mother threw in her opinion on their work, but she'd been deep in conversation with Rachel the entire meal. They'd been thick as thieves talking about who knew what—girl stuff, he supposed.

"Have you thought any more about the alpacas?" Caleb asked

His father added creamer to his coffee. "I'm a little hesitant, to tell you the truth. I know nothing about the animals."

"They're a good investment," Caleb insisted. "Mr. Vann has decided he's too old to manage such a big farm."

Ida looked up in surprise. "It's hardly bigger than ours, and Mr. Vann is only—"

"Nearly seventy."

"Not so old, then." His father shared a smile with his mom. Must have been an old-people's joke, though his parents were only forty-eight.

"He has no children close enough to help on a daily basis," Caleb explained. "He's gifting the farm to his children and grandchildren, who will only use it for a weekend place. Obviously they can't keep the alpacas."

"I'm wondering if it's the best time of year to get into a new business."

"Better than planting season or harvesting, and he's letting them go cheap. I'm telling you, if we don't get them today, they'll probably be gone."

"Even a bargain costs money," John said.

"Ya, I'm aware of that, but we have plenty put back."

"What good are they, Caleb?" His mother held up a hand. "I'm not arguing with you. It's only that I know nothing about them."

"The yarn is quite popular," Rachel said.

Everyone turned to stare at her. She blushed the color of a pretty rose and added, "I don't know how I knew that."

"Did you maybe have alpacas before? At your parents' farm?"

"I don't—I don't think so, but I can remember the yarn. Spinners and knitters and even weavers use it."

"Any chance you recall how much trouble they are to raise?" His father laughed at his own joke, and then he reached across the table and patted her hand. "I don't expect you to answer that. I was only teasing because my son seems set on bringing strange animals onto our farm."

"I thought you were a traditionalist," Rachel said, then immediately pressed her fingers to her lips as if she wanted to pull back the words.

But if Caleb was worried he might have to answer that, might have to explain in front of his parents their conversation the night before, he was pleasantly mistaken.

Ida was up and clearing dishes, and she answered for him. "Oh, *ya*. In nearly every way that's true. Caleb is quite traditional."

"Unless it comes to animals," his father said. "We've tried camels."

"How was I to know they'd be so hard to milk?"

"And goats."

"We learned a lot that time."

"Ya, we learned if water can go through a fence, then so can a goat."

"We're a little off topic here." Caleb tried to ignore the fact that Rachel was now grinning at him as if she'd discovered the most amusing thing that she might insult him with later. "Let's just go look at the alpacas together. We could go this morning, and I'll fix the fence this afternoon."

"How about we do it the other way around?"

"Deal."

He was up and out of his chair, already glancing at the clock. If he worked quickly, they could be there before noon—surely before anyone else came along and bought the alpacas out from under their noses.

"Caleb, would you mind making sure that the front porch and steps are free of ice?"

"The front porch?"

"We're going to have visitors, and I don't want anyone slipping."

Visitors? On a Tuesday morning? "I was headed out to work on the fence line."

"And then look at alpacas. I heard."

He tugged on his ear. His mother was acting so strangely. Since when did she have weekday visitors? When had she ever asked him to clean off the frontporch steps?

"Shouldn't take but a few minutes," his father said. "Your mother wouldn't ask if she didn't need it."

The rebuke was mild, but still he felt his cheeks flushing.

"Ya, of course. Anything else?"

"You could move your muddy boots off the front porch, as well as that sanding project you've never finished."

"Did I miss something? Are we having Sunday service here on a Tuesday?" He meant it as a joke, but it came out as a whine.

Rachel jumped up to help his mother, not even attempting to hide her smile.

"Some ladies are stopping by." His mother reached up and patted his shoulder. "I just don't want them tripping over your things." He rolled his eyes but assured her that he'd take care of it right away.

When he stepped out onto the front porch, his dad clapped him on the back. "Give them a little space. Your *mamm*, she's happy to have another girl around the place."

"Ya, that makes sense, but—"

"She's convinced that *Gotte* brought Rachel into our lives for a reason."

"To give me more work?"

"And, of course, we all want to make the transition easier for Rachel. This is bound to be a difficult time."

From the grin on Rachel's face, he didn't think it was as difficult as his father imagined, but instead of arguing with him, he found the stiff outdoor broom and began sweeping the steps to make sure there was no ice or water or snow there. *Woman's work*, he thought, but that wasn't what was bothering him. Change was in the air, and Caleb had never been one to embrace change—unless it was regarding farm animals.

In every other way, stubborn and old-fashioned was more his style.

Ida had shared with Rachel that a few ladies would be stopping by. "They heard about your situation and want to help."

She wasn't sure what that meant, but she'd nodded politely, and then Caleb had brought up alpacas, and the conversation had twisted and turned from there.

Now it was nearly noon, and she plopped onto the couch and stared at the items stacked on the coffee table.

Ida sat across from her, holding a steaming mug of

coffee. "Seems everyone from our community pitched in. It's *gut*, *ya*?"

"Of course. I'm a bit stunned. How did they even know that I'd need these things? How did they know I was here?"

"Word travels fast in an Amish community. Certainly you remember that."

"We used to call it the Amish grapevine."

Ida laughed. "I've heard that before, too, but 'grapevine' has a gossipy sound to it. This is really just neighbors helping neighbors."

Rachel picked the top dress off the pile of clothes. The color was midnight blue—Caleb would be happy about that—and the fabric was a good cotton that would last. It was also soft to the touch. She ran her hand across it, humbled by all that these women, who were strangers to her, had given.

"We'll need to take those in, of course. You're shorter and smaller than Rebekah's girls."

"Won't they need these?"

"Not likely, both have put on a good bit of weight since marrying, and that was before they were expecting her first grandchildren. No, I don't think they'll be needing them back."

There were underclothes, *kapps*, two outdoor bonnets and a coat. All except the underclothes were used, but in good condition. Someone had brought a Bible and a journal for writing in. She thought those might come in handy. Dr. Gold had mentioned that writing a little every day might help her memories return. There was also a new scarf and gloves, knitted in a dark gray that had a touch of shimmer to it. "This is beautiful work."

"Melinda can do wonders with a knitting needle. I've always been more of a crochet person myself."

Rachel stood up, went to the room she was staying in and returned with the blue scarf she'd apparently been wearing when Caleb had found her. No coat, but a scarf—strange indeed. "I think—I think I might be a knitter."

"That's why you knew about the alpaca yarn."

"Maybe. I think so. I know this is called a stockinette pattern—you alternate rows of knitting with rows of purling." She closed her eyes, could almost see herself adjusting the tension in her yarn, squinting at a pattern, knitting needles flying. She could be imagining, or she could be remembering. There was no way to know.

"Are you remembering anything else?"

"Only that this—" She ran her fingers over the scarf, then draped it around her neck. "It seems very familiar." "That's a beginning."

"If only I could remember more, but when I try, the headaches return."

Ida walked over to the bookcase and brought back the packet of information from the doctor at the hospital. Rachel had already rifled through it twice. There were instructions, what to expect, warning signs, as well as two cards—one for her next appointment with Dr. Gold and another card with the name and contact information for a Dr. Michie. She'd spoken with the doctor a few minutes before leaving the hospital. She was a counselor of some sort and had told Rachel to call her if she'd like to make an appointment.

Ida sat beside Rachel on the couch and they both stared down at the top page.

Ida read aloud from the sheet. "Symptoms of a concussion include brief loss of consciousness."

"Check."

"Memory problems."

"We all know I have that."

"Confusion."

Rachel leaned forward, propped her elbows on her knees and pressed her fingertips to her forehead. "Sometimes, when I can't remember how I know something, I feel terribly confused."

Ida nodded and continued with the list. "Drowsiness or feeling sluggish."

"Twice this morning I went back and laid down on the bed for a few minutes."

"Only because I insisted. You need to recognize when things are overwhelming you. It's important for a woman to learn to take care of herself. You're no use to your family—"

"I don't have one."

"Or anyone else if you allow yourself to become ill or exhausted."

Rachel heard the concern in Ida's voice, but she couldn't bring herself to meet her gaze. "I'm batting a thousand, as my *bruder* would say..."

She slapped her hand over her mouth.

Ida reached over and clutched her hand. "That's *gut*, Rachel. You're starting to remember. That's a *gut* sign."

"I suppose."

"Can you remember his name?"

"Nein."

"Older or younger?"

She closed her eyes and tried to picture her family, tried to recall anything from her past, but to no avail.

Her heart was racing and her mind was spinning off in a dozen directions, but she couldn't quite grasp even one solid piece of information about her former life—other than she had a brother. Was he worried? Was he looking for her?

Finally, she motioned for Ida to continue with the list of symptoms. They knew she had a concussion, the doctor had confirmed as much, but it helped to know that the things she was feeling and experiencing weren't unusual.

"Dizziness or blurred vision."

"A little yesterday, when I first woke up in the hospital."

"Headache."

"Ya, especially when I try to remember."

"Nausea or vomiting."

"Not since I started eating."

"Sensitivity to light."

"That's on there?" She scooted closer and peered at the sheet. "I tried going outside for a few moments earlier, but the sunshine felt like a pitchfork in my brain. I found myself wishing I had my sunglasses."

"Another puzzle piece. You have a *bruder* and you wore sunglasses."

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Perhaps." Ida tapped the last item on the list. "What about balance problems? Any trouble there?"

"I'm not sure. Let's check." Rachel jumped up and pretended to walk a straight line, holding her hands out to the side. She pivoted and started back toward Ida, touching her nose with first her right and then left index finger as she walked. Ida began to laugh, and

then Rachel began to laugh, and soon they were giggling like schoolgirls.

And, of course, that was the moment that Caleb walked inside, a frown pulling down the corners of his mouth. Why did he always seem to be disapproving of her? She pitied the woman that did decide to marry him or even date him. Caleb Wittmer might be a good man, but he wasn't much fun to be around, and life should include some fun. Shouldn't it?

"We're about to head over to see the alpacas."

"Oh, well, I hope it goes well, dear."

"Actually I was wondering..."

"About?"

"Lunch."

Ida started laughing again, and then she spread her arms to encompass the pile of goods their neighbors had brought. "We've been pretty busy in here."

"I see that."

"Our neighbors brought all of these things for Rachel."

"Wunderhaar."

"Honestly I forgot about making lunch, but I'll throw some sandwiches together."

Caleb nodded as if that made sense. His mother brushed past him, humming as she went into the kitchen.

"Let me guess." Rachel couldn't have stopped the smile spreading across her face if she'd tried, which she didn't. "You're not used to eating sandwiches."

"Actually I can't remember the last time *Mamm* didn't have lunch waiting on the table."

Rachel attempted to make sympathetic noises, but it probably came out like she'd managed to choke on something. She knew she should keep her mouth shut. Instead she said, "Men can make a sandwich, too, Caleb. Maybe you should give your *mamm* a little bit of a break here. Having me around? It's a lot of extra work."

He narrowed his eyes and pulled in a deep breath. Rachel immediately regretted baiting him.

"Your community has been very nice. They even brought me some appropriate clothing." Oops. She'd done it again.

Instead of aggravating Caleb, he seemed to relax. Perhaps poking at one another felt like safe ground to him. "That is a *gut* thing. I see you even have several *kapps* and bonnets there."

He picked one up. Unfortunately, it happened to be on top of the pile of underclothes. When he glanced down and saw the stack of underthings, he dropped the bonnet, turned a bright shade of red and then pivoted and fled from the room.

Rachel grabbed a pillow and buried her face in it so that he couldn't hear her laughter. Which felt so much better than worrying about what Caleb thought of her—that question was behind the laughter. She didn't want to think about that, though, or about why it mattered.

She needed to remember who she was. Borrowed clothes, a guest room in someone else's house and Caleb looking over her shoulder to see if she was following the rules were not how she wanted to live the rest of her life.

Chapter Three

Caleb bought the seven alpacas that afternoon.

His father had finally said, "You saved the money yourself. If it's what you want, then give it a try."

"Strangest animal I've ever seen" was his mother's only comment.

Caleb spent the rest of the week making sure the alpacas had adequate space in the barn, reinforcing fencing where he would pasture them and generally getting to know the strange beasts.

His parents came out once a day to check on the animals and his best friend, Gabriel, had been by twice. Mostly he'd laughed at Caleb's feeble attempts to interact with them.

As for Rachel, she hadn't stepped outside of the house at all. If anything, she'd seemed physically worse on Wednesday and Thursday. At one point, his *mamm* had walked down to the phone shack and contacted the doctor, who had called in a prescription for nausea and told her to be patient. "These things take time" were the doctor's exact words.

So Caleb was surprised when he was in the field

with the alpacas on Friday morning and looked up to see Rachel leaning against the fence. She wore a proper dress and coat, plus one of the outer bonnets she'd been given, though there was little wind and the sun had melted away every last trace of snow. She also sported sunglasses, an old pair of his mother's if he remembered correctly. In the crook of her arm she was carrying a bowl that his mother used to dump scraps into.

"Nice to see you outside."

"If I sit in the house one more day, I might go crazy. One can only read so much or do so many crossword puzzles."

"I wouldn't know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that I work every day from sunrise until dark."

"Life of a farmer, I guess."

"Amish women work hard, too. At least most of them do."

"Kind of hard to find a job if you can't remember anything more than your first name."

Caleb shrugged. Rachel could find work if she wanted it. They both knew it. Instead of defending herself further, she changed the subject.

"Have you named them?"

"Nein. We don't name our cows."

"I don't see any cows."

"We only have three—all dairy cows. They're in the east pasture."

"Oh. I guess I haven't been in that direction yet." She reached out her hand and one of the alpacas moseyed over to sniff at her palm.

"I'd call you Mocha."

The alpaca stood completely still and allowed her to rub its top notch of hair.

"How'd you do that? They won't let me within five feet of them."

When the male alpaca began to crunch on something, one of the females bounded over to join him. Soon he could barely see Rachel because the entire herd of alpacas had congregated near the fence. Caleb walked over to see what she was giving him.

"Apple slices?"

"Ya. Your mamm is making an apple pie, but she didn't want to include the skins. It seems like I always did when I baked a pie..." She shook her head back and forth, as if she could rattle the memory free.

Caleb scratched at his jaw. "I didn't think of giving them scraps."

"Makes sense, though. Most animals enjoy apple slices. We had a dog once that loved them."

Her head jerked up and she met Caleb's gaze, surprise coloring her features.

"You're remembering more every day."

"Small inconsequential things. It's frustrating."

"Not to my alpacas."

She smiled at that, and Caleb felt inexplicably better. He didn't pretend to understand Rachel, but he somehow thought of himself as responsible for her. Perhaps that was normal considering he'd found her in the snow only a few days before.

"Did you get a good deal on the animals?"

"I think so. Less than three thousand dollars for all seven, and there are two females."

"Hopefully you'll have baby alpacas running around by spring."

"That's the plan."

"Do you expect they'll be much work?"

"Not according to Mr. Vann. They mainly eat hay and grass, though some mineral supplements are good, too."

"So you won't be spending much money to maintain them."

"Nein. Also, they don't bite or butt or spit. I tried raising a llama once, but that didn't go so well."

Rachel crossed her arms on the fence and rested her head on top of them, watching the group of alpacas dart away and then flop and roll in a patch of dirt. He'd seen them do that before, but watching Rachel watching them, seeing the smile grow on her face, he realized for the first time what funny animals they were.

"They're herd animals, so it's a good thing I was able to buy seven."

"I think you made a good business decision, Caleb. You'll know for sure once you shear them, but my guess is that you'll make a nice return on your investment."

"Mr. Vann said to watch the top notch. If the hair grows to cover their eyes, I'm supposed to have it cut, which will mean learning to do it myself because I'm not about to pay someone else to do it."

Rachel covered her mouth to hide a giggle, which Caleb heard nonetheless.

"What's so funny?"

"Explain that to me," she said.

"Explain what?"

"You're so old-fashioned about other things." She held up a hand when he began to protest. "You admitted it yourself, the first night I was here. The night that you told me about your last girlfriend."

"She wasn't right about everything."

"But you said...what was it? 'My normal personality is bullheaded and old-fashioned."

"Ya. I suppose it's true."

"Not exactly unusual among the Amish."

"Oh, you remember that, do you?"

"So why are you such a risk taker as far as animals?"

"Crops, too," he admitted. He'd been watching the animals, but now he turned to study Rachel. "I'll answer your question, but first tell me why you want to know."

"Curious, I guess. Sort of like your alpacas."

The horses were grazing in the adjacent pasture. The gelding had wandered close to the fence separating it from the alpacas. The horse was focused on the winter grass, but one of the tan alpacas had zeroed in on the horse. It stuck its nose through the fence, then jumped back, jumped almost vertically. Which caused the other alpacas to trot over, and then they were all gawking at the horse and making a high-pitched noise that sounded like a cat with its tail caught in a door.

"So you're not asking merely to give me grief?"

"Not at all." With her fingers, she crossed her heart. "Promise."

He leaned against the fence, studying the animals but thinking of the woman standing beside him. Rachel was a jumbled mix of paradoxes. One moment she seemed vulnerable, the next fiercely independent, and then sometimes she was quietly curious.

Glancing at her, he realized—not for the first time—what a beautiful woman she was. Probably back in her own community she had a boyfriend who was wondering what had happened to her. The thought made him uncomfortable, as if they should be doing more to return her to her home. But what could they do?

Nothing, so far as he knew, so instead he settled for being honest and answering her question.

"I like the Plain life. I've seen my fair share of folks leave our faith—about half of them came back, tails tucked between their legs. The other half? They either never visit their family at all—"

"Is it allowed?"

"Oh, *ya*. Our bishop encourages families to support one another, even when a member chooses a different path."

Rachel nodded, as if that made sense.

"These people I'm thinking of, they have a standing invitation to come home and see their loved ones."

"But they don't?"

"Most don't. The ones that do, they seem put out that they have to leave their cell phone in the car."

"Are you speaking from personal experience?"

"You're asking if anyone in my family has gone over to the *Englisch* side?" Caleb ran his hand along the top rail of the metal fence—it was smooth and cold to the touch. "Two cousins, on my mother's side."

"So that makes you conservative...as far as people are concerned."

"I think being Plain means we stand for something. We stand for a different lifestyle. Once we start making compromises, there's no difference between us and the *Englisch*—in that case, who wouldn't leave?"

Rachel was shaking her head, her bonnet strings swaying back and forth, but she smiled and said, "All right. I've never heard it expressed that way before, but—"

"You might have. Maybe you don't remember."

"Good point. So you're conservative because you think it's good for families and believers."

"Right."

"But the farming? And animals?"

"In business you want to be conservative—for sure and certain you do."

"But?"

"It's exciting to try something new. *Ya?* Look at those animals. They seem like giant poodles to me. Who figured out that their wool would be a good crop?"

"Caleb, you surprise me."

"Ya?" He reached forward and brushed some grass off her coat sleeve, no doubt left by one of his alpacas that had been nosing closer for apple peels. "Is that *gut* or bad?"

"Both. The alpacas will be entertaining."

They'd returned to flopping down in the dirt.

"Your herd looks like they will produce a variety of coffee colors."

"Coffee, huh?"

"Something *Englischers* love—lots of browns and tans and mochas and cappuccinos. Maybe even a cinnamon hue on that far one."

"Cappuccino?" He could feel the frown forming on his lips. No doubt she loved visiting a coffee shop and wasting her money.

"Plus their fiber is hypoallergenic, which is what makes it very popular."

"Funny that you know that."

She simply shrugged.

"I know nothing about shearing, but I can learn."

"Do you have a local library?"

"Sure."

"You can search how to do that on their computers." He felt something freeze inside of him. This happened

every time he began to feel comfortable with Rachel. She said or did something that reminded him she didn't belong here and probably wouldn't be staying. He stepped away from the fence, so now they were facing each other, though Rachel was a good head shorter than he was.

"We don't use the computers."

"Why?" She cocked her head and looked genuinely puzzled.

"Because we choose not to. We're *Plain...*" He couldn't help emphasizing the last word, though he realized it sounded patronizing.

"Uh-huh. Well, I can tell you're getting aggravated, so I suppose I should go back inside."

"We just talked about what it means to be Plain, and then you throw out a comment about using computers."

"There's nothing wrong with a computer, Caleb." She stepped closer, right up into his personal space, and stared up at him.

He took a step back.

"Computers aren't evil."

"Never said they were, but they're not Plain."

"A computer isn't going to cause anyone to leave the faith"

"It could. The things you can see on one...well, it's like bait to our *youngies*..."

"Of which you are one."

He laughed at that. "Turned twenty-five last year." "Me, too."

They both froze, the argument suddenly forgotten.

"Another piece of the puzzle of Rachel," he said softly.

She glanced at him uncertainly, a range of emotions playing across her face, and then she turned and

wandered back into the house, pausing now and again to look back at the alpacas.

Rachel spent the rest of Friday morning helping Ida, but honestly there wasn't much to do for a family of three—four if she counted herself. Was she a part of Ida's family? Was this her home now? When would she remember her past?

And beneath those questions were Caleb's words, mocking her.

Amish women work hard, too. At least most of them do. Did he think she liked not being able to remember her own last name or where she was from? Did he think she enjoyed being ill?

"The headaches are better, *ya*?" Ida was crocheting a gray-and-black winter scarf for Caleb. She only brought it out during the day, not wanting him to see it until Christmas morning.

Rachel was sitting and staring at the crochet needle that Ida had given her. She'd even shown her how to use it, but the rhythm and stitch pattern seemed completely foreign. If she'd crocheted in her other life, she certainly couldn't remember doing so.

"Some."

"That's *gut*. You're a little better every day. You could be entirely well by Christmas."

"Does your community celebrate on December twenty-fifth or on January sixth?"

"Both. The older generation—older than me even, they prefer Old Christmas."

"Probably includes Caleb."

"Caleb likes both holidays—mainly because I cook his favorite dishes."

"I wish I could remember how to use this." Rachel stared at the crochet needle. "I wish I remembered something useful."

"That seems to happen when you're not thinking about it." She pointed to the journal that contained the list that Rachel had made. The list was pitifully short, in her opinion. She opened the journal and stared down at the first page.

My name is Rachel. I have a brother. I know about alpaca wool. Used to wear sunglasses? I'm 25 years old.

"Those things could describe a lot of women."

"And yet they describe you, and *Gotte* made you special and unique."

"Now you're trying to cheer me up."

"Indeed." Ida peered at her over the reading glasses she wore while crocheting. The frames were a pretty blue, which probably irked Caleb to no end. A blue dress was out of the question—blue frames couldn't be far behind.

"Do you know what I think is wrong with you?"

Rachel nearly choked on the water she'd been sipping. She'd known Ida for only less than a week, and yet already she knew the woman had a gentle spirit—one that wasn't critical.

"What's wrong with me?"

Now Ida was smiling. "Uh-huh."

"Tell me, Ida. Because it may just be that my brain is bruised, but I feel all out of sorts."

"You have cabin fever."

"Pardon me?"

"Cabin fever. I used to suffer from it something terrible when Caleb was a babe. That was a hard winter, and we were inside—in this very house—too much. Finally, his father came into the kitchen one morning and told me that he had finished all of his work in the barn."

"A farmer's work is never done..."

"Exactly. When John came in that morning, he claimed he'd finished the work that *had* to be done, took the babe from my arms and told me to go to town."

"And did it help?"

"Immensely. After that, one day a week he'd come in and take care of Caleb for a few hours while I went on little errands."

"So I need to go on little errands?"

"Wouldn't hurt." Ida dropped her crochet work in her lap and pulled a scrap of paper from her apron pocket. "Here's some things I need from the general store. It's on the main road. You won't have any trouble finding it. While you're out, maybe you can find something whimsical to do."

"Whimsical?"

"Impulsive. Something you hadn't planned on. Life on a farm can be awfully predictable. A surprise, even a little one, can brighten the spirit."

"How am I supposed to get there?"

"John told me he'd bring around the buggy after lunch."

"What if I don't remember how to drive a buggy?"

"We won't know that until you try. If you don't remember, then I'll ask Caleb to go with you."

The rest of the morning sped by and suddenly lunch

was over and the buggy and horse were waiting near the front porch.

Maybe it was the thought of a little freedom, or perhaps it was fear that Caleb would be saddled with her for an afternoon when he'd rather be with his alpacas—he'd frowned fiercely when Ida shared their plan during lunch—but whatever the cause, Rachel was determined to drive the buggy herself. She needn't have worried. As soon as she climbed up into the buggy, something deep inside of her brain took over.

Her hands picked up the reins.

She clucked to the horse.

Her spirit soared, and she pulled away.

Ida had given her an envelope with cash in it and drawn a crude map on the back of the list. The way to the general store was simple and consisted of driving down the lane to the main road, making a right and heading into town. Rachel suspected the map was in case she forgot how to get home, but her confidence had surged as soon as she'd begun driving the buggy. She didn't think she'd be getting lost.

The dark cloud that had been hovering over her mood lifted by the time she hit the main road. Farms dotted the way into town, and many had Christmas displays in the yards. *Englisch* homes had lights strung across shrubs and trees. She wondered what they'd look like at night.

Other houses sported giant inflatable yard decorations. There were large white polar bears wearing red neckties, yellow cartoon characters with blue pants and round eyeglasses that she had seen on *Englisch* coloring books, and even reindeer pulling a sleigh. A few Amish homes had wooden nativities, and their porches

were decorated with green cedar wrapped around the porch railing.

As she neared town, she passed a sign that read Welcome to Montgomery, Indiana. The name didn't ring any bells. But then, she already knew she wasn't from here.

So how had she happened on the road that led to Caleb's home?

Where was she from?

In town, the main road was filled with other buggies as well as cars. She saw even more decorations, including festive window displays, city banners wishing everyone "Happy Holidays" and churches reminding people when their Christmas services would be held. It was only December seventh, but it seemed that everyone was getting ready for the holiday early.

She was waiting at a signal light when a car of *Englischers* pulled up beside her, and a young child waved. She waved back as they pulled away. If it hadn't been for the child, she wouldn't have been looking in that direction, but she was...and so she saw the sign that said Montgomery Public Library.

She was in the wrong lane. She had to drive another block before turning, but the entire time she could hear Caleb's words in her ears.

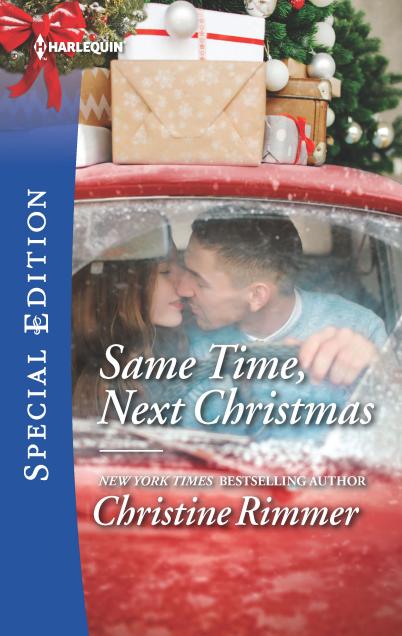
Amish women work hard, too. At least most of them do. He might not want to use the Englisch computers to learn about his new alpaca herd, but she was more than willing to look for a job on them. Something told her that if she wanted to move forward, the internet would be the place to start.

Find a job. Earn some money. Remember who she was. It was a short list, and suddenly Rachel was sure it was one she could conquer.

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Chapter One

December 23, four years ago...

Even with the rain coming down so hard he could barely make out the twisting gravel road ahead of him, Matthias Bravo spotted the light shining through the trees.

The Jeep lurched around another twist in the road. For a few seconds before the trees obscured his view, Matt could see his getaway cabin in the clearing up ahead. Yep. The light was coming from the two windows that flanked the front door.

Some idiot had broken in.

Swearing under his breath, Matt steered his Jeep to the almost nonexistent side of the road and switched off the engine and lights.

The rain poured down harder, pounding the roof,

roaring so loud he couldn't hear himself think. Out the windshield, the trees with their moss-covered trunks were a blur through the rippling curtain made of water.

Should he have just stayed home in Valentine Bay for Christmas?

Probably. His injured leg throbbed and he was increasingly certain he'd caught that weird bug his brothers had warned him about. He had a mother of a headache and even though he'd turned the heater off several miles back, he was sweating.

"Buck up, buddy." He slapped his own cheek just to remind himself that torrential rain, a sliced-up leg, a headache and a fever were not the worst things he'd ever lived through.

And at the moment, he had a mission. The SOB in his cabin needed taking down—or at the very least, roughing up a tad and kicking out on his ass.

Matt kept his rifle in a hidden safe at the back of the Jeep. Unfortunately, the safe was accessed through the rear door.

"No time like the present to do what needs doing." Yeah. He was talking to himself. Kind of a bad sign.

Was he having a resurgence of the PTSD he'd been managing so well for over a year now?

No. Uh-uh. Zero symptoms of a recurrence. No more guilt than usual. He wasn't drunk and hadn't been in a long time. No sleep problems, depression or increased anxiety.

Simply a break-in he needed to handle.

And going in without a weapon? How stupid would that be?

He put on his field jacket, pulled up the hood, shoved open his door and jumped out, biting back a groan when his hurt leg took his weight.

The good news: it wasn't that far to the rear door. In no time, he was back inside the vehicle, sweating profusely, dripping rain all over the seat, with the rifle in one hand and a box of shells in the other.

Two minutes later, rifle loaded and ready for action, he was limping through the downpour toward the cabin. Keeping to the cover of the trees, he worked his way around the clearing, doing a full three-sixty, checking for vehicles and anyone lurking outside, finding nothing that shouldn't be there.

Recon accomplished, he approached the building from the side. Dropping to the wet ground, he crawled to the steps, staying low as he climbed them. His leg hurt like hell, shards of pain stabbing him with every move he made. It was bleeding again right through the thick makeshift bandage he'd tied on the wound.

Too bad. For now, he needed to block the pain and focus.

As he rolled up onto the covered porch, he swiped back his dripping hood and crawled over beneath the front window.

With slow care, he eased up just enough to peer over the sill.

He got an eyeful.

A good-looking brunette—midtwenties, he would guess—sat on the hearth, warming herself at a blazing fire. She wore only a bra and panties. Articles of clothing lay spread out around her, steaming as they dried.

Was she alone? He didn't see anyone else in there. The cabin was essentially one big room, with bath and sleeping loft. From his crouch at the window, he could see the bathroom, its door wide open. Nobody in there. And he had a straight visual shot right through to the back door. Nada. Just the pretty, half-naked brunette.

She looked totally harmless.

Still, he should check the situation out from every possible angle before making his move.

Was he maybe being a little bit paranoid? Yeah, possibly.

But better safe than sorry.

He dragged himself over beneath the other front window. The view from there was pretty much the same. The woman looked so innocent, leaning back on her hands now, long, smooth legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. She raised a slim hand and forked her fingers through her thick, dark hair.

Grimly, he pulled up his hood and crawled down the steps into the deluge again. Circling the cabin once more, close-in this time, he ducked to peer into each window as he passed.

Every view revealed the leggy brunette, alone, drying off by the fire.

By the time he limped back to the front of the building and crept up onto the porch again, he was all but certain the woman was on her own.

Still, she could be dangerous. Maybe. And dangerous or not, she *had* broken in and helped herself to his firewood. Not to mention he still couldn't completely discount the possibility that there was someone upstairs.

He'd just have to get the jump on her, hope she really was alone and that no damn fool hid in the loft, ready to make trouble.

Sliding to the side, Matt came upright flush against the front door. Slowly and silently, he turned the knob. The knob had no lock, but he needed to see if the dead bolt was still engaged. It was. He took the keys from his pocket. At the speed of a lazy snail, in order not to alert the trespasser within, he unlocked the dead bolt.

That accomplished, he put the keys away and turned the knob with agonizing slowness until the door was open barely a crack. Stepping back, he kicked the door wide. It slammed against the inside wall as he leveled the barrel of his rifle on the saucereyed girl.

"Freeze!" he shouted. "Do it now!"

Sabra Bond gaped at the armed man who filled the wide-open doorway.

He was a very big guy, dressed for action in camo pants, heavy boots and a hooded canvas coat. And she wore nothing but old cotton panties and a sports bra.

No doubt about it. Her life was a mess—and getting worse by the second.

Sheepishly, she put her hands up.

The man glared down the barrel of that rifle at her. "What do you think you're doing in my cabin?"

"I, um, I was on my way back to Portland from my father's farm," she babbled. "I parked at the fish hatchery and started hiking along the creek toward the falls. The rain came. It got so bad that I—"

"Stop." He swung the business end of his rifle upward toward the loft. "Anyone upstairs? Do not lie to me."

"No one." He leveled the weapon on her again. "Just me!" she squeaked. "I swear it." She waited for

him to lower the gun. No such luck. The barrel remained pointed right at her. And, for some incomprehensible reason, she couldn't quit explaining herself. "I was hiking and thinking, you know? The time got away from me. I'd gone miles before the rain started. It kept getting worse, which led me to the unpleasant discovery that my waterproof jacket is only water resistant. Then I found your cabin..."

"And you broke in," he snarled.

Had she ever felt more naked? Highly unlikely. "I was just going to stand on the porch and wait for the rain to stop. But it only came down harder and I kept getting colder."

"So you broke in," he accused again, one side of his full mouth curling in a sneer.

Okay, he had a point. She *had* broken in. "I jimmied a window and climbed through," she admitted with a heavy sigh.

Still drawing a bead on her, water dripping from his coat, he stepped beyond the threshold and kicked the door shut. Then he pointed the gun at her pack. "Empty that. Just turn it over and dump everything out"

Eager to prove how totally unthreatening she was, Sabra grabbed the pack, unzipped it, took it by the bottom seam and gave it a good shake. A first-aid kit, an empty water bottle, a UC Santa Cruz Slugs hat and sweatshirt, and a bottle of sunscreen dropped out.

"Pockets and compartments, too," he commanded. She unhooked the front flap and shook it some more. Her phone, a tube of lip balm, a comb and a couple of hair elastics tumbled to the floor. "That's it." She dropped the empty pack. "That's all of it." When

he continued to glare at her, she added, "Dude. It was only a day hike."

"No gun." He paced from one side of the cabin to the other. She realized he was scoping out the upstairs, getting a good look at whatever might be up there.

Apparently satisfied at last that she really was alone, he pointed the gun her way all over again and squinted at her as though trying to peer into her brain and see what mayhem she might be contemplating.

Hands still raised, she shook her head. "I'm alone. No gun, no knives, no nothing. Just me in my underwear and a bunch of soggy clothes—and listen. I'm sorry I broke in. It was a bad choice on my part." *And not the only one I've made lately.* "How 'bout if I just get dressed and go?"

He studied her some more, all squinty-eyed and suspicious. Then, at last, he seemed to accept the fact that she was harmless. He lowered the rifle. "Sorry," he grumbled. "I'm overcautious sometimes."

"Apology accepted," she replied without a single trace of the anger and outrage the big man deserved—because no longer having to stare down the dark barrel of that gun?

Just about the greatest thing that had ever happened to her.

As she experienced the beautiful sensation of pure relief, he emptied the shells from his rifle, stuffed them in a pocket and turned to hang the weapon on the rack above the door. The moment he turned his back to her, she grabbed her Slugs sweatshirt and yanked it on over her head.

When he faced her again, he demanded, "You got anyone you can call to come get you?" She was flip-

ping her still-damp hair out from under the neck of the sweatshirt as he added, "Someone with four-wheel drive. They'll probably need chains or snow tires, too." When she just stared in disbelief, he said, "That frog strangler out there? Supposed to turn to snow. Soon."

A snowstorm? Seriously? "It is?"

He gave a snort of pure derision. "Oughtta check the weather report before you go wandering off into the woods."

Okay, not cool. First, he points a gun at her and then he insults her common sense. The guy was really beginning to annoy her. Sabra had lived not fifteen miles from this cabin of his for most of her life. Sometimes you couldn't count on the weather report and he ought to know that. "I did check the weather. This morning, before I left on my way to Portland. Light rain possible, it said."

"It's Oregon. The weather can change."

His condescending response didn't call for an answer, so she didn't give him one. Instead, she grabbed her still-soggy pants and put them on, too, wishing she'd had sense enough to keep driving right past the sign for the fish hatchery. A hike along the creek to the falls had seemed like a good idea at the time, a way to lift her spirits a little, to clear her troubled mind before going on back to Portland to face finding a new apartment during the remaining two weeks and two days of her vacation from work—a vacation that was supposed to have been her honeymoon.

The big guy grunted. "And you didn't answer my question. Got anyone you can call?"

"Well, let me see..." Her mom had been dead for six years now. Her dad was three hours away in Eugene until New Year's. Five days ago, on the day before she was supposed to have gotten married, she and her ex-fiancé had called it quits for reasons too upsetting to even think about at the moment. And she just wasn't ready to ask any of her Portland friends to drive eighty miles through a blizzard on the day before Christmas Eve to save her from a stranger with a bad attitude in an isolated cabin in the middle of the forest. "No. I don't have anyone to call."

The big guy did some swearing. Finally, he muttered, "Let me get my tree in here and I'll drive you wherever you need to go."

Get outta town. Mr. Grouchy Pants had a tree? She was almost as surprised as when he'd kicked open the door. "Uh, you mean you have a Christmas tree?"

His scowl deepened. "It's Christmas, isn't it?"

She put up both hands again. "It's just, well, you don't seem like the Christmas-tree type."

"I like Christmas." He narrowed his blue eyes at her. "I like it *alone*."

"Gotcha. And thank you—for the offer of a ride, I mean. If you can get me to my car at the fish hatchery, I can take it from there just fine. As for the tree, I'll help you bring it in."

"You stay here. I don't need you."

"Good to know." She tugged on her socks and boots and not-quite-waterproof jacket as he pulled a tree stand out from under the sink, filled it with water and put it down near the door—and now that she wasn't terrified half out of her wits, she noticed that he was limping.

His right pants leg was torn up, hanging in tatters to the knee. Beneath the tatters, she could see a bit

of bloody bandage—a very bloody bandage, actually, bright red and wet. It looked like he was bleeding into his boot.

He straightened from positioning the tree stand and took the three steps to the door.

She got up. "Do you know that you're bleeding?" He didn't bother to answer. She followed him outside. "Listen. Slow down. Let me help you."

"Stay on the porch." He growled the command as he flipped up the hood of his jacket and stepped out into the driving rain again. "I'll bring my Jeep to the steps."

She waited—because, hey. If he didn't want her help, he wasn't going to get it. Still, she felt marginally guilty for just standing there with a porch roof over her head as she watched him limp off into the downpour.

He vanished around the first turn in the road. It was getting dark. She wrapped her arms across her middle and refused to worry about that bloody bandage on his leg and the way he walked with a limp—not to mention he'd looked kind of flushed, hadn't he? Like maybe he had a fever in addition to whatever was going on with that leg...

Faintly, she heard a vehicle start up. A moment later, a camo-green Jeep Rubicon rolled into sight. It eased to a stop a few feet from the steps and the big guy got out. She pulled up her hood and ran down to join him as he began untying the tree lashed to the rack on the roof.

He didn't argue when she took the top end. "I'll lead," was all he said.

Oh, *no kidding*—and not only because he was so damn bossy. It was a thick noble fir with a wide circle of bottom branches that wouldn't make it through the door any other way.

He assumed the forward position and she trotted after him, back up the steps and into the warmth of the cabin. At the tree stand, he got hold of the trunk in the middle, raising it to an upright position.

She crouched down to guide it into place and tighten the screws, sitting back on her heels when the job was done. "Okay. You can let it go." He eyed her warily from above, his giant arm engulfed by the thick branches as he gripped the trunk. His face was still flushed and there were beads of moisture at his hairline—sweat, not rain, she would take a bet on that. "It's in and it's stable, I promise you," she said.

With a shrug, he let go.

The tree stood tall. It was glorious, blue-green and well shaped, the branches emerging in perfectly balanced tiers, just right for displaying strings of lights and a treasure trove of ornaments. Best of all, it smelled of her sweetest memories, of Christmases past, when her mom was still alive. Ruth Bond had loved Christmas. Every December, she would fill their house at Berry Bog Farm with all the best Christmas smells—evergreen, peppermint, cinnamon, vanilla...

"Not bad," he muttered.

She put away her memories. They only made her sad, anyway. "It's a beauty, all right."

He aimed another scowl at her. "Good, then. Get your gear and let's go." Was he swaying on his feet? She rose to her height. "I don't know what's wrong

with your leg, but you don't look well. You'd better sit down and let me see what I can do for you."

"I'm fine."

"Get real. You are not fine and you are getting worse."

He only grew more mulish. "We're leaving."

"I'm not getting in that Jeep with you behind the wheel." She braced her hands on her hips. He just went on glaring, swaying gently on his feet like a giant tree in a high wind. She quelled her aggravation at his pigheadedness and got busy convincing him he should trust her to handle whatever was wrong with him. "I was raised on a farm not far from here. My mom was a nurse. She taught me how to treat any number of nasty injuries. Just let me take a look at your leg."

"I'll deal with that later."

"You are wobbling on your feet and your face is red. You're sweating. I believe you have a fever."

"Did I ask for your opinion?"

"It's not safe for you to be—"

"I'm fine."

"You're not."

"Just get your stuff, okay?"

"No. Not okay." She made a show of taking off her jacket and hanging it by the door. "I'm not leaving this cabin until we've dealt with whatever's going on with your leg."

There was a long string of silent seconds—a battle of wills. He swayed and scowled. She did nothing except stand there and wait for the big lug to give in and be reasonable.

In the end, reason won. "All right," he said. He shrugged out of his coat and hung it up next to hers.

And then, at last, he limped to the Navajo-print sofa in the center of the room and sat down. He bent to his injured leg—and paused to glance up at her. "When I take off this dressing, it's probably going to be messy. We'll need towels. There's a stack of old ones in the bathroom, upper left in the wooden cabinet."

She went in there and got them.

When she handed them over, he said, "And a firstaid backpack, same cabinet, lower right." He set the stack of towels on the sofa beside him.

"I've got a first-aid kit." It was still on the floor by the hearth where she'd dumped it when he'd ordered her to shake out her pack. She started for it.

"I saw your kit," he said. She paused to glance back at him as he bent to rip his pants leg wider, revealing an impressively muscular, bloodstained, hairy leg. "Mine's bigger."

She almost laughed as she turned for the bathroom again. "Well, of course it is."

His kit had everything in it but an operating table. She brought it into the main room and set it down on the plank floor at the end of the sofa. He'd already pushed the pine coffee table to the side, spread towels on the floor in front of him and rolled his tattered pants leg to midthigh, tying the torn ends together to keep them out of the way.

She watched as he unlaced his boot. A bead of sweat dripped down his face and plopped to his thigh. "Here." She knelt. "I'll ease it off for you."

"I've got it." With a grunt, he removed the boot. A few drops of blood fell to the towels. His sock was soggy with it, the blood soaking into the terrycloth when he put his foot back down.

"Interesting field dressing." She indicated the article of clothing tied around his lower leg.

One thick shoulder lifted in a half shrug. "Another T-shirt bites the dust."

"Is it stuck to the wound?"

"Naw. Wound's too wet." He untied the knots that held the T-shirt in place.

When he took the bloody rag away, she got a good look at the job ahead of her. The wound was an eightinch crescent-shaped gash on the outside of his calf. It was deep. With the makeshift bandage gone, the flap of sliced flesh flopped down. At least it didn't appear to go all the way through to the bone. Blood dripped from it sluggishly.

"Let me see..." Cautiously, so as not to spook him, she placed her index and middle fingers on his knee and gave a gentle push. He accepted her guidance, dipping the knee inward so she could get a closer look at the injury. "Butterfly bandages won't hold that together," she said. "Neither will glue. It's going to need stitches."

For the first time since he'd kicked open the door, one side of his mouth hitched up in a hint of a smile. "I had a feeling you were going to say that." His blue eyes held hers. "You sure you're up for this?"

"Absolutely."

"You really know what to do?"

"Yes. I've sewn up a number of injured farm animals and once my dad got gored by a mean bull when my mom wasn't home. I stitched him right up."

He studied her face for a good five seconds. Then he offered a hand. "Matthias Bravo."

She took it. "Sabra Bond."

Chapter Two

Sabra washed up at the kitchen-area sink, turning and leaning against the counter as she dried her hands. "Got a plastic tub?"

"Under the sink." He seemed so calm now, so accepting. "Look. I'm sorry if I scared you, okay?" His eyes were different, kinder.

She nodded. "I broke in."

"I overreacted."

She gazed at him steadily. "We're good."

A slow breath escaped him. "Thanks."

For an odd, extended moment, they simply stared at each other. "Okay, then," she said finally. "Let's get this over with."

Grabbing the tub from under the sink, she filled it with warm water and carried it over to him. As he washed his blood-caked foot and lower leg, she laid out the tools and supplies she would need. His firstaid pack really did have everything, including injectable lidocaine.

"Lucky man," she said. "You get to be numb for this."

"Life is good," he answered lazily, leaning against the cushions, letting his big head fall back and staring kind of vacantly at the crisscrossing beams overhead.

Wearing nitrile gloves from his fancy kit, she mopped up blood from around the injury and then injected the painkiller. Next, she irrigated the wound just the way her mom had taught her to do.

As she worked, he took his own temperature. "Hundred and two," he muttered unhappily.

She tipped her head at the acetaminophen and the tall glass of water she'd set out for him. "Take the pills and drink the water."

He obeyed. When he set the empty glass back down, he admitted, "This bug's been going around. Two of my brothers had it. Laid them out pretty good. At least it didn't last long. I was feeling punk this morning. I told myself it was nothing to worry about..."

"Focus on the good news," she advised.

"Right." He gave her a wry look. "I'm sick, but if I'm lucky, I won't be sick for long."

She carried the tub to the bathroom, dumped it, rinsed it and left it there. When she returned to him, she repositioned the coffee table, sat on the end of it and covered her thighs with a towel. "Let's see that leg." She tapped her knees with her palms, and he stretched the injured leg across them.

"Can you turn your leg so the wound is up and keep it in that position?"

"No problem." He rolled his foot inward, turning his outer calf up.

She put on a fresh pair of gloves and got to work.

It took a lot of stitches to do the job. He seemed content to just sprawl there, staring at the ceiling as she sewed him up.

But, now she had him at her mercy, there were a few questions she wanted to ask. "Did somebody come after you with an ax?" He lifted his head and mustered a steely stare. She grinned in response. It was so strange. Not long ago, he'd scared the crap out of her. Yet now he didn't frighten her in the least. She actually felt completely comfortable kidding him a little. "Do not make me hurt you."

He snorted. "It's embarrassing."

"I'll never tell a soul."

"It was raining when I cut down that tree. I forgot to bring gloves and my hands were soaking wet. Plus, I was feeling pretty bad from this damn bug I seem to have caught."

She tied off a stitch. "So then, what you're telling me is you almost chopped off your own leg?"

He let his head fall back again. "I come from a long line of woodsmen on my mother's side," he said wearily. "No self-respecting member of my family ever got hurt while cutting down an eight-foot tree."

"Until you."

"Go ahead, Sabra Bond, rub it in."

"Where'd you get that tree?" She tied off another stitch. "I didn't see a tag on it. Have you been poaching, Matthias?"

"You can call me Matt." He said it in a lovely, low rumble that made her think of a purring cat—a very

large one. The kind that could easily turn dangerous. "Everyone calls me Matt."

"I kind of like Matthias."

"Suit yourself."

"I'll ask again. Did you steal that gorgeous tree from the people of Oregon?"

He grunted. "I'll have you know I'm a game warden, a Fish and Wildlife state trooper. I *catch* the poachers—so no, I didn't steal that tree. I took it from property that belongs to my family."

"Ah. All right, then. I guess I won't have to turn you in."

"You can't imagine my relief."

"I have another question."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Didn't it occur to you to head for a hospital or an urgent care after you took that ax to your leg?"

He didn't answer immediately. She was considering how much to goad him when he muttered, "Pride and denial are powerful things."

By the time she'd smoothed antibiotic ointment over the stitched-up wound and covered it with a bandage, he was sweating more heavily than ever. She helped him off with his other boot. "Come on," she coaxed. "Stretch out on the sofa, why don't you?"

"Just for a few minutes," he mumbled, but remained sitting up. He started emptying his pockets, dragging out his phone, keys and wallet, dropping them next to the lamp on the little table at the end of the sofa. From another pocket, he took the shells from his rifle. He put them on the little table, too, and then leaned back against the cushions again.

She asked, "Do you have another sock to keep that bare foot warm?"

"You don't have to—"

"Just tell me where it is."

He swiped sweat from his brow. "In the dresser upstairs, top drawer, left."

Sabra ran up there and came down with a pillow from the bed and a clean pair of socks. She propped the pillow against one arm of the sofa and knelt to put on the socks for him. By then, he wasn't even bothering to argue that she didn't need to help him. He looked exhausted, his skin a little gray beneath the flush of fever

She plumped the pillow she'd taken from the bed upstairs. "Lie down, Matthias." He gave in and stretched out, so tall that his feet hung off the end. "Here you go." She settled an afghan over him and tucked it in around him. "Okay, I'll be right back." And she hustled over to the sink to run cold water on a cloth.

"Feels good," he said, when she gently rubbed the wet cloth across his forehead and over his cheeks. "So nice and cool. Thank you..." Under the blanket, his injured leg jerked. He winced and stifled a groan. The lidocaine was probably wearing off. But the acetaminophen should be cutting the pain a little—and lowering his fever.

"Just rest," she said softly.

"All right. For few minutes, maybe. Not long. I'll be fine and I'll take you where you need to go."

She made a sound of agreement low in her throat, though she knew he wasn't going anywhere for at least a day or two.

Within ten minutes, he was asleep.

Quietly, so as not to wake him, she cleaned up after the impromptu medical procedure. She even rinsed out his bloody boot and put it near the hearth to dry.

Two hours later, at a little after eight in the evening, Matthias was still on the couch. He kept fading in and out of a fevered sleep. There wasn't much Sabra could do for him but bathe his sweaty face to cool him off a little and retuck the blanket around him whenever he kicked it off.

She put another log on the fire and went through the cupboards and the small fridge in the kitchen area. He had plenty of food, the nonperishable kind. Beans. Rice. Flour. Pasta. Cans of condensed milk, of vegetables and fruit. She opened some chili and ate it straight from the can, washing it down with a glass of cold water

Matthias slept on, stirring fitfully, muttering to himself. Now and then he called out the names of men, "Mark, no!" and "Nelson, don't do it!" and "Finn, where are you?" as if in warning or despair. He also muttered a woman's name, "Christy," more than once and vowed in a low, ragged rumble, "Never again."

He woke around nine. "Sabra?" he asked, his voice dry. Hoarse.

"Right here."

"Water?"

She brought him a tall glassful. "Don't get up. Let me help." She slipped her free hand under his big, sweaty head and held the glass to his mouth as he drained it.

With a whispered "Thank you" and a weary sigh, he settled against the pillow again.

She moistened another cloth in the icy water from the sink and bathed his face for him. "You know what, Matthias?"

"Ungh?"

"I'm going to go ahead and unload your Jeep for you."

He made another low sound in his throat. She decided to take that sound for agreement.

"Well, great." She patted his shoulder. "I'll just get after that, then. Go back to sleep." Scooping his keys off the side table, she put on her jacket and quietly tiptoed out to the porch.

The gorgeous sight that greeted her stole her breath and stopped her in her tracks.

Just as Matthias had predicted, the rain had turned to snow. She gazed at a world gone glittering white.

In the golden light that spilled out the cabin windows, the fat flakes fell thick and heavy. They'd piled up on the ground and decorated the branches of the western hemlock and Sitka spruce trees. There was a good three inches already.

"So beautiful," she whispered aloud and all of her worries just fell away, both at the mess that currently added up to her life and the challenges she'd faced in the past few hours.

How could she be anything but happy in this moment? Christmas was falling from the sky.

She knew what was coming. She would be staying in this cabin for at least a few days with the man who'd introduced himself by pointing his rifle at her. Should she be more upset about that?

Probably.

But after they'd gotten past those terrifying first

minutes when she'd feared he might shoot her, things had definitely started looking up. He was a good patient, and he seemed kindhearted beneath that gruff exterior.

And this situation? It felt less like an ordeal and more like an adventure. As if she'd fallen out of her own thoroughly depressing life—and into a weird and wonderful Christmassy escapade.

Stuck in a one-room cabin with a big, buff injured stranger for Christmas?

She'd take that over her real life any day of the week.

As it turned out, she didn't need the car key. Matthias had left the Jeep unlocked.

And there were treasures in there—three large boxes of groceries. Fresh stuff, greens and tomatoes. Apples. Bananas. Eggs, milk and cheese. A gorgeous rib roast, a fat chicken and some really pretty pork chops.

It was a good thing she'd decided to bring it all in, too. By morning everything would have been frozen.

She carried the food in first, then his laptop, a box of brightly wrapped Christmas gifts probably from his family and another boxful of books, as well.

After the boxes, she brought in three duffel bags containing men's clothes and fresh linens. Detouring to the bathroom, she stacked the linens in the cabinet. She carried the bags of clothes up to the loft, leaving them near the top of the stairs for him to deal with when he felt better.

Her sick, surly stranger definitely needed some chicken soup. She hacked up the chicken. She put the pieces on to simmer in a pot of water with onions and garlic, a little celery and some spices from the cute little spice rack mounted on the side of a cabinet.

The night wore on. She fished the cooked chicken from the pot. Once it was cool enough to handle, she got rid of the bones, chopped the meat and returned it to the pot, along with some potatoes and carrots.

On the sofa, Matthias tossed and turned, sometimes muttering to the guys named Nelson and Mark, even crying out once or twice. She soothed him when he startled awake and stroked his sweaty face with a cold cloth.

When the soup was ready, she fed it to him. He ate a whole bowlful, looking up at her through only slightly dazed blue eyes as she spooned it into his mouth. Once he'd taken the last spoonful, he said, "I've changed my mind. You can stay."

"Good. Because no one's leaving this cabin for at least a couple of days. It's seriously snowing."

"Didn't I warn you?"

"Yes, you did. And it's piling up fast, too. You're gonna be stuck with me through Christmas, anyway."

"It's all right. I can deal with you." He sat up suddenly. Before she could order him to lie back down, he said, "I really need to take a whiz—get me the cane from that basket by the door, would you?"

"You need more than a cane right now. You can lean on me"

His expression turned mulish. "You're amazing and I'm really glad you broke into my cabin. But as for staggering to the head, I can do it on my own. Get me the damn cane."

"If you tear any of your stitches falling on your ass—"

"I won't. The cane."

She gave in. *He* wasn't going to. The cane was handmade of some hard, dark wood, with a roughhewn bear head carved into the handle. She carried it back to him. "Still here and happy to help," she suggested.

"I can manage." He winced as he swung his feet to the floor and then he looked up at her, waiting.

She got the message loud and clear. Pausing only to push the coffee table well out of his way, she stepped aside.

He braced one hand on the cane and the other on the sofa arm and dragged himself upright. It took him a while and he leaned heavily on the cane, but he made it to the bathroom and back on his own.

Once he was prone on the couch again, he allowed her to tuck the afghan in around him. She gave him more painkillers. Fifteen minutes later, he was sound asleep.

By then, it was past three in the morning. She checked her phone and found text messages—from her dad and also from Iris and Peyton, her best friends in Portland. They all three knew that it had ended with her fiancé, James. She hadn't shared the gory details with her dad, but she'd told her BFFs everything. The texts asked how she was doing, if she was managing all right?

They—her friends and her dad—believed she was spending the holiday on her own at the farm. However, with no one there but her, the farmhouse had seemed to echo with loneliness, so she'd told Nils and Mar-

jorie Wilson, who worked and lived on the property, that she was leaving. She'd thrown her stuff in her Subaru and headed back to Portland, stopping off at the fish hatchery on the spur of the moment.

And ending up stranded in a cabin in the woods with a stranger named Matthias.

Really, it was all too much to get into via text. She was safe and warm with plenty of food—and having a much better time than she'd had alone at the farmhouse. There was nothing anyone could do for her right now. They would only freak out if she tried to explain where she was and how she'd gotten there.

Sabra wished them each a merry Christmas. She mentioned that it was snowing heavily and implied to her girlfriends that she was still at the farm and might be out of touch for a few days due to the storm. To her dad, she wrote that she'd gone back to Portland—it wasn't a lie, exactly. She *had* gone. She just hadn't gotten there yet.

Though cell service in the forest was spotty at best, a minor miracle occurred and all three texts went through instantly—after which she second-guessed herself. Because she probably ought to tell someone that she was alone with a stranger in the middle of the woods.

But who? And to what real purpose? What would she even say?

Okay, I'm not exactly where I said I was. I'm actually snowed in at an isolated cabin surrounded by the Clatsop State Forest with some guy named Matthias Bravo, who's passed out on the sofa due to illness and injury...

No. Uh-uh. She'd made the right decision in the

first place. Why worry them when there was nothing they could do?

She powered off the phone to save the battery and wandered upstairs, where she turned on the lamps on either side of the bed and went looking for the Christmas decorations Matthias had to have somewhere.

Score! There were several plastic tubs of them stuck in a nook under the eaves. She carried them downstairs and stacked them next to that gorgeous tree.

By then, she was yawning. All of a sudden, the energy had drained right out of her. She went back to the loft and fell across the bed fully clothed.

Sabra woke to gray daylight coming in the one tiny window over the bed—and to the heavenly smell of fresh coffee.

With a grunt, she pushed herself to her feet and followed her nose down to the main floor and the coffee maker on the counter. A clean mug waited beside it. Matthias must have set it out for her, which almost made her smile.

And Sabra Bond never smiled before at least one cup of morning coffee.

Once the mug was full, she turned and leaned against the counter to enjoy that first, all-important sip.

Matthias was sitting up on the sofa, his bad leg stretched out across the cushions, holding a mug of his own, watching her. "Rough night, huh?"

She gave him her sternest frown. "You should not have been up and you are not allowed to speak to me until I finish at least one full cup of coffee."

He shrugged. But she could tell that he was trying not to grin.

She took another big gulp. "Your face is still flushed. That means you still have a fever."

He sipped his coffee and did not say a word. Which was good. Great. Exactly what she'd asked for.

She knocked back another mouthful. "At least you're not sweating anymore. Have you taken more acetaminophen since last night?"

He regarded her with mock gravity and slowly shook his head in the negative.

She set down her mug, grabbed a glass, filled it with water and carried it over to him. "There you go. Take your pills. I'll need to check your bandage and then I'll cook us some breakfast."

He tipped his golden head down and looked at her from under thick, burnished eyebrows. His mouth kept twitching. Apparently, he was finding her extremely amusing.

"What?" she demanded.

He only shook his head again.

She marched back to the counter, leaned against it once more and enjoyed the rest of her coffee in blessed silence

"You don't happen to have an extra toothbrush, by any chance?" she asked once she'd drained the last drop from the mug. He just gave her more silent smirking. "Oh, stop it. You may speak."

"You're such a charmer in the morning."

She grunted. "Toothbrush?"

"Under the bathroom sink. Small plastic tub. There should be a couple of them still in the wrappers and some of those sample-sized tubes of toothpaste."

"Thank you—need more coffee before I go in there? Because I am completely serious. For today at least, you're not getting up unless you really need to."

He set his mug on the coffee table and reached for the bottle of painkillers. "No more coffee right now. I'll have another cup with breakfast."

The fire was all but out. She added a little kindling and another log. As soon as the flames licked up, she faced him. "Do not get up from that couch while I'm in there."

He was stretched out on his back again, adjusting the afghan, but he dropped it to make a show of putting his hands up in surrender. "I will not move from this spot until you give me permission."

She grabbed her pack. "That's what I wanted to hear."

In the bathroom, she didn't even glance at the mirror. Not at first. The coffee had gone right to her bladder, so she took care of that. It wasn't until she stood at the sink to wash her hands that she saw what Matthias had been trying not to laugh about.

She had three deep sleep wrinkles on the left side of her face and her hair was smashed flat on that side, with another ratty-looking section of it standing straight up from the top of her head.

A little grooming was definitely in order. She took off her clothes and gave herself a quick sponge bath, after which she brushed her teeth, put her clothes back on and combed her hair, weaving it into a single braid down her back.

By then, she almost looked human.

Snow had piled up on the sill outside the tiny bath-

room window. She went on tiptoe to peer through the clear part of the glass.

A blanket of unbroken white extended, smooth and sparkly, to the tree line. The trees themselves were more white than green. And it was still coming down.

Everything out that window looked brand-new. And she felt...gleeful.

She had someone to spend her Christmas with. And a gorgeous tree to decorate.

So what if that someone was a stranger and the tree wasn't hers? This totally unexpected interlude in the forest was just fine with her. She felt energized, very close to happy. And ready for anything.

For the first time in a long time, she looked forward with real anticipation to whatever was going to happen next.

Chapter Three

Matt was feeling almost human again. Yeah, his leg ached a little. But he'd taken his temperature before he made the coffee. It was down two degrees. His headache was gone.

Sabra came out of the bathroom looking a lot more pulled together than when she'd gone in. Though really, she'd been damn cute with her hair sticking up every which way, giving him the evil eye, ordering him to keep his mouth shut until she'd had her coffee.

"How about some oatmeal?" she asked as she refilled his coffee mug. "Think you could keep that down?"

He had zero desire to eat mush. "Did I dream it or did you haul everything in from the Jeep last night?"

"No dream. I brought the food and your other things inside."

"And you made soup."

"Yes, I did."

"It was delicious. I can't tell you how much I appreciate everything you've done and I would like eggs, bacon and toast. Please."

She handed him the mug and then stood above him, holding the coffee carafe, her head tipped to the side as she studied him. "I'm not going to be happy with you if it all comes right back up." She put on her don't-mess-with-me look, just to let him know who was boss.

Damn. The woman had attitude. And she took care of business. She was tough and resourceful and pretty much unflappable—with a dry sense of humor.

Not to mention she looked amazing in panties and a sports bra.

Matt liked her. A lot. He was a little blown away at how much. As a rule, he was cautious around new people. But for her, he would definitely make an exception. He said what he was thinking. "I could have done a lot worse than to get snowed in with you."

For that, he got a small nod and a hint of a smile. "I'm glad you're feeling better. I just want you to be careful not to overdo it."

"Eggs," he said longingly. "Toast. Bacon."

She made a disapproving face, but then she cooked him the breakfast he asked for. He did his part and kept the food down. After the meal, she changed his bandage. His leg wasn't pretty, but there was no sign of infection.

Once she'd changed the dressing, she got him some sweats and clean underwear from the duffel bags she'd

brought in from the car. She even allowed him to hobble into the bathroom on his own steam.

He brushed his teeth, cleaned himself up a little and changed into the stuff she'd brought downstairs for him. When he emerged into the main room, she said he looked a little green and ordered him to lie down.

"I have a request," she said as she tucked the old afghan in around him.

"My Jeep? My bank account number? The deed to this cabin? Whatever you want from me, it's yours."

She laughed. The sound was low and a little bit husky. Every time she bent close, he could smell her. She'd used the Ivory soap in the bathroom, yeah, but beneath that, her body itself smelled clean and sweet, like fresh-baked bread or maybe sugar cookies. Sugar cookies and woman.

A knockout combination.

Really, she had it all going on. He'd never realized before that he might have a type. Hi, I'm Matt Bravo and I like my women hot, smart, competent and bossy. As soon as he was capable of washing up in the bathroom without needing a nap afterward, it was going to get really difficult not to put a move on her.

Now, though? He was weak as a baby and fading fast, making her one-hundred-percent safe from his bad intentions.

"Keep your bank account," she said with a grin. "It's your tree I'm after."

He imagined reaching up, running a finger down the velvety skin of her neck, maybe tugging on that thick braid down her back—and what was this he was feeling? Like he had a crush on her or something.

Matt didn't do crushes. He'd been in love once and

it had all gone to hell like everything else in his life at that time. Nowadays, he went out occasionally with women who wanted the same thing he did—satisfying sex. And no sleeping over.

Although, in all honesty, if he was going to crush on a woman, it would have to be this one.

"Matthias? You okay?"

He picked up the conversation where he'd dropped it. "I noticed you found the decorations and brought them down."

She grinned. "It's Christmas Eve. You're in no condition to decorate that tree and it's not going to decorate itself. Is it all right with you if I do it?"

She was way too much fun to tease. "You sure you don't want the Jeep? It's a Rubicon. Super fancy. You can go off-road in it, take a seventy-degree downhill grade on rugged terrain without even stopping to consider the risks—because there are none."

A sound escaped her, a snappy little "Ffft." She gave him a light slap on the shoulder with the back of her hand. "Stop messing with me. Say yes."

He stared up into those beautiful brown eyes. "Yes."

"Well, all right." She retucked a bit of his blanket. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

He reached back and punched his pillow a little, all for show. "Have fun."

"I will."

"And try to keep the noise down. I need my sleep." He turned his head toward the back of the sofa and closed his eyes.

But not two minutes later, he rolled his head back the other way so he could watch her work. Methodical and exacting, that was her treedecorating style. She found the lights, plugging in each string first, replacing the few bulbs that had gone out. There weren't many bad bulbs because Matt took care of his gear. Also, the lights weren't that old.

This was his third Christmas at the cabin. His great-uncle Percy Valentine had given the place to him when Matt was discharged from the service. A few wooded acres and a one-room cabin, Matthias, Uncle Percy had said. I'm thinking it will be a quiet place just for you, a place where you can find yourself again.

Matt wasn't all that sure he'd found himself yet, but he liked having his own place not far from home to go when he needed it. He had a large family and they kept after him to start showing up for Christmas, which had always been a big deal for all of them.

His mom had loved Christmas and she used to do it up right. She and his dad had died when Matt was sixteen, but his older brother Daniel had stepped up, taken custody of all of them and continued all the family Christmas traditions.

He loved them, every one of them. He would do just about anything for them. But for Christmas, he liked the cabin better. He liked going off into a world of his own now and then, needed it even. Especially for the holidays. There was something about this time of the year that made the ghosts of his past most likely to haunt him.

Through half-closed eyes, he watched as Sabra strung the lights. She tucked them in among the thick branches just so, making sure there were no bare spaces, the same way he would have done. When

she neared the top, she found the folding footstool in the closet under the stairs and used it to string those lights all the way up.

She had the lights on and was starting to hang ornaments when his eyes got too heavy to keep open even partway. Feeling peaceful and damn close to happy, he drifted off to sleep.

When he woke again, Sabra was curled in a ball in the old brown armchair across from the sofa, asleep. She'd found a book, no doubt from the bookcase on the side wall. It lay open across her drawn-up thighs, her dark head drooping over it.

The tree was finished. She'd done a great job of it. He just lay there on the sofa and admired it for a few minutes, tall and proud, shining so bright. She'd even put his presents from the family under it.

But he was thirsty and his water glass was empty. He sat up and reached for the cane that he'd propped at the end of the sofa.

That small movement woke her. "Wha...?" She blinked at him owlishly. "Hey. You're awake." She rubbed the back of her neck.

He pushed back the afghan and brought his legs to the floor. "The tree is gorgeous."

She smiled, a secret, pleased little smile. "Thanks. How're you feeling?"

"Better." He pushed himself upright and she didn't even try to stop him.

"You look better. Your color's good. Want some soup?"

"If I can sit at the table to eat it."

"You think you're up for that?"

"I know I am."

* * *

Matthias was better. Lots better.

So much better that, after dinner that night, when he wanted to go out on the porch, she agreed without even a word of protest.

"You'll need a warmer coat," he said, and sent her upstairs to get one of his.

The coat dwarfed her smaller frame. On her, it came to midthigh and the arms covered her hands. She loved it. It would keep her toasty warm even out in the frozen night air—and it smelled like him, of cedar and something kind of minty.

On the porch, there were two rustic-looking log chairs. Sabra pushed the chairs closer together and they sat down.

The snow had finally stopped. They'd gotten several feet of the stuff, which meant they would definitely be stuck here for at least the next few days.

Sabra didn't mind. She felt far away from her real life, off in this silent, frozen world with a man who'd been a stranger to her only the day before.

He said, "My mom used to love the snow. It doesn't snow that often in Valentine Bay, but when it did she would get us all out into the yard to make snowmen. There was never that much of it, so our snowmen were wimpy ones. They melted fast."

"You're from Valentine Bay, then?" Valentine Bay was on the coast, a little south of Warrenton, which was at the mouth of the Columbia River.

He turned to look at her, brow furrowing. "Didn't I tell you I'm from Valentine Bay?"

"You've told me now—and you said your mom *used* to love the snow?"

"That's right. She died eleven years ago. My dad, too. In a tsunami in Thailand, of all the crazy ways to go."

"You've lost both of them? That had to be hard." She wanted to reach out and hug him. But that would be weird, wouldn't it? She felt like she knew him. But she didn't, not really. She needed to try to remember to respect the guy's space.

"It was a long time ago. My oldest brother Daniel took over and raised us the rest of the way. He and his wife Lillie just continued right on, everything essentially the way it used be, including the usual Christmas traditions. Even now, they all spend Christmas day at the house where we grew up. They open their presents together, share breakfast and cook a big Christmas dinner."

"But you want to spend your Christmas alone." "That's right."

A minute ago, she'd been warning herself to respect the man's space. Too bad. Right now, she couldn't resist trying to find out more. "Last night, you were talking in your sleep."

He gave her a long look. It wasn't an encouraging one. "Notice the way I'm not asking what I said?"

"Don't want to talk about Mark and Nelson and Finn?"

He didn't. And he made that perfectly clear—by changing the subject. "You said you grew up on a farm?"

"Yes, I did."

"Near here, you said?"

"Yeah. Near Svensen."

"That's in Astoria."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"But you were headed for Portland when you suddenly decided on a hike to the falls?"

"I live in Portland now. I manage the front of the house at a restaurant in the Pearl." The Pearl District was the right place to open an upscale, farm-to-table restaurant. Delia Mae's was one of those.

"Got tired of farming?" His breath came out as fog. She gathered his giant coat a little closer around her against the cold. "Not really. I'm a farmer by birth, vocation and education. I've got a bachelor's degree in environmental studies with an emphasis in agroecology."

"From UC Santa Cruz, am I right?"

"The Slugs hat and sweatshirt?"

"Dead giveaway." He smiled, slow and sexy, his white, even teeth gleaming in the porch light's glow. She stared at him, thinking that he really was a hotlooking guy, with those killer blue eyes, a shadow of beard scruff on his sculpted jaw and that thick, unruly dark blond hair.

And what were they talking about?

Farming. Right. "Our farm has been in the Bond family for generations. My dad and mom were a true love match, mutually dedicated to each other, the farm and to me, their only child. All my growing-up years, the plan was for me to work right along with them, and to take the reins when the time came. But then, when I was nineteen and in my first year at Santa Cruz, my mom died while driving home from a quick shopping trip into downtown Astoria on a gray day in February. Her pickup lost traction

on the icy road. The truck spun out and crashed into the guardrail."

Matthias didn't even hesitate. He reached out between their two chairs, clasped her shoulder with his large, strong hand and gave a nice, firm squeeze. They shared a glance, a long one that made her feel completely understood.

His reassuring touch made it all the easier to confess, "I have a hard time now, at the farm. It's been six years since my mom died, but my dad has never really recovered from the loss. I guess, to be honest, neither have I. After college, I just wanted something completely different."

"And now you run a restaurant."

"The chef would disagree. But yeah. I manage the waitstaff, the hiring, supervising and scheduling, all that."

He shifted in the hard chair, wincing a little.

"Your leg is bothering you," she said. "We should go in."

"I like it out here." He seemed to be studying her face.

"What?"

"I like *you*, Sabra." From the snow-covered trees, an owl hooted. "I like you very much, as a matter of fact."

A little thrill shivered through her. She relished it. And then she thought about James. She'd almost married him less than a week ago. It was turning out to be much too easy to forget him.

"What'd I say?" Matthias looked worried.

"Something nice. Too bad I'm not looking for anything remotely resembling romance."

"It's not a problem," he said in that matter-of-fact way of his. "Neither am I."

She felt a flash of disappointment, and quickly banished it. "Excellent. No romance. No...fooling around. None of that. We have a deal."

He nodded. "Agreed. And I sense a story here. You should tell it to me."

"Though you won't tell me yours?"

"I'm sure yours is more interesting than mine." Again, he shifted. His leg hurt. He just refused to admit it.

"I'm braver than you, Matthias."

He didn't even try to argue the point. "I have no doubt that you are."

"I'll put it right out there, tell you all about my failures in love."

He looked at her sideways. "You're after something. What?"

She laughed. "I'm not telling you anything until you come back inside."

In the cabin, they hung their coats by the door. Matt took off his boots and settled on the sofa with his bad leg stretched out.

"You want some hot chocolate or something?" she offered.

Was she stalling? He wanted that story. He gestured at the armchair. "Sit. Start talking."

She laughed that husky laugh of hers. The sound made a lightness inside him. She was something special, all right. And this was suddenly turning out to be his favorite Christmas ever. She took off her own boots, filled his water glass for him and put another log on the fire.

Finally, she dropped into the brown chair across the coffee table from him. "Okay. It's like this. I've been engaged twice. The first time was at Santa Cruz. I fell hard for a bass-playing philosophy major named Stan"

"I already hate him."

"Why?"

"Was he your first lover?" As soon as he asked, he wished he hadn't. A question like that could be considered to be crossing a certain line.

But she didn't seem turned off by it. "How did you know?"

"Just a guess—and I'm not sure yet why I hate him. Because I like *you*, I think, and I know it didn't last with him. I'm guessing that was all his fault."

"I don't want to be unfair to Stan."

Matt laughed. It came out sounding rusty. He wasn't a big laugher, as a rule. "Go ahead. Be unfair to Stan. There's only you and me here. And I'm on *your* side."

"All right, fine." She gave a single, definitive nod. "Please feel free to hate him. He claimed to love me madly. He asked me to marry him."

"Let me guess. You said yes."

"Hey. I was twenty-one. Even though losing my mom had rocked the foundations of my world, I still had hopes and dreams back then."

"Did you move in together?"

"We did. We had this cute apartment not far from the ocean and we were planning an earthcentric wedding on a mountaintop." "But the wedding never happened."

"No, it did not. Because one morning, I woke up alone. Stan had left me a note."

"Don't tell me the note was on his pillow."

Stifling a giggle, she nodded.

"Okay, Sabra. Hit me with it. What did the note say?"

"That he couldn't do it, couldn't marry me. Marriage was just too bougie, he wrote."

"Bougie? He wrote that exact word?" At her nod, he said, "And you wondered why I hate Stan."

"He also wrote that I was a good person, but I didn't really crank his chain. He had to follow his bliss to Austin and become a rock star."

"What a complete douchebasket."

"Yeah, I guess he was, kind of."

"Kind of? People shouldn't make promises they don't mean to keep."

Sabra sat forward in the big brown armchair.

Was he speaking from painful experience? She really wanted to know. But he didn't want to talk about himself—not as of now, anyway. And those deep blue eyes had turned wary, as though he guessed she was tempted to ask him a question he wouldn't answer.

"Keep talking," he commanded. "What happened after Stan?"

"After Stan, I decided that my judgment about men was out of whack and I swore to myself I wouldn't get serious with a guy until I was at least thirty."

Now he was looking at her sideways, a skeptical sort of look. "Thirty, huh?"

"That's right."

"And as of today, you are...?"

"Twenty-five," she gave out grudgingly.

"And why am I thinking you've broken your own rule and gotten serious since Stan?"

"Don't gloat, Matthias. It's not attractive—and you know, I kind of can't believe I'm telling you all this. I think I've said enough."

"No. Uh-uh. You have to tell me the rest."

"Why?"

"Uh." His wide brow wrinkled up. "Because I'm an invalid and you are helping me through this difficult time."

She couldn't hold back a snort of laughter. "I really think you're going to survive whether I tell you about James or not."

"So. The next guy's name is James?"

She groaned. "The *next* guy? Like there've been a hundred of them?"

He sat very still. She could practically see the wheels turning inside his big head. "Wait. I think that came out wrong."

"No, it didn't. Not at all. I'm just messing with you."

"You're probably thinking I'm a jerk just like Stan." He looked so worried about that. She wanted to grab him and hug him and tell him everything was fine—and that was at least the second time tonight she'd considered putting her hands on him for other than purely medical reasons.

It had to stop.

"No," she said. "I honestly don't think you're a jerk—and look, Matthias, I've been meaning to ask you..."

* * *

Matthias *felt* like a jerk, whether or not Sabra considered him one. He'd been having a great time with her, like they'd known each other forever.

Until he went and put his foot in it. As a rule, he was careful around women. He wasn't ready for anything serious, so he watched himself, made sure he didn't give off the wrong signals.

But Sabra. Well, already she was kind of getting under his skin. There was so damn much to admire about her—and she was fun. And hot.

But they'd agreed that the man/woman thing wasn't happening. He was friend-zoned and he could live with that. Anything more, well...

It would be too easy to fall for her. And he didn't want to fall for anyone. Not yet. Maybe never. The last year or so, he'd finally started to feel like his life was back on track. True, getting something going with a woman could turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to him.

But it might send him spinning off the rails.

He just wasn't ready to find out which.

"Do you maybe have some sweats I could wear?" she asked. "Something soft to sleep in would be great..."

She was going to bed now? It wasn't much past nine.

No doubt about it. He'd definitely screwed up.

"Uh, sure," he said, and tried not to let his disappointment show. "Take anything you want from whatever's upstairs."

"I was thinking I might even have a bath, if that's all right with you?"

"Now?"

"Well, I mean, no time like the present, right?"

"Absolutely. Go ahead."

She got up. "Can I get you anything before I—?"

"No. Really. I'm good."

She took off up the stairs. Not five minutes later, she came running back down with an armful of his clothes and disappeared into the bathroom.

He sat there and stared at the tree and tried not to imagine what she was doing behind that shut door. Really, he must be getting better fast—he had the erection to prove it.

Friend-zoned, you idiot. And that's how you want it.

He needed to take his mind off his exceptionally clear mental image of Sabra, naked in the tub, her almost-black hair piled up on her head, random strands curling in the steam rising from the water, clinging to the silky skin of her neck as she raised one of those gorgeous long legs of hers and braced her foot on the side of the tub.

Lazily, humming a holiday tune under her breath, she would begin to work up a lather. Soap bubbles would dribble slowly along her inner thigh...

Matt swore, a graphic string of bad words.

And then he grabbed his cane and shot to his feet, only swaying a little as his bad leg took his weight—yeah, he'd promised her he would stay on the sofa unless he had a good reason to get up.

Well, clearing his mind of certain way-tootempting images was a good enough reason for him.

He limped over to the bookcase. She'd set the box

of books he'd brought from home right there in the corner on the floor.

Might as well shelve them. He got to work, his leg complaining a little when he bent down to grab the next volume. But it wasn't that painful and it kept his mind from wandering to places it had no business going.

He was three-quarters of the way through the box when the bathroom door opened.

"Matthias. What the—? You promised you'd stay off your feet."

Yep. He could already smell the steaminess from across the room—soap and wet and heat and woman.

"Matthias?"

Slowly, so as not to make a fool of himself lurching on his bad leg and proving how right she was that he shouldn't be on his feet, he turned to her.

Cutest damn thing he ever saw.

She was covered head to toe, dwarfed by his Clatsop Community College sweatshirt and a pair of his sweatpants she must have rolled at the waist, his redtoed work socks like clown shoes on her narrow feet.

Damn it to hell, she looked amazing, all rosy and soft, swimming in his clothes—and she'd washed her hair, too. It was still wet, curling sweetly on her shoulders.

His throat felt like it had a log stuck in it. He gave a quick cough to clear it. "I, um, just thought I might as well get these books out of the box."

She simply looked at him, shaking her head.

"C'mon," he coaxed. "I'm doing fine. It's not that big a deal."

She pressed her soft lips together—hiding a smile

or holding back more scolding words? He couldn't tell which. But then she said, "I washed out my things. They're hanging over the tub and the shower bar. Hope that's okay."

"You don't even need to ask."

"All right, then."

A silence. Not an awkward one, surprisingly. She regarded him almost fondly—or was that pure wishful thinking on his part?

She spoke first. "Thought I would grab a book or two, read myself to sleep."

He wanted to beg, *Stay. Talk to me some more*. But all he said was, "Help yourself."

Big socks flapping, she crossed the room to him and made her choices as he just stood there between the box and the bookcase, breathing in the steamy scent of her, wishing she would move closer so he could smell her better.

She chose a thriller and a love story set in the Second World War that had won a bunch of literary awards a few years ago. "Okay, then," she said finally. "Anything else I can do before I go? Shall I unplug the tree?"

"Nope. I'm almost done here. Then I'll lie down, I promise."

"Fair enough." Both books tucked under one arm, she turned for the stairs.

He bent to grab another volume, shelved it, bent to grab the next.

"Matthias?" He straightened and turned. She'd made it to the top. "Merry Christmas."

He stared up at her, aching for something he didn't

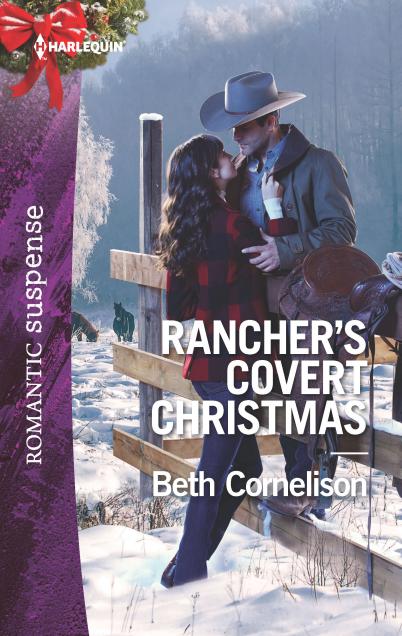
want to name, feeling equal parts longing and gladness—longing for what he knew he wouldn't have.

Gladness just to be here in his cabin in the forest, stranded. With her.

"Merry Christmas, Sabra."

She granted him a smile, a slow one. And then she turned and vanished from his sight.

Want to know what happens next?
Order your copy of *Same Time*, *Next Christmas*by Christine Rimmer today!



Prologue

He needed to be free of his blackmailer once and for all. A cut brake line should do the job.

One last time, he'd do the man's bidding, but then, no more.

He made his way into the garage where the Double M owners parked the large pickup truck used to tow their cattle trailer. No overhead light. The light might draw attention, he decided, and dropped the hand that hovered near the switch. He fumbled in the dark until he found the snake-necked flashlight on a shelf on a sidewall. Shuffling slowly, his path lit only by the thin moonlight that filtered through the high window, he made his way past the family's personal vehicles. He stopped at the Ford F-350 that would haul the trailer with the largest part of this year's herd to market. Or not.

His goal was to strand the family long enough that

they missed the best sales days. If they didn't make it to market, didn't get top dollar for the cattle, the financial setback would devastate the struggling ranch. And he could finally be finished with the plot to ruin the Double M.

Raising the hood, he stepped up on a stool to lean over the engine. He used the flashlight to locate the main brake line, then centered an empty coffee can beneath the reservoir.

Unfolding his pocketknife, he sliced a thin line in the tube that fed fluid to the brakes. A slow leak of yellow-tinged liquid seeped from the cut. He bent the tube slightly, accelerating the flow into the can. The rapid drip, drip, drip of liquid into the aluminum can synced with the anxious drumming of his heart. He needed to hurry. His absence would be noticed soon, and someone might come looking for him.

He considered allowing a small telltale puddle of the brake fluid to collect on the garage floor. He wanted the damage to be discovered before the trip over the mountains, just not soon enough to repair the damage before the scheduled departure. His goal was to prevent the trip to the cattle market, not to cause an accident.

He heard a noise, a scuff of feet, and he jerked his head up. The overhead light came on, and he blinked in the bright fluorescent glow.

"Oh, hi," the woman at the door said.

He swallowed hard as she approached and, squeezing the pocketknife handle, his gaze locked on hers.

"I didn't realize anyone was in h—" She stopped abruptly when her gaze fell to his handiwork.

The dripping of fluid continued, like gunshots in the still garage. The knife in his hand screamed his guilt.

"What are you doing?" Her tone was sharp, accusing. Her eyes narrowed on him, as understanding and outrage hardened her face. "It's you! You're the one who's been sabotaging the ranch!"

Bile rose in his throat, knowing he'd been found out, knowing what awaited him when she told what she'd seen tonight. His heartbeat stuttered. Unless...

"It's not what it looks like." He rose and moved toward her

She took a stumbling step back, shaking her head. "I know what I'm looking at. It explains so much. I won't let you get away with this!"

Panic swelled in him. A survival instinct. He lunged toward her, grabbing her arm. "No! You can't say anything!"

"Ow! Let go. You're hurting me!"

He squeezed tighter, shaking her. "You can't say anything!"

"Let go, or I'll scream!"

If he let go, she'd run straight to the main house, tell the family what she'd seen. If she screamed, someone would hear her and come investigate. Neither could happen. He had to make sure she didn't talk. He narrowed his eyes and snarled, "You can't say—"

She drew a deep breath and opened her mouth.

Before she could loose the shriek, he snaked his arm around her, still clenching the small knife. He clapped his hand firmly over her mouth and nose. A muffled grunt of surprise rumbled in her throat, and she struggled to free herself from his grip. Between tightening his grip and her thrashing, the pocketknife managed to cut her, slicing through her sleeve and gashing her arm.

He shifted his grip, only to accidentally jab her belly when she flinched

Her accelerated pulse meant that she bled faster and droplets began to make the floor slick as they struggled. Finally he dropped the knife with a clatter. With his hand now free, he wrapped his arm across her sternum and dragged her up against his chest. "Be still!"

His fingers dug into her cheek and chin as he smothered her distressed cry.

Damn, damn, damn! What was he supposed to do with her? How could he shut her up?

Her fingers scrabbled feebly at the hand he had over her mouth. But having pinned her arms at her sides with his other arm, she barely reached his palm. Her efforts did little other than anger him. Why did she have to fight? Why couldn't she have just promised her silence and left him alone?

Despite the freezing temperatures, sweat popped out on his brow. His heart thumped hard enough that he would have sworn the whole ranch would hear it. *Do something!* his brain screamed. But the harder she fought, the more rattled he became. The madder, the more desperate.

"Stop it!" He shook her and stumbled when she raised a foot to kick backward at him. His grip tightened as his frustration and fury grew. "I said stop!"

A whimpering mewl escaped from beneath his muffling hand. Her tears dripped from her cheeks to his fingers. Blood continued to leak from her wounds, saturating her clothes and dripping on the floor. Guilt sawed his gut, adding a bitter bite to his agitation. He could feel himself losing the tenuous hold he had on his temper.

When she tried again to break free, twisting her hips,

bucking, he gave her another hard shake. "Stop it!" He gritted his teeth, growling, "Stop, stop, stop!"

She wrenched to the left, and he jerked hard back to the right. And heard a crack. Felt the give in her neck. Her body went limp and heavy in his arms.

He stilled. Stunned. An icy terror crawled through him. Slowly he peeled his fingers away from her mouth.

Her head lolled to the side, and when he relaxed the arm across her chest, her legs buckled. She slid to the ground. Inert. Silent.

His breath rasped in shallow gasps as he dropped to his knees to feel for a pulse.

OhGodohGodohGod! What had he done?

Her sightless eyes stared up at him, and acid pooled at the back of his throat. A numb stupor settled over him.

She was...dead.

He'd...murdered her.

Dazed, he slogged through the horrible truths, his sins, which flashed like slides on a screen. A review of all his transgressions. Lies. Arson. Betrayal.

And murder.

He'd killed an innocent woman.

Again.

Chapter 1

Two weeks earlier

Deception did not sit well with Erin. Her life's work, her history, her passion was truth. But her client had been adamant. No one was to know her true purpose for going to the Double M Ranch in Boyd Valley, Colorado. Or rather, she would be going, assuming she could sell her cover story to—she checked the notebook where she'd scribbled the names and phone numbers of her contacts—Zane McCall. Of the four co-owners of McCall Adventure Ranch, Zane was the chief business manager and, according to her client, the primary hurdle she had to pass.

Erin Palmer took a deep breath, mentally reviewing her practiced script, and tapped in the phone number she'd been given. The line rang several times, and she was about to hang up, expecting the call to go to voice mail any moment, when a low male voice answered. "H'lo?"

"Hi," Erin said, infusing her tone with cheer, "My name is Erin Palmer. I'm looking for Zane McCall."

"You found him. What can I do for you, Erin?"

An unexpected thrill raced through her hearing her name caressed by his sultry baritone voice.

"Well, Zane—" If he could use her first name, she could use his, too. And no, she wasn't flirting. After all, she didn't know anything about the guy other than the melted-dark-chocolate sound of his voice. And flirting would be unprofessional. And—

"Yes?"

Erin wet her lips and refocused her straying thoughts. "I'm a journalist for *Well Traveled* magazine." She cringed internally as the lie rolled smoothly from her tongue. "I'm interested in writing a feature piece about adventure ranches and McCall Adventures specifically." A pregnant pause followed, and Erin's heart tapped out a staccato beat. "Um...Zane? You there?"

"Yeah. I..." She heard the creak of desk chair and his sigh. "Can I ask why?" His sexy baritone voice was now rife with suspicion.

"Why what?"

"Why McCall Adventures?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and pinched her lips together. Answering his question would require laying out an even more elaborate lie. Her gut twisted as she dug for a believable excuse. She couldn't say, "Because that's the cover I'm going with to get me on-site at your ranch."

She decided to stay as close to the truth as possible.

"I heard about the trouble you had with your soft opening, the failure of the zip line and—"

"Wanted to exploit our accident and drag our business through the mud?" The once enchanting voice now had an edge of steel.

Erin swallowed hard. "No! Not at all. Quite the opposite. I respect the way you've turned the business around and recovered from the setback. In fact, I'd like to highlight the precautions you've taken and the remarkable strides you've made toward your relaunch." She held the phone away from her mouth and pulled a face, shocked at her fawning. *Kiss up much, Erin?*

After another significant pause, Zane asked, "Well Traveled magazine, you say?"

"That's right."

Another chair squeak filtered through the line, followed by what sounded like the clacking of a computer keyboard. A moment passed before it clicked. He was looking up the magazine, verifying her credentials! Of course he would check out her story. He was smart to do it. So she had to be smarter to pull off her cover.

"I'm not officially on staff at the magazine," she said, quickly pulling the magazine's website up on her own laptop. "I freelance, and I'm hoping to sell my article to *Well Traveled*. I've queried the editor-in-chief about my article idea, and she said she was interested if I could get her a draft by the end of January."

"You mean *he*? The magazine's website says the editor-in-chief is someone named Bill Sherman."

Erin cursed silently as she brought up the staff page. Sure enough, the editor-in-chief was a man. He smiled at her from his bio picture in all his balding, bespectacled glory. Erin felt a prickle of perspiration pop out on her face.

This. This was why she hadn't wanted to lie to Zane and his business partners. She sucked at it. Along with all her other reasons for eschewing the art of deception and vigorously pursuing truth, her complete ineptitude at pretense meant she had a slim chance at pulling it off. Her go-to was always honesty, even if it hurt.

Yes, Officer, I know how fast I was driving. Just write me the ticket.

Yes, DMV worker, that is how much I weigh. I love cheese.

Yes, little sister, those pants make you look fat. Stick with the black pair.

"Oh, sorry. Not Bill. I meant the assistant editor," Erin countered with what she hoped was a casual-sounding laugh. She scrolled down the staff bio page to the next listing. "Claire Norris is who I queried."

She should call her client back and refuse this job. While the case intrigued her, the ground rules gave her too much consternation.

"Well..." Zane said and sighed. "A positive article in a travel magazine would be good publicity." He paused. "Though I hate to remind people of the accident. I'd rather let bygones be bygones regarding that dark chapter of our past."

Erin wanted to tell Zane that dark chapters were never truly history for anyone. They shaped you, changed you, marked your life forever. But such grim prophesying wasn't likely to win her points in her appeal to Zane, so she tucked her personal experience with tragedy away and focused on her sales pitch.

"Yes, the article would definitely be good publicity. Which leads me to my special request."

"A request?" His guarded tone was back.

A shame. She much preferred the casual, flirty baritone. She tried to imagine the face that went with the seductive voice. Typically she didn't research the subjects of her investigations before meeting them. She trusted her instincts about people, and first impressions, uncolored by personal histories, social media or biased articles, were at the heart of how she operated. She researched businesses, places and things, but people required face-to-face meetings. That intangible but all-important vibe she got by looking people in the eye.

Which brought her back to...

"Yes. I'd like to visit the ranch. Conduct interviews. Get a firsthand look at the business, a feel for the locale. Would it be possible for me to come out there for a week or two? I know it's right before Christmas, but I'm on deadline."

"Uh," he grunted. Clearly she'd caught him off guard. "When?"

"I can be there Monday."

Dang it. Her curiosity was tickling her. Thrashing her, really. She had to know the face that went with that voice! She hesitated only a moment before opening her Facebook account and doing a search for Zane McCall.

"So soon?" he asked. "I don't know. We've got a busy couple weeks leading up to Christmas. It's the end of the season, and we'll be sorting the herd in preparation to go to auction."

Several Zane McCalls popped up on her screen, and she scanned the list looking for the one whose information matched Mr. Sexy Voice's. He was third on the list. Boyd Valley, CO. Rancher/Adventurer.

Single. That tidbit excited her more than it should. "I promise not to get in the way. In fact, I'd love to

see the sorting process. If it is key to the ranch business, then it will be great fodder for the article."

"I thought you said the focus of your story would be the adventure ranch."

She couldn't tell anything about Zane's appearance from the thumbnail profile picture in the list. She chewed her bottom lip, debating, and her finger hovered over her mouse. Curiosity won. She clicked his listing, and his profile page opened.

"Erin?"

She jolted as if she'd been caught snooping in his underwear drawer and slapped her laptop closed. "Oh, uh, right! It is. But I want a complete picture of the ranch and your operations."

Speaking of pictures... She opened the laptop again, and his Facebook page filled the screen. She zoomed in on his profile picture and caught her breath.

OMG. The photo was of a dark-haired cowboy with a strong, square jaw, wide shoulders and piercing blue eyes. He wore a gray Stetson, a tight T-shirt and a pensive look that sent shivers to her core. Oh, yes. The face matched the voice.

"How much input would we have over what appeared in the final article?" he asked.

Drawing her attention back to her conversation took all of her concentration. Even after she closed the web page, she saw the image of Zane McCall, as if he'd been burned onto her retinas

She exhaled a cleansing breath, fighting to bring her scattered pulse back under control.

"Pardon?"

"How much editorial input would we be allowed?" Zane repeated.

Since there would never really be an article, she supposed that point was moot. But because she was selling herself, for the time being, as a journalist, she figured her answer needed to reflect a journalistic standard. "Well, I would, of course, want to be sure all of my facts were correct, but beyond that, I would have the last say over my writing. A good journalist can't allow outside influences to dictate the content of her work."

"So what assurance do I have that you're not planning to trash us and get readers by writing some sensational, scandal-mongering thing about the recent events at our ranch?"

Erin settled back in her sofa cushions, intrigued by Zane's wariness.

"You don't," she said bluntly.

She knew his family, the ranch, his new business had been through some rough times. That was why she'd been hired. Maybe his skepticism was understandable, but his distrust of her didn't bode well for the mission for which she had been hired.

"All you have is my promise, my word that I have no intention of hurting your family or causing your business any grief." That much was true, and it felt good to be able to be completely honest in that regard. "I want to help your family get the Double M and McCall Adventure Ranch back on track, not derail you."

Zane was silent, and, conjuring the Facebook picture of him again, she could easily imagine him brooding, mulling his options. Square jaw set. Black eyebrows drawn down in meditation over those pale blue eyes. How would she handle working with him every day during her assignment at the ranch? She'd need to get a

handle on her giddy attraction to him. Be professional. Not get distracted.

"Your word?" His doubt was obvious in his heavy tone.

"I know you have no reason to trust me, but it is the best I can offer." Sensing she might have underestimated her ability to sell her cover, she searched for additional arguments to sway him.

Before she could launch into a further spiel, he said, "I'm willing to have you come and get a look at the adventure ranch operation. We've made changes, repairs and are planning a relaunch in the spring."

She released her breath. "Great! I can be there—"

"But—" he cut in, his voice firm and commanding. A delicious shiver slid through her. His take-charge, alphamale authority was sexy. She liked a man who knew what he wanted and had the confidence to get it. "I can only speak for the adventure ranch. I'll have to speak to my father before granting you full access to the ranch. He's the owner here and has the final word regarding the Double M."

"Of course." Erin smiled to herself and relaxed. "I'll wait until you get approval from your father."

She was in.

Erin knew before Zane could say the first word to his father. Because Zane's dad, Michael McCall, was the real reason she was going to the Double M. Zane's father was her client.

He spotted his blackmailer in Buckley's Feed and Seed, and a black pit of loathing gnawed his gut. He didn't want to call attention to himself and to have to face the threats the blackmailer was sure to make again. Though his business at the Feed and Seed wasn't done, he'd much rather make a second trip into town than linger here and deal with another confrontation.

Moving carefully toward the exit, he lost sight of the blackmailer as he edged past a tall display of winter clothes set up to look like a Christmas tree. The exit was in sight. If he could cross the open area just inside the door, near the checkout counter without being seen...

He paused at the end of the aisle with hardware supplies, peering cautiously around the rack of axes and sledgehammers. The coast appeared clear. He took his opportunity and started quickly and quietly toward the front door.

"Leaving so soon?" The voice sent a curl of acid and frustration through him.

He sensed more than saw the source of the voice edging into his path, blocking the exit. He raised his head, nudging back the brim of his hat, to meet the leering expression on his tormenter's face.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"I think you know damn well what I want." The reply was hushed. Clearly the blackmailer didn't want to draw attention any more than he did. Could he use that to his advantage?

"Step aside," he said. "This isn't the time or place."

"Agreed. So meet me in the restroom. Two minutes."

No. Go to hell, you and your threats. I'm done with you. Dear God, how he wanted to say as much to the source of his anxiety and grief for the past several months. But too much hung in the balance. The black-

mailer knew it, too, and gloated over the power, the ability to destroy his life, if he didn't do what was asked.

His enemy stepped away and disappeared down an aisle of nuts and screws. Appropriate, he thought with a derisive snort, since he was putting the screws to him. He thought of leaving, of ignoring the demand for a confrontation. But how could he risk incurring the wrath of his foe? One wrong step could trigger all the threatened repercussions to come down on him like a crapstorm. Worse, the blowback could hurt his family. His family was all he had, and he wouldn't risk them to save himself

Gritting his teeth, he made his way to the back of the store. He killed a minute gathering himself as he feigned interest in the bridles and bits displayed on the back wall. Then he stepped inside the unisex restroom in the rear hall. His tormentor was waiting for him.

"I'm tired of waiting." No preamble or preliminaries. Straight to the point. "The herd doesn't make it to auction. Understood? Enough with the piddling stabs and pokes meant to slow them down. I want you to slash the throat of the operation. A fatal blow. Now. This year's herd."

He'd been afraid that it would come to this. Bile rose, nearly gagging him. "How? Something that big won't look like an accident."

"That's your problem. Just finish them! If the herd makes it to auction, they'll skim by for another year. I'm not waiting another year to get my revenge."

"But I—"

"No excuses. Either the ranch goes down or you do." He had to brace himself on the dirty sink as a wave of dread stampeded him.

His blackmailer put one hand on the doorknob and paused long enough to deliver a parting shot. "No more stalling. One way or another, I want the Double M to die!"

Chapter 2

Zane studied the spreadsheet his sister, Piper, had prepared with the previous month's expenses, and frowned. "Are you sure this is right?"

When she didn't answer, he glanced up and met her raised-eyebrow, exasperated expression. "No, Zane. I just threw some random numbers on the page for kicks."

He rolled his eyes. "I see marriage hasn't made you less sarcastic."

Mention of Piper's recent wedding brought a quick smile to her lips. "Nor has it made me less meticulous with my numbers." She folded her arms over her chest and leaned back in the chair across the desk from him. "Besides, you ask me that every month, dork."

She added a lopsided grin to soften the epithet his siblings had given him when they were kids.

"Yeah, okay." He turned back to the computer screen

and sighed. "Maybe I was just hoping there was better news than this. If we don't start getting reservations and deposits soon, we'll be out of cash before we open in April. I refuse to go back to Gill for another loan."

Just the thought that his high school rival and allaround SOB oversaw the business loan for McCall Adventure Ranch soured his gut. The sooner he and his siblings could get out from under that debt the better. But the numbers Piper had presented him this morning showed a lot of red ink and expenditures.

"None of us want that," Piper said and leaned down to pat the head of the family's Maine Coon, Zeke. The cat rubbed against her shins and mewed at her. "I know, Zeke! Right?" she said to the cat. "See, even Zeke knows what a putz Gill is." Dusting loose fur from her fingers as she rose from her chair, Piper flashed her brother a conspiratorial grin, which he returned. "I gotta go. I'm late."

"You headed out to pick Connor up from school?" Zane asked without taking his eyes off the computer screen.

"Yep. What time do you expect that reporter to get in?"

Zane's chest tightened. Even though his family had been enthusiastic about having the travel writer come visit, he remained skeptical. Sure, good publicity, *free* publicity, would be great for the adventure company. But he'd gotten a weird vibe from the *Well Traveled* reporter that he hadn't been able to shake. He trusted his instincts about people, and the odd conversation they'd had set him on edge.

He flipped his wrist to check the time. "According to her last text, she should be here anytime now. She's driving in from Boulder." "Hmm. Guess I'll meet her when I get back then." Piper shouldered her purse and rattled her car keys as she headed out.

"Tell my favorite nephew I said hi," Zane called as she left the office.

Zeke, abandoned by Piper, moved on to demand attention from Zane. The cat hopped up on the desk and walked in front of the computer monitor, his fluffy tail swishing in Zane's face. "Uh, excuse me, Fluffbutt."

Zeke nudged Zane's hand with his nose. Pulling an amused face, Zane scratched the cat behind the ear for a few moments then lifted him down to the floor. "Now, vamoose. I have work to finish before our guest arrives." He gave the cat's head a final pat before returning to the spreadsheets Piper had prepared.

He stared at the dismal numbers with a pit in his stomach. No matter how many ways he tried to rework or reimagine the company budget, the bottom line remained the same. The delays in opening, the expense of rebuilding the zip line and increased insurance premiums had hit the fledgling McCall Adventures hard. Really hard.

Zane jammed his fingers through his short-cropped hair and buzzed his lips as he exhaled his frustration. Zeke, who rarely took no for an answer, jumped into his lap and, purring loudly, head-butted Zane's hand. He ruffled the cat's head. "Thanks, pal. But what I need is about a hundred thousand dollars to get the business back in black."

"Zane," his twin brother Josh said, thumping his hand on the office door frame. "Your reporter just pulled in the front drive."

"She's not *my* reporter," he replied, frowning, and not sure why the pronoun bothered him so much.

"You're the one said she could come stay and write her article." Josh hitched his head toward the front of the family house. "Yours or not, get out here and greet her."

"You heard the man," he told Zeke, shooing the cat to the floor as he pushed his chair back from the desk.

"Dad?" he called down the hall toward his father's office, "Ms. Palmer's here if you wanna come meet her."

From the next door down, his father replied, "On a business call. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Zane traipsed through the family home to the mudroom where he snagged his winter coat from the hook by the back door. Shoving his arms in his fleece-lined jacket, he hurried out into the frigid December air, arriving at the main drive in front of his family home just as the sporty, dark blue Toyota 86 pulled up to the house. While the family's two blue heelers wiggled and wagged their tails in excitement, Josh opened the driver's side door and introduced himself as he offered their guest a hand to help her climb out.

Zane stopped in his tracks to stare as a woman with long, curling, dark brown hair and high cheekbones stepped out, flashing Josh an appreciative smile. He wasn't sure what he'd imagined the freelance travel writer would look like, but this stunning beauty wouldn't have been it. When her gaze met his and locked, his pulse jolted as if he'd been hit by the cattle prod.

The bright smile she'd given Josh faltered briefly as she gazed at Zane, then returned to full wattage as she stepped forward, shucking her gloves to extend a bare hand. "You must be Zane. Erin Palmer. Nice to meet you."

Recalled to the moment and his manners, Zane returned a welcoming grin and gripped her hand. Her

handshake was firm, her hand warm, her skin silky-soft. Zane became self-conscious of how work-roughened his own palm must be, but she seemed unfazed by his callused hand.

"Welcome, Ms. Palmer."

One delicate eyebrow lifted, and she tilted her head. "Ms. Palmer? What happened to Erin? I thought after our phone conversation that we were on a first-name basis. I certainly would prefer to be less formal...Zane."

The way she said his name, as an addendum, her husky voice heavy with innuendo, her rosy lips twitching with amusement, caught him off guard. And shot a spike of lust through his blood. Zane arched one eyebrow, matching her gesture, and nodded once in agreement. "Erin, then. How was your drive?"

"Blessedly traffic-free, although I did run across a good bit of ice on the road." She had yet to release his hand, and he found himself drawn to her eyes. Eyes the deep green of—

A loud clatter and shout drew her attention across the ranch yard. Erin's hand dropped from his, her gaze seeking the source of the disturbance.

"Hey, can I get a hand here?" Piper's husband, Brady Summers, shouted. He was carrying a tall stepladder and stood next to the twenty-five-foot blue spruce tree that grew next to the stable. A pile of Christmas lights lay on the ground at his feet.

Even as he tucked his hand in his pocket, Zane could still feel the satin warmth of her fingers, like lingering impressions on his memory-foam mattress. He determinedly steered his brain away from thoughts of Erin and his bed. Clearing his throat, he turned to his brother. "Josh? Would you—?" Zane hitched his head toward

Brady and the ladder. "I need to show Erin where she'll be staying, help her with her luggage."

His brother, who already had Erin's suitcases out of the sporty Toyota, said, "I can—" Josh bit off his words as he met his twin brother's gaze and the silent message relayed in Zane's expression. "I can...help Brady with the Christmas tree lights."

Josh flashed his brother a not-so-secret grin and playpunched him in the shoulder as he headed across the ranch driveway toward the massive spruce, the two dogs at his heels.

"All right, then." Zane moved to the bags and lifted one in each hand, while Erin slid an additional duffel over her shoulder. "If you'll follow me..."

Traces of slush and ice left from a light snow earlier in the week crunched under Zane's boots as he escorted Erin across the ranch yard toward the bunkhouse-turned-guest-quarters. "You'll have the run of the guesthouse. Once the adventure biz gets up and running again, this is where the clients will sleep during the on-site portion of the tours."

"Uh-huh," she hummed distractedly, watching Brady position the large ladder with Josh's help. She strayed from the path Zane was leading to get a closer look at the spruce. Setting the suitcases on a dry spot of ground, he followed her over to the tree that the family decorated each year with a copious number of lights and large red glass balls. The glass decorations were already hung on the tree.

"Um..." Erin said as she approached the tree, putting her glove back on. "Can I make a suggestion?"

Brady turned to face their guest, taking a moment to blow warmth into his hands. "Uh, sure."

Zane jogged a few steps to catch up to Erin and made the introduction to his new brother-in-law. After niceties were exchanged, Erin waved a gloved hand toward the spruce. "It's easier to put lights on a tree if you do them before the other decorations."

"Told you!" another male voice said, and Zane angled his head to see their ranch hand coming out of the stable with an extension cord looped over his arm. Zane introduced Erin to the hand, Dave Giblan, and Dave gave her a smile and a nod of greeting, adding, "We went through this last year, too. But Mr. The-Order-Doesn't-Make-A-Difference didn't remember the hassle we had with the lights last time."

"I don't mean to butt in. I've just learned from experience," Erin said and grinned brightly at Dave.

He was *not* jealous of the spark of attraction he saw in her eyes as she replied to the ranch hand, Zane told himself, despite the niggle of irritation in his gut.

Brady grunted and cast Dave a hooded side glance. "Whatever."

As Brady began plucking the glass decorations off the tree, the ranch foreman joined the crowd, as well. Roy Summers, Brady's father and long-time ranch employee, frowned at the group. "Is this like a lightbulb riddle? How many ranchers does it take to decorate a Christmas tree?" He cast a startled glance at Erin. "Oh, hello, young lady. You must be the writer."

More introductions were made, and Roy put a hand on Brady's shoulder. "Come on, son. Someone's got to do the real business of the ranch. Give me a hand tending the abscessed hoof on that calf I brought in earlier."

"Be there in a minute," Brady said, and Roy firmed his mouth in displeasure.

"I'd say a hurting calf takes priority over some baubles on a tree, son." He nudged Brady more insistently. "Let's go."

"Fine," Brady replied grudgingly, and he handed off the glass balls he'd gathered to Dave. "Okay, Santa Claus. I'm out. You have the conn."

Dave responded with a snort and an eye-roll that made Erin chuckle. He repositioned the ladder, which rattled and creaked as he settled it closer to the tree.

"I can't wait to see it all decorated and the lights glowing." She turned to Zane, her face lit with enthusiasm, her cheeks and nose pink from the cold. "I love Christmas. Even more than spring. And my birthday's in spring, so that's saying something, because I *really* love celebrating my birthday."

His chest tightened as he gazed at her. Her eyes reflected a childlike glee that reminded him of Christmases past, rising before the sun with his brother and sister, filled with exuberance and anticipation. As she stood in the winter sun, gazing up at the spruce tree, her breath clouding in the chilled air, Zane finished his earlier interrupted thought. *Spruce green*. Erin's eyes were the same color as a Christmas tree, he decided as a he felt a small hiccup in his pulse.

He gave himself a mental finger-thump to the forehead. *Don't go all hearts and flowers over her in the first five minutes, dork.* Such an impetuous reaction to a woman was more his flirtatious brother's style than his own. Zane preferred time to build an opinion based on his interaction with a person.

Pragmatic. Reasoned. Grounded. He prided himself on being everything an oldest sibling should be, even if his age advantage was only five minutes. So why did Erin evoke such a visceral reaction from him?

He cleared his throat and tipped his head toward the guesthouse. "I'll just put your luggage inside. Then, whenever you're ready, I can—"

A loud *snap* crackled through the winter air like a gunshot. In the next instant, the tall step ladder where Dave perched buckled and collapsed. He toppled to the ground, landing with a thud and a feral cry of pain.

Chapter 3

Erin gasped her shock and concern as the handsome ranch hand crashed to the frozen ground. If his guttural shout left any doubt to his injury, the odd angle of his leg did not.

She clapped a hand over her mouth as a wave of nausea roiled through her at the gruesome sight. Zane abandoned her bags and brushed past her as he rushed to aid his friend.

"Call 9-1-1!" he yelled to no one in particular.

Pulling her glove off with her teeth, Erin fumbled her cell phone from her purse and tapped in her security code with a trembling finger. She squinted at the screen, trying to make out the image against the glare of the winter sun. Her signal reception was weak at best.

Josh hustled past her. "Landline's more reliable. I'm on it"

As Zane's brother ran toward the main house, Erin faced Zane and Dave again, her heart in her throat. Surely she could do *something* to help. Yanking her knit scarf from under the collar of her coat, she balled the scarf as she dropped to her knees across from Zane. "Here," she said, handing him the messily folded neckwear. "Put this under his head."

A pillow may be a small thing under the circumstances, but she had little else to offer at the moment. And standing idly by while the cowboy suffered was not her style. Action was her go-to mode, and her brain was ticking through more options for the crisis, even as Zane tucked the knit scarf under Dave's head.

As if sensing something was amiss, the dogs barked and paced the yard. When the black-and-white dog tried to nose in next to him, Zane pushed the dog back. "No, Ace. Lie down."

The foreman and Brady appeared at the door of the barn across the yard.

"What happened?" Brady called as he trotted toward them.

"Ladder collapsed. Dave broke his leg, maybe more," Zane returned in a clipped, efficient tone, despite his obvious worry. With a wave of his hand, he directed the father and son to, respectively, fetch someone named Helen and to go to the end of the driveway to flag down the ambulance when it arrived.

Zane's take-charge leadership impressed Erin, as well as the way that the other men followed his directives without demurring. Zane's father had indicated as much, as well. Though the McCall siblings and Brady Summers were equal partners in McCall Adventure Ranch, Zane was the gatekeeper, it seemed.

Zane held one of the injured man's hands, letting Dave squeeze his fingers as he writhed and groaned. "Stay still, buddy. I know it hurts. Help's coming."

Seeing Dave's other hand at his side, his fingers clenched in a tight ball, Erin lifted his fist into her lap. Cupping his fist between her palms, she stroked his taut knuckles with her thumb and muttered, "Hang in there, cowboy."

Zane's gaze darted to her, then dropped to her comforting gesture as Dave loosened his balled fingers to grip her hand.

"Thanks," Dave rasped, casting a quick side glance to her before scrunching his eyes closed in pain. His breathing was shallow and rapid, and she didn't need to be a nurse to know hyperventilating was not what Dave needed.

"Hey, Dave," she said, jostling his hand to get his attention. "Will you try something with me?"

Both Zane and Dave peered at her with curious looks.

"You need to calm your breathing, so I thought we could do some yoga breathing together. Will you do it with me?"

The injured cowboy furrowed his brow and stared at her with shock in his eyes. "Yoga?"

Though Zane's expression was equally leery, she could see his concern for his friend outweighed his skepticism. "What do you have in mind?"

She fixed her gaze on Zane and his stunning blue eyes sent a tremor through her. With her host's penetrating gaze on her, she needed the relaxation technique as much as Dave. "Calming breaths. You do it with us."

Dave scoffed quietly between gasps and grunts. Patting his hand firmly, she directed him to inhale with her as she counted two beats in her head. "Now exhale slowly for four seconds."

The cowboys both blew their breaths out through their mouths.

"Through your nose, gentlemen. You're not having a baby, you're trying to relax."

Her comment earned her odd looks from both men, but they followed her example as she inhaled again and let her exhale draw out twice as long. "Now inhale for three seconds and exhale for six."

Dave's demeanor calmed, his hyperventilating quieted, and Erin's pulse slowed, too...so long as she didn't look into Zane's piercing eyes. Meeting his celestial-blue gaze was a bit like staring at the sun. Doing so for too long was risky, as if he could sear something deep inside her with his laser-bright stare.

She continued walking them through the one-to-two breathing ratio for a couple of minutes until Josh ran back across the ranch yard and skidded to a stop beside them.

"Ambulance is on the way," Josh said as he spread a heavy blanket that he'd brought out over Dave. Josh was panting from exertion and stress, and his tense energy and ragged breaths distracted her students.

Erin felt the tension reenter Dave's grip as his eyes darted to Josh, and she saw the muscles in the injured man's jaw flex as he gritted his teeth. She snapped her fingers in front of Dave's eyes and, with a nudge of his chin, brought his attention back to her. "Right here, cowboy. Focus on me."

He gave her a pained grin and rasped, "My pleasure. You're a...heap prettier than either of these...chumps." "Thank you. Now, less talking and more slow breath-

ing, friend." She flashed him a bright smile, and from her peripheral vision, she noticed the frown that Zane divided between them.

Dave followed her directions for a couple more breaths, then with another thin grin that reflected his agony, he added hoarsely, "Any chance I could...repay you for your kindness?" He paused to drag in another breath. "Dinner sometime maybe?"

Now Zane's whole body tensed, his brow forming a deep V as he sent the hand a hard look.

"Why, you flirt!" She sent the injured man a wink. Anything that helped distract him from his pain was acceptable in her book. "I just might have to take you up on that."

"What about Helen?" Josh said, and Zane arched a raven eyebrow and cocked his head as if to say, *Yeah*, what he asked.

"Helen?" She gave him a scolding pout.

The ranch hand grimaced, clearly from his excruciating pain rather than the shame of being caught out. He gulped a couple shallow breaths. "It wouldn't be...a date, so what's...wrong with it?"

She gave him a disapproving grunt, then tapped his nose with her finger. "Through your nose. Let's start again. Three-second inhale..."

Her coaching was interrupted again as a woman's distress cry reached them through the chill air. Erin and the men all turned to look toward the back of the main house where the foreman appeared with a young woman wearing a stained apron and no coat. She ran toward them, calling, "Dave! Oh, my God, Dave!"

Erin scooted aside to allow the sobbing woman access to the ranch hand, though she hated the fact that the

woman was clearly upsetting Dave again. She glanced at Zane, meaning to send him a silent message with her facial expression.

As if sensing her attention, Zane raised his head, his gaze clashing with hers. She indicated her concern over the woman's effect on the patient with a twitch of her brow and quick side glance. Zane gave her the merest of nods, then put a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Helen, calm down. Help is coming. Right now, we have to keep him comfortable and breathing deeply."

"Dave," Erin said, gaining the hand's attention again. "With me. Inhale..." She demonstrated the technique again while Helen watched. "Can you keep him going?" she asked Helen and the young woman nodded, though her eyes spoke for her distress. Then to Dave, Erin said, "No hyperventilating, cowboy. Concentrate on your breathing."

Dave gave a nod, his jaw clenched and his complexion a worrisome gray.

Having passed the distraction and deep breathing reins to Helen, Erin pushed to her feet and backed away from the huddle of bodies around Dave. She considered taking her luggage inside, but since she'd not yet officially been shown in to her accommodations at the guesthouse, that seemed presumptuous.

Besides, her curiosity was sparking.

The ranch has had a string of incidents, with evidence of sabotage that have hamstrung our operations, crippled us financially.

Her client's words replayed in her head and his word choice stirred a disquiet in her gut as she glanced back at Dave. Though Josh's back currently blocked her view of the ranch hand's broken leg, the grisly image of Dave's twisted shin was burned on her brain.

With a furtive glance toward the ranchers, she sidled over to the collapsed stepladder and studied the rails, the spreader, the bolts. What had happened to the ladder? A simple slip by the hand or something more sinister? She toed a bent piece of aluminum and searched the ground for the screws that should have attached the loose support bar to the legs of the ladder. Casting her gaze around her feet, she searched the ground for the failed bit of hardware. Finding a rusted screw lying in two pieces beneath the branches of the spruce tree, she stooped to gather the bits. Then hesitated.

If this did prove to be sabotage and not just the failure of an ancient screw, she should leave the evidence untainted for the police. She straightened and backed away from the ladder, but slid her phone back out of her pocket.

With another glance behind her to make sure her actions were not being watched, she quickly snapped a few pictures of the fallen ladder and the rusty pieces of the broken screw. Repocketing her phone, she edged back toward the injured cowboy, making mental notes about who was present and their reactions to the incident. She would be having a private meeting with her client tonight, and she already had something to report.

Seeing that she'd left the cluster, Zane stood and approached her.

"Hardly the welcome to the ranch I'd have planned." He shoved his hands in his pockets and drew his mouth into a grim line.

"And not one I'd have expected. I'm sure this isn't the kind of excitement McCall Adventure Ranch had in mind for customers." She placed a hand over her chest. "My heart is still thumping." And it bumped even harder when Zane stepped closer, his gaze intense.

"Thank you for your help. I'm not sure I'd have known what to do if he'd passed out or..." He waved a hand, his thought unfinished as he cut a glance back toward the injured man. A frown dented his brow and he started unbuttoning his coat. He shrugged out of the fleecelined jacket and walked over to drape it around Helen's shoulders. Helen turned a pixie-like, tearstained face up to his and gave him a brief smile of thanks. Zane's gentlemanly gesture touched Erin.

"So chivalry isn't dead," she said to him as he returned.

He gave her a brief puzzled look, then shrugged his actions off. "She needed a coat. I gave her mine. No biggie."

But to Erin his thoughtfulness was telling, as was his modesty. She'd learned through her work, through her life-changing moments, that people can say who they are until they are blue in the face. But actions were the real evidence of character. This was why she typically avoided pre-researching people. She didn't want preconceived notions to jade her observations of people in action. Body language. How they reacted to questions and events...

Zane divided a concerned look between her and the fallen hand. Clearly he was torn between his duty as host and his friend's well-being. Rubbing his hands on his jeans, he started toward her suitcases. "Anyway... let me get you settled—"

The distant wail of a siren reached them, yanking his attention toward the highway and the Double M's long gravel driveway.

She put a hand on his arm. "You go meet the ambulance. I can see myself in."

"I—"

"Zane." She squeezed harder on his wrist and could feel the steady thump of his pulse under her fingers. A jolt of something hot and unnerving skittered from his skin through her fingers and throughout her body when his eyes connected with hers. She'd have to get over her unsettling fascination with his breathtaking eyes if she was going to keep her head as she worked with him in the coming days. She paused a beat, regaining her composure, before she slanted a half grin toward him and bent to gather her luggage for herself. "Go on. I've got this."

She turned and headed for the guesthouse door.

"Erin." The sexy timbre of his voice slid over her like a lover's caress. She stopped. Faced him, trying to pretend his voice didn't weaken her knees.

He reached into his pocket, then extended his hand to her. As he walked closer, gravel and ice crunched under his boots. "You'll need this."

A silver key winked in the sunlight at her. "Oh," she muttered as she lifted it from his callused palm. "Thanks." The metal was still warm from being nestled in his pocket near his body heat.

He ducked his head in a nod, and the corner of his mouth tugged in a strained smile. "Let me know if I can do anything to help you get settled."

With an appreciative nod, Erin let herself in the guesthouse and left her bags in the first bedroom down the hall. Moving to the front window, she parted the curtains, allowing her to keep watch for the arrival of the emergency vehicles. Would the police come? Or was the incident being viewed as accidental by the ranch staff? If *she* made too much of an issue about the broken ladder, she'd call unwanted attention to herself, raise questions. Instead she pulled out her phone and texted her client, Zane's father. He needed to know what had happened and that she advised he have the police look at the scene before it was disturbed. Within seconds of her text, her phone chimed with Michael McCall's reply that he was on his way to the scene.

Erin pocketed her phone and returned to her suitcases to hang up a few clothes, set out her toiletries and plug her laptop in to charge, all the while wishing she were still out in the yard helping, observing. She needed to maintain her cover, but for such a tragic incident to happen within minutes of her arrival...

She just couldn't believe it was coincidence. Her gut told her it was no accident. She thought hard about exactly what had happened prior to the ladder collapse. Who had been present? What had transpired? She'd met Brady Summers, Zane's brother-in-law. And the foreman, also last name Summers. Some relation to Brady? Zane hadn't said, but she'd wager so. Hadn't he called Brady "son" when he'd requested his help with the sick calf?

She replayed that scene in her mind's eye. Brady had put off the foreman at first. That would indicate no preconception about the state of the ladder. And Dave had climbed right on. To his detriment. Josh and Zane had been involved with greeting her. She couldn't fairly make an assessment there. Had she not arrived when she did, would one of them have been climbing the faulty ladder? And was all this speculation just that? Seeing trouble and misconduct where none existed? The ladder was clearly old. Rusted in more places than the screws. Maybe the

worn-out equipment was just an accident waiting to happen and Dave had drawn the short straw.

The wail of approaching emergency vehicles and rumble of engines drew her back to the window. An older man with black hair like Zane's had joined the men standing around Dave. Michael McCall? As the vehicles pulled up, the older man walked over to an attractive brown-haired woman of approximately the same age and wrapped her in a comforting hug. Zane's mother?

Erin didn't linger in the guesthouse any longer. While getting in the way during an emergency would be bad form for a visiting travel writer, she really wanted to have a firsthand, up-close view of the proceedings. A sheriff's department SUV was among the arriving vehicles, and she *really* wanted to observe the handling of the incident, since Michael's chief reason for hiring her was his discontent with the way the local law enforcement had essentially shrugged off previous incidents of vandalism on the ranch. Or so Michael felt. Maybe there had truly been little the sheriff could do, too little evidence to make an arrest. Michael didn't buy that reasoning and that scenario seemed sketchy to Erin, as well. How hard had they tried to find the person sabotaging the Double M?

Snagging her coat off the back of the communal area's couch where she'd discarded it minutes ago, Erin headed back outside. She kept to the perimeter of the gathered crowd, edging closer to the site of the broken ladder.

Initial efforts of the first responders were, understandably, getting Dave stabilized and into the ambulance. Zane approached one of the sheriff's deputies and pointed to the fallen ladder, spread his hands, shook his head. *Oh, to be a fly on the...deputy's hat?*

Erin rolled her eyes at her broken idiom and noticed presumably Michael break away from presumably his wife to join Zane's conversation with the deputy. Michael's jaw was taut. When the deputy said something with a lift of his shoulder, Michael's eyes hardened, and he made an angry gesture toward the rubble of the ladder.

Zane placed a hand on presumably his father's shoulder and said something that was answered with a head shake and grim, tight-lipped expression from the older man. The older woman joined them and apparently encouraged Michael to step aside. "Let Zane handle it, honey," Erin overheard the woman say, then garbled words and "...your blood pressure."

She read on his lips the curse word that Michael loosed as Zane and the deputy stepped aside and his wife guided him away. As the older couple stepped to the edge of the crowd, Michael's gaze drifted to Erin and stopped. He tensed, then softened his facial expression and gave her a tiny nod of acknowledgment. His wife noticed, and Erin saw the woman's lips say, *Who's that?*

Michael turned toward his wife to reply, and whatever he said had the woman towing him over to Erin, a warm smile of greeting on her lips. "Are you Erin Palmer, the writer?"

Erin stuck out her hand to the woman. "I am."

"Melissa and Michael McCall. So nice to meet you." Rather than shake her hand, Melissa folded Erin's hand between her gloved palms and squeezed. "I'm so sorry that your welcome has been spoiled by this terrible accident."

"No apologies, please. I'm just so sorry this happened. How is Dave?"

"Shocky," Michael said, offering his hand.

Melissa dropped Erin's fingers so that she could greet the patriarch of the family.

"But the EMT assures us he'll be fine." Erin gave the older man's hand a firm shake as he continued. "Glad to meet you, Ms. Palmer. Zane says you were quite helpful in calming the patient earlier. Some sort of yoga breathing?"

She shrugged. "Mostly common sense. He needed not to hyperventilate, which was where he was headed, so I got him to refocus his thoughts and breathe deeper."

"Don't be modest, dear. That was a good thing you did. We thank you. Dave is like family to us." Melissa patted Erin's sleeve, and the maternal gesture flowed through Erin like warm honey. She immediately liked the woman, whose kind eyes and generous smile spoke of a gentle soul.

"Melissa and Michael McCall..." she said, tipping her head with a grin tugging her lips. "How very alliterative."

Melissa chuckled. "Says the writer. Yes, we have plenty of Ms around here. That's where the Double M got its name."

Erin furrowed her forehead. "I thought the ranch had been in the family for several generations."

Melissa gave a startled laugh. "Someone has been doing her research!" She sent her husband an impressed look before returning her gaze to Erin. When the mostly gray blue heeler nuzzled her hand, Melissa bent to stroke the dog's head and scratch his ears. "The ranch was my family's for close to fifty years before I inherited it when my father died. We renamed it the Double M at that time because I wanted Michael to feel he was included, that he belonged, that the ranch was truly his as much as mine."

Michael jerked his head toward Melissa. "What? You told me you wanted to change the name because Rocking X sounded like a porn palace."

Erin snorted a laugh and quickly covered her mouth to muffle her mirth.

"It did sound like a porn palace or house of ill repute!" Melissa fussed. "My mother thought so, too. It needed to change. And the Double M achieved both dignity and a sense of inclusion for you. Win-win."

Michael touched his wife's cheek. "Well done, love." He gave her a peck on the lips. "Thank you."

The clack of metal stretcher legs folding called their attention to the back of the ambulance. Dave was loaded in the patient bay, and Zane had to retrieve one of the dogs when it tried to jump into the ambulance with the stretcher.

Helen clambered in next to Dave before the back doors were slammed shut.

"Lord, take care of him. Give them both strength and peace," Melissa said under her breath, then raised a worried look to her husband.

"Why don't you follow the ambulance to the hospital?" Michael said quietly to his wife. "I'll join you shortly, but I want to stay here as long as the sheriff is on the premises."

Melissa gave him a long, anxious stare. "Will you behave? Let your sons talk to the deputies? I don't need another emergency because your blood pressure spiked."

The reminder of his medical condition clearly irritated the ranch owner, but he sighed, nodded. "I'll be careful."

"Thank you." Melissa rose on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek before heading across the ranch yard calling, "I'm going to the hospital. Roy? Josh? Anyone want to ride with me?"

Michael shifted his body so that his back was to the rest of the people in the yard. "You saw the accident happen?"

"Sort of," Erin said, matching his lowered volume. "I was talking to Zane at the time, and suddenly the ladder collapsed, and Dave was on the ground."

"And you suspect foul play?" Michael lifted an eyebrow.

Erin shook her head. "Not necessarily. I just thought it wise for the police to photograph the scene, treat it as sabotage for the time being. Just in case. Considering the history of incidents here, it would be prudent."

"I agree. Unfortunately, the deputy I talked to is not so convinced. I tried to argue the point and was sidelined by my family because I had a cardiac event a few years ago and am at risk of another because of my blood pressure." He grumbled something under his breath, then said, "The best thing for my blood pressure would be to see this menace hanging over us solved, and the ranch put back on a profitable trajectory."

"I'd like to go observe," Erin said, casting a glance behind her client and seeing the deputies milling about the ladder debris. "We'll talk later." She offered her hand and said in a louder voice, "It was nice to meet you, Michael. Thank you for hosting me."

He jerked a nod and stepped aside, and Erin eased closer to the area where the deputy was nudging the parts of the broken ladder with his toe.

"Um," she said and cleared her throat, "aren't you going to photograph the scene before you move pieces?"

The deputy raised his head and eyed her. "We only

do that at crime scenes, ma'am. No evidence of a crime here"

"And how do you know there was no crime if you don't examine the broken parts and try to determine what happened?"

The deputy tucked his thumbs in his utility belt, puffed his chest out and narrowed a glare on Erin. "And who are you?"

"Guest of the ranch. Concerned citizen. Witness to the accident. Take your pick." She tipped her head. "I'm available now if you are planning to interview the witnesses."

"Again, no need. No crime to investigate." He took a step toward her. "Unless you know something about what happened that you'd like to share. You have a reason to believe this was more than an accident?"

She flipped up a gloved palm. "Context. Past incidents of vandalism here. And, in my experience, ladders don't typically just fall apart."

The deputy bent to pick up the bits of the rusty screw she'd found earlier. "They do when the hardware holding 'em together rusts out this much. The ladder was old. Worn out. I don't see enough here to warrant an investigation."

She held the deputy's stare. The hard slash of his mouth said clearly he was miffed that she'd questioned his professional judgment, but she didn't back down. She was no stranger to crimes being brushed under a rug, investigations neglected because of political agendas and the influence of money.

She heard the crunch of boots on slush but didn't take her eyes from the deputy.

"Is there a problem here?" Zane said, stepping up

beside her and dividing a glance between her and the deputy.

"I was just offering to tell Deputy—" she shifted her gaze briefly to the man's name tag "—Morton what happened. What I saw. But he indicated he wouldn't be conducting interviews or investigating the cause of the accident, seeing that he has *no reason* to believe anything untoward happened here." She didn't try to hide her sarcasm, and she earned a scowl from the deputy and a puzzled look from Zane.

Morton cast a disgruntled look at Zane before returning his dark glare to her. "Thank you for your concern, ma'am," he said tightly, his expression flinty. "I'll be sure to contact you if we have any questions for you later. Good day." He turned sharply on his heel and stalked away.

Zane watched the officer go for a moment before facing her with a crease in his brow. "What did I miss?"

"I was just expressing my concern to the deputy that they weren't doing a more thorough investigation of what happened here." She motioned to the broken ladder, then rolled her shoulders, releasing some of the tension that had knotted there as she'd confronted the deputy.

"I see." His lips pressed into a thin line, and he glanced toward the departing squad car. "As I said earlier, I appreciate your help with calming Dave. But if I may be blunt, Ms. Palmer..."

His return to her surname told her all she needed to know about his mood, his opinion of her conversation with the deputy.

"The incident is *not* your concern, and I would ask that you not interfere. Our family needs to maintain a good working relationship with the sheriff's department.

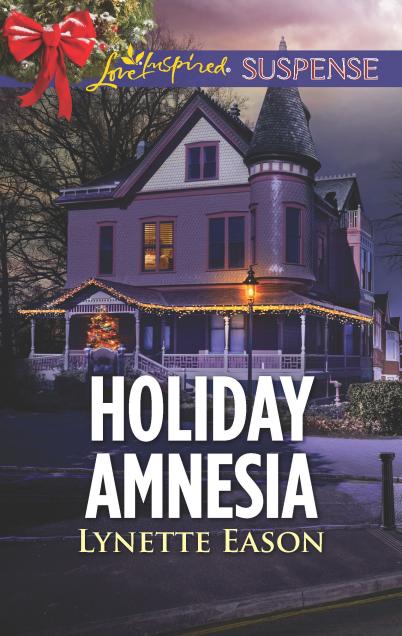
We have other issues pending with them, and it would be counterproductive to antagonize Deputy Morton or any of the other officers."

"Even if they aren't doing their job?" she countered, belatedly realizing that she should have stifled her kneejerk reaction.

"Not your business," he repeated calmly, though she could see the tick of the pulse in his throat and the twitch of muscles in his jaw.

She blew out a cleansing breath and gave him a nod. If she wanted to do her job properly, she had to try to maintain objectivity and not let her hot-button issues color the facts. She'd only just arrived, and she had far too much fact-gathering and observing left to do. Getting on Zane's wrong side would be a mistake.

Want to know what happens next?
Order your copy of *Rancher's Covert Christmas*by Beth Cornelison today!



ONE

Dr. Robin Hardy looked up from her microscope and frowned when the voices reached her over the Christmas music she had playing softly through the one earbud she wore. She never wore two when working just in case someone needed her attention. A habit she'd developed after being scared out of her skin by coworkers tapping her on the shoulder.

Some people played only music. She liked the radio app and the commentary that came with it. And she'd hoped the cheery tunes and upbeat voices would lighten the heaviness in her heart.

So far it hadn't worked.

A part-time professor at the Middle Tennessee State University, she spent the majority of her time teaching virology research to eager young minds.

The rest of the time—too much time, some might say—she worked in the lab along with several other scientists. None of whom were on the schedule to be here tonight. She'd come because she'd craved something to take her mind off the fact that she'd been betrayed by someone she'd considered a good friend. With the potential to be something more.

Hurt feelings and righteous anger didn't promote rest-

ful nights. So, she worked. And fumed. And vowed never to trust another charming, good-looking, smooth-talking male again.

Toby Potter, with his dancing eyes, finger-magnet five o'clock shadow and perpetually mussed caramel-colored hair, had used her. The rat. Pretending he cared when the whole time he was just getting close to her so he could get close to her research and have firsthand knowledge of what was going on in the lab. And while she just wanted to be mad, tears once again blurred her vision.

Stop thinking about him.

Easier said than done. It was hard to turn off the hurt. She blinked and sniffed—and tried to focus. The voices grew louder. Unable to hear more than the fact someone else was in the lab, she supposed a couple of fellow scientists had decided to put in a few more hours just like her.

But they probably weren't using work to distract them—to keep their minds off of people better just forgotten. Unfortunately, work wasn't doing anything to help her forget.

She studied the specimen, trying to see it through her tears. And finally gave up. She'd thought Toby was different, that his interest in her work was because he was interested in *her*. Boy, was she a lousy judge of character.

Heated words snapped her head around. "What in the world?" she muttered.

Curious, she removed the slide from the scope and returned it to its secure slot in the box next to her. She slipped off the gloves and tossed them into the hazardous waste bin. Most of the lights had been turned off and she usually liked it that way, but right now, they held a foreboding that crept over her. The farther she walked from her workstation, the darker it got, the blackness like a glove closing around her.

She shivered.

Then laughed at herself, mentally reviewing the security in the lab. No one without authorization could get in. And no one with authorization was anyone to be afraid of. While the university lab wasn't a Level 4 secure lab working with deadly pathogens, Robin still considered her research and teaching an important part of the process for training upcoming scientists. And it was very secure.

Light returned. Someone else was working at the far end of the large building in a corner station. Or *had been* working. Possibly. Right now, the two men standing face-to-face looked like they were ready to start throwing punches.

"The bidding has already started. I need that virus now!"

"It's not ready. I told you. I'm still working out some issues, but I should have it soon."

Their words echoed through the large area.

Virus? Bidding? She didn't recognize the first voice, but the second one belonged to Alan Roberts—a virologist like her.

"How soon is soon?" the first voice asked.

"Soon! Okay? I'll call when I'm ready." A pause. "I'm serious. I think I've got it, I just need to run a couple of more tests and then it'll be ready."

"How much longer?"

"Twelve hours, okay?" Alan threw the notebook onto his workstation area and it landed on top of the manila file folders that always seemed to overflow his desk. "I have to make sure it's right. The first test said it was."

"Then why more tests?"

"To make sure. If you sell a defective product, your investors might take exception. Just let me do my job, then you can do yours."

"Twelve hours. That's it. I'll let the buyer know we're a go."

"Fine," Alan said. "You have my account number. Make sure the money lands there like it's supposed to."

"Of course."

Robin eased closer, careful not to do anything stupid like knock something over or misstep. She could see the two men huddled in the corner. She and Alan shared a love of the classics, and he usually had a jovial personality in spite of his daughter's medical bills. Leukemia had taken its toll on the family.

A deep scowl creased his lean face. "I'll figure it out. Get out of here before someone sees you."

"Right."

Robin held her breath as the second man turned on his heel and strode to the door that would lead him out of the back of the lab. How had he even gotten in? He'd need a key card to get out. The sick feeling that had been growing as she listened now blossomed into full-fledged nausea.

They were selling a virus? But what kind? And how would they get access to it? Or had they *built* it?

Alan slammed a fist on the desk and closed his eyes for a brief moment. Unsure whether to leave or confront him, she hesitated. A shot sounded, and Alan jerked, then dropped to the floor. Robin clapped a hand over her mouth.

Blood from the bullet wound in the middle of his back stained his white lab coat. Robin swallowed a sob, terror pounding through her. Alan rolled with a grunt. Another pop stilled him. The killer ran out the door. She heard two more gunshots as she turned to run. But she had to check on Alan. She hurried to his side and knelt next to him. His eyes were open with his pupils fixed.

Robin scrambled to her feet, her lungs desperate for air, adrenaline racing. The door opened and Alan's killer

stood there, hand grasping the collar of the man Alan had been speaking with. He dragged him back into the lab, then released his hold. In slow motion, she watched the victim thud to the floor.

Time sped up again when the killer swept a hand over Alan's desk, raking up the files he'd been working through. Vaguely, her mind registered that the shooter had been in the lab the whole time. He'd heard the same conversation she had. And he'd had a gun. Why?

Frozen, she ordered herself to move and couldn't. The man turned and jerked when he saw her standing there. Hard eyes never left hers. Breath caught in her constricted throat. "You killed them," she whispered. "Why? How could you?"

"Call it an unexpected moneymaking opportunity that I'd be crazy to pass up." He lifted his phone. "I've hit a small snag in the plan. Warn me if anyone approaches while I take care of this."

"Snag in what plan?" Why wasn't she running? Run! "Sorry, Robin." He lifted his weapon.

Robin screamed and lunged sideways. The bullet shattered the beaker on the table behind her. Stumbling, refusing to fall, she got her feet under her and raced through the lab, dodging chairs and tables, her goal the back hallway that held the break room, conference room and restrooms. She'd never make it to the exit.

Another shot whizzed too close to her cheek as the footsteps behind her pounded faster. *No!* She would *not* die like this. She burst into the men's bathroom, slammed the door and locked it. If he saw her dart down the hallway, he'd assume she'd go into the women's bathroom. Locking herself in the men's might buy her an extra lifesaving minute or two.

She shoved her hand into her lab coat pocket and froze. Her phone. Where was it?

A picture of it sitting on her workstation flashed through her mind. With no way to call for help, her panic bloomed, exploding through her.

Think. Think.

Panting, lungs straining for air, she went to the window.

A loud boom shuddered through the building and sent her to her knees. The door exploded inward and slammed into her like a missile, knocking her to the floor facefirst. Her forehead connected with the solid tile floor. Pain arched through her and blackness coated her.

Toby Potter watched the flames shoot toward the sky as he raced toward the building. "Robin!"

Sirens screamed closer. Toby had been on his way home when he'd spotted Robin's car in the parking lot of the lab. Ever since Robin had discovered his deception—orders to get close to her and figure out what was going on in the lab—she'd kept him at arm's length, her narrow-eyed stare hot enough to singe his eyebrows if he dare try to get too close.

Tonight, he'd planned to apologize profusely—again—and ask if there was anything he could do to earn her trust back. Only to pull into the parking lot, be greeted by the loud boom and watch flames shoot out of the window near the front door.

Heart pounding, Toby scanned the front door and rushed forward only to be forced back by the intense heat. Smoke billowed toward the dark night sky while the fire grew hotter and bigger. Mini-explosions followed. Chemicals.

"Robin!"

Toby jumped into his truck and drove around to the

back only to find it not much better although it did seem to be more smoke than flames. The thick cloud decreased his visual field, but he had to try. Robin was in that building, and he was afraid he'd failed to protect her. Big time.

The lab backed up to a wooded area left by the designers of the campus to make it feel less city and more rural. He'd always appreciated the beauty of the place, and now he had visions of it burning, the trees and animals caught in the path of the flames. And Robin.

Toby parked near the tree line in case more explosions were coming. The lot on this side was smaller, just one row along the length of the building.

At the back door, he grasped the handle and pulled. Locked. Of course. Using both fists, he pounded on the glass and metal door. "Robin!"

He fumbled for the key card FBI special agent Ben Little had provided when Toby had agreed to take the case, allowing him access to the building when it would be empty. Better for snooping and spying.

Another explosion from inside rocked Toby back, but he was able to keep his feet under him. He figured the blast was on the other end of the building—where he knew Robin's station was. If she was anywhere near that station, there was no way she was still alive. "No, please no," he whispered. No one was around to hear him, but maybe God was listening.

He raced down the side of the building, trying each door only to find them locked. He wasn't getting inside. And no one was coming out. Where were the fire trucks? He knew his concept of time was skewed. What was merely seconds seemed like hours.

Heart in his throat, he finally backed away, his mind flashing through times spent with Robin. Eating at the university cafeteria, walks around the small pond near the library, laughter at the old movies in the campus theater. Her fury when she discovered his duplicity. He blinked and shook his head.

Initially, his assignment had been to get close to her and find out what was going on in the lab. Over the past month, he'd found himself wanting to know *her*, convinced she wasn't involved in anything suspect but that she might have information she didn't know she had. Now, he'd failed her.

Grief gripped him. This wasn't supposed to happen. He'd quit the CIA because he was tired of the covert life. He'd been working as a professor at the university—and healing from life's wounds—when his former handler and friend, turned FBI agent, had roped him into helping with his case.

Toby grabbed his phone from his pocket and punched in the number for Ben Little. It rang twice as a fire truck finally screamed around the side of the building. "Yeah?"

"Ben, it's me. Someone blew up the lab and I think Robin's inside."

"What!"

"I failed her, Ben." He didn't recognize his own voice. "I failed." Again. Another woman had died because of him

Robin blinked. Then coughed. Her head pounded in time with her heart. The pain nearly sent her back into the black abyss, but she drew in a smoky breath and shoved herself up off the bathroom floor. Darkness swirled, and spots danced before her eyes while sweat rolled down her temples and between her shoulder blades. Nausea doubled her over, but she stumbled to the door and touched the handle.

Only to jerk back when it burned her hand. Fighting

to stay upright and conscious, she staggered to the window and unlocked it. Then realized it was sealed shut. The double-paned frosted window that ran from ceiling to floor was simply for looks, not for opening.

Groaning, she looked around for something, anything to break the glass. An idea sparked in her smoke-fogged brain and she stumbled to the nearest stall. Grabbing the top of the ceramic tank, she hefted it with a grunt and carried it back to the window, ignoring her churning stomach, pounding head and shaky legs. She gathered her strength and heaved it against the glass. Once. Twice. A large crack formed in the window. Her legs gave out and she fell, gasping, choking, her lungs grabbing at any remaining oxygen in the room.

Get up! You're going to die if you don't!

Pulling on the last of her strength, Robin hauled herself and the tank lid up. "Ahhh!" She slammed it against the glass.

The window shattered, the pieces falling to the ground outside. "Oh, thank you," she breathed.

She shrugged out of her lab coat, placed it over the jagged edges and hauled herself through the opening. She fell to the ground on top of the glass. Her palms stung and she flinched but pushed to her feet, coughing and gagging.

Robin staggered away from the burning building, blinded by the smoke and desperate for clean air. The sirens and red flashing lights registered. She pressed a bleeding hand to her pounding head and finally found herself at the edge of the parking lot. She staggered into the trees and retched.

The world continued to spin, and she fell to the ground, her cheek pressing into the pine needles. She had to run.

But why?

She should know why but couldn't bring the reason into focus.

Oh, because of him.

He'd tried to kill her.

His eyes closed. Then opened. Her head continued its hammering and her ears rang with an annoying highpitched frequency.

Rolling onto her back, she stared up at the swirling trees while she tried to figure out what had happened. There'd been an explosion. Something had hit her, and she'd fallen.

Voices reached her. Instinctively, she scrambled to her knees and crawled behind the nearest tree while she made out the words "...find her. Get rid of her."

"There's no way she survived that," another voice said. "You barely got out alive and she was still in the building when it exploded."

"Maybe."

"No maybe about it. You said she ran into the bathroom just before the first explosion went off. She's dead."

"Make sure!"

"Fine, I'll make sure."

They had to be talking about her. Tremors set in. Shock? She curled her arms around her knees and pressed her aching forehead against them. They wanted her dead? Who? Why? No, she'd seen him. In the lab. His face blurred, and she was sick again. When her stomach calmed down, the world still spun while she tried to force her mind to work.

She had to leave. To run. She stood, using the tree to help pull herself to her feet, ignoring the pain in her hands.

As she stepped in the opposite direction of the men who wanted to kill her, a hand slapped over her mouth and pulled her back to the ground.

TWO

When Robin went limp in his arms, Toby lowered her to the ground and watched the two men stomp away from their meeting spot.

He'd been bolting back to his truck, mind whirling, grief slashing his heart to shreds, when he'd heard a loud crash behind him. He'd spun to see a figure emerge from the broken window and stagger across the parking lot and into the trees. The smoke had kept him from seeing clearly, but he'd followed, praying it was Robin but willing to help whoever it was.

He'd been almost upon her when he'd heard the faint voices but couldn't hear their words or see their faces. The fact that they seemed to be hiding, whispering and unconcerned about the burning building behind them, triggered his internal alarms.

Since the person who'd escaped the building was staying hidden and quiet, he'd done the same just a few feet behind her. When she'd turned, he'd caught a glimpse of her silhouette and relief had pounded through him when he'd realized it was definitely Robin. But he'd stayed silent, only moving when it looked like she might inadvertently reveal her presence.

And then she'd passed out in his arms.

"...kill her. Tonight." The faint order given by one of the men he could no longer see reached his ears. He didn't recognize the voice, but now knew why he needed to act with caution.

They were trying to kill Robin?

Once the men were gone, he checked her pulse. Her eyelids fluttered but didn't open. "Robin, it's me, Toby. Can you wake up?"

No response. The gash on her forehead worried him. "Robin?"

Her lashes lifted, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Come on, there's an ambulance over here. Let's get your head looked at."

"No. They'll find me," she whispered.

"I'll stay with you."

"No!" She rolled her head back and forth, clearly agitated. "Can't trust...anyone. Got...to...get away...please..."

"Robin, it's okay, I promise. Just let them check your head."

But she didn't answer. She'd passed out again. He suspected she had a concussion, he just prayed it wasn't anything worse. Great. Now what?

The fact that she could move her neck without apparent trouble or pain decided for him. If she didn't want to risk being examined here at the scene, then fine. Now that he had a second chance to keep her safe, he wasn't about to fail her.

The hospital wasn't too far. He shrugged out of his heavy coat and tore the long sleeves from his T-shirt. He wrapped one around his nose and mouth, then covered her face with the other one. He lifted her into his arms and rose to his feet.

Under cover of the smoke that now blanketed the wooded area, Toby made his way back to his vehicle at

the edge of the lot and loaded her into the back seat. Once he had her covered with the blanket, he climbed behind the wheel and made his way out of the parking lot.

Emergency crews were too busy putting out the blaze to bother noticing him. Law enforcement and campus security were on-site, but until they figured out the reason for the explosions, they would have no cause to stop him. He hoped.

Once they started their investigation, if there was foul play involved—and after overhearing the conversation in the woods between the two men, he was pretty sure there was—they'd watch security footage and see him leaving in his truck. And they'd want to talk to him. Which was fine, but for now, he wanted to get Robin to a safe place where she could receive the care she needed for her head wound.

Robin woke with a start and bit back a groan, swallowing the nausea that clawed at the back of her throat. She lay still while trying to get a grip on the pain that came from every part of her. She finally registered the gentle movement beneath her. The hum of the engine, the low volume of the radio. No Christmas music on this one, but someone saying something about a fire at the university lab?

She was in a vehicle—a large one since she stretched the length of the back seat without any trouble. But who was driving? And why was she sleeping in the back? And why did her entire body hurt?

Sitting up required effort so she stayed still, her pounding temples convincing her that moving would be a mistake. She forced her mind to work. Or at least she tried to. But it rebelled. She simply couldn't remember where the headache had come from.

Get rid of her. She's dead The words echoed, bouncing in her brain but unable to take root and tell her what they meant.

Cold fear enveloped her and the desire to run, get away, nearly strangled her. All she could see was the back of the driver's head. Who was he? Someone who wanted her dead? Was he taking her somewhere to kill her?

Get rid of her.

She's dead.

Her head rested behind the passenger seat so when the truck slowed to a stop, she reached up, popped the door and shoved it open.

"Robin! Stop!"

No, she had to get out. In an awkward half crawl, half lunge, she managed to propel herself from the back seat onto the asphalt.

But she couldn't move fast enough. The pain was too much, the nausea overwhelming. She lost whatever she might have had left in her stomach.

Gentle hands held her head while she dry-heaved. "You have a concussion," a man said. A white tissue appeared in front of her face. She took it and wiped her mouth. Then a water bottle replaced the tissue. She took that, too. Rinsed and spit. "Who are you?" she whispered.

"Look at me."

She did. Familiarity flashed, but no name came with it. "Who are you?"

He blanched. "I'm Toby, Robin. Toby Potter." His hand went to the wound on her forehead. "We need to get you to a doctor. We're almost to the hospital."

"I... I'm scared. Why am I scared?" Tremors shook her, and Toby's look of concern deepened.

"Someone tried to kill you," he said.

Get rid of her.

She's dead.

She blinked. "Who?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me."

Robin raised a hand to her head. "I...can't think. Everything's a jumble. Why can't I remember? You're acting like I should know you. But I don't!" Panic clawed at her.

His warm hands gripped hers and she flinched. He turned them over to look at her palms. "What happened?"

She stared at the cuts. "I don't know. Why don't I know?"

"It's okay. Shh..." He pulled her to him and for some reason she let him. She needed to believe him. To believe that he wouldn't hurt her, and he was there to help her. "You've had a really traumatic experience," he said. "Give it some time and it'll all come back to you. But for now, let's continue on to the hospital."

She had no words or energy left to argue. The pain was constant, and she just wanted it to go away. If Toby was out to harm her, he could have just done it. Instead, he was loading her into the front passenger seat this time. Probably so he could catch her if she tried to nose-dive out the door again.

Once she had her seat belt on, he rounded the front of the vehicle and climbed behind the wheel. "You ready?"

"I'm ready." Ready for what, she wasn't exactly sure, but Toby seemed to know what he was doing. And for now, that was going to have to be enough.

The remainder of the drive to the hospital didn't take long and was, thankfully, uneventful. When Toby pulled into the parking lot, Robin was asleep, her head propped against the window. "Robin?"

She didn't move.

"Robin, can you walk?"

She groaned and pulled away from him.

Toby rubbed his eyes, then the back of his neck. Just

as he'd decided to simply carry her inside, his phone rang. Ben "Yes?"

"Are you all right?" his friend asked.

"I'm at the hospital. I've got Robin with me."

"They know she's alive."

"What? How?"

"The same way I know. The broken bathroom window. It's obvious she got out."

"It could have been anyone in that bathroom." Toby sighed. "But they're going to rightly assume it was her since no one else was there at the lab." He paused. "At least I don't think so. There were two guys in the woods where we were hiding. They were talking about making sure she was dead. I'm not sure if they were actually in the lab when it exploded, but I got the impression that they weren't."

"Got it."

"And, Ben?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't remember seeing any other cars in the parking lot except Robin's, but that doesn't mean someone didn't park elsewhere and walk over. You'll need to scour the security footage from different areas on campus."

"Okay. Local police are already here. They've requested FBI presence and resources, so they made it easy for us."

"Meaning you're already looking into it."

"We have a team of local and federal agencies questioning people who were on campus at the time and near the lab. So far, no one's come up with anything useful."

"Okay. Let me think." Toby drummed the steering wheel for a moment. "First and foremost, Robin's got a head wound that needs to be checked out."

"Anything else besides the head wound?"

"Some superficial wounds to her hands. What wor-

ries me the most is the confusion and memory loss." He paused. "She doesn't know me."

"Oh no. That doesn't sound good."

"Tell me about it."

"Okay, get her checked out but don't linger. They're probably going to be checking the hospitals. I'm going to be gathering information on this end and see if I can figure out who's behind the blast. You just keep her safe."

"Got it. Bye." He gave her a gentle shake and frowned when she only blinked and closed her eyes again. He gave up and went around to the passenger side, hefted her slight form in his arms and carried her into the emergency department. With one eye behind him and one in front, he caught the attention of the triage nurse. "Got an emergency here."

She took one look at them and reacted. No doubt Robin's bloody head was quite the attention-catcher. Within seconds, the nurse had them back in a room and was examining Robin. "She'll need a CT scan and a number of other tests. You'll have to wait here."

He caught her arm and pulled her to the side. "She needs police protection. She wound up like this because someone tried to kill her tonight. I don't want to leave her."

She held his gaze for a few moments, then nodded. "Are you a cop?"

"Not exactly. I'm working with the FBI. I can give you a contact number if you need proof, but I can't leave this woman"

"No ID?"

"No. Not for this assignment."

"I see."

He had a feeling she did. After several agonizing seconds of her scrutiny, she shot him one more look and nod-ded. "You can go."

"Thanks."

For the next six hours, Toby stayed with Robin, never leaving her side and monitoring those who entered her room with ID checks. The kind nurse who'd shown him grace by letting him stay with Robin stepped into the room.

"How's she doing?" she asked. "Has she regained consciousness yet? Is she talking and making sense?"

"She's in and out of consciousness and not making much sense when she talks." He paused. "She grew up in foster homes and is talking about one of the families she lived with when she was around ten years old, I think. She doesn't know who I am though."

"Did she know who you were before the knock on the head?"

He shot her a tight smile. "Yes. I'm very concerned."

The nurse nodded. "You're not the only one. We'd like to keep her overnight for observation," she said. "The doctor's not comfortable releasing her yet. The fact that she's still not remembering anything that happened has him wanting to take extreme cautions and the neurologist concurs."

Toby blew out a breath. "Of course." He rubbed his chin. "What about helping her remember?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, telling her things that she doesn't remember right now in an attempt to jar her memories loose."

"The doctor said good memories would be fine. Anything that might upset her or be a shock would be better for her to remember on her own."

"I see." Well, that could work in his favor since he definitely didn't want to tell her about their last few weeks together. Not yet at least.

"I'll be back to check on her shortly," she said after adjusting the IV line.

"Thank you," Toby said.

She left, and Toby settled into the chair next to Robin's bed. He pulled out his phone and texted Ben an update, then leaned back to close his eyes for a few minutes.

When the door opened, he blinked and straightened. His gaze went to Robin who was resting peacefully, eyes shut, lips parted slightly. A male nurse in his late thirties nodded at him and pulled a syringe from his pocket. "Good morning."

"Morning." Toby frowned. "What's that?"

"Just a little more pain medicine. Want to keep her comfortable."

"I think she's fine." Toby's gaze went to the man's name tag. And found it missing. Toby stood. "Let me see some ID please. She just had some medicine not too long ago."

"I know. I read her chart. But the doctor wanted her to have this."

"What is it?"

The man huffed and aimed the needle at the IV port. "Look, I'm just following orders, okay? If you have a problem with it, take it up with the doc."

"I will." Toby stepped forward and grabbed the man's forearm. "But you're not giving her that medicine until I do. Understood?"

Fury flashed in the man's eyes, but his lips curved in a cold smile. "Of course."

"Where's your name tag?"

"I forgot it today. Why?"

Toby yanked the syringe from the man's fingers in a smooth move and shoved him away from Robin's bed. "Who are you, and how did you know she was here?"

The man bolted for the door and Toby followed, stop-

ping just outside the door. He couldn't go after him without leaving Robin alone. He grabbed the phone and called security, describing the incident and where the man had disappeared, then turned back to find Robin sitting up in bed, blinking at him. "What's going on?" she asked.

"We're getting out of here." He grabbed her filthy clothes from the bag on the counter. "You need to put these on."

She grimaced. "Why?"

He went to the bed and took her face in his. Gently, so as not to cause her any more pain. "Look at me." He waited for her eyes to meet his and focus. The nurse's words flipped through his mind. Don't tell her anything stressful or shocking. It's better for her to remember on her own. He hesitated for a brief second. "Will you trust me?"

"No. I don't know you and I'm in the hospital, and I can't remember anything. Why should I trust you?"

At the edge of hysteria in her words, he made an executive decision. "You're not safe here, understand?"

"Why?"

"Because—"

"Wait a minute." She pressed a hand to her bandaged head. "There was a fire."

"That's one way of putting it. Someone set that fire, okay? In the form of explosives. And I'm pretty sure you were supposed to die in it." She stared, unblinking. "When they discovered you survived, they sent someone to finish the job. I just chased him off. At least that's the way it looks. Whether or not any of that is true, I'm not willing to chance it. We're leaving." Her eyes followed him, but he saw no sign of recognition in their depths. "Will you trust me? Please?"

"Someone tried to kill me?" she whispered. "Here? In the hospital?"

"Yes." Had he said too much? Pressed her too hard? Done irreparable damage because he hadn't followed the nurse's orders?

"Hand me the clothes and help me into the bathroom. I'll be ready to leave in about sixty seconds."

THREE

Once they'd made it out of the hospital and she'd climbed into the passenger seat of Toby's truck, Robin leaned her head back and closed her eyes in spite of the fact adrenaline wired her. Her head wasn't pounding nearly as hard as it had been, and she figured it was the medicine that was keeping the pain under control.

When Toby hauled himself into the driver's seat, she had a momentary blip of panic. What was she doing? How did she know she could trust him? But what choice did she have?

She tried to remember what had happened that had brought her to this point, but all she could pull from her mind was the phone call offering her the job at the university lab last week. She frowned. No, that was impossible. Last week it had been hot and muggy at night. She'd just walked out of the hospital to find it chilly. "What day is it? What month?"

"It's December 5th."

"December!"

"Yes, why?"

"Because the last thing I remember is getting a phone call offering me the job at the lab. That was at the begin-

ning of June." She swallowed the panic that threatened to consume her. "Are you telling me I've lost six months?"

"That's what it sounds like, Robin, but don't panic."

A laugh escaped her. She noted that the sound bordered on the edge of hysteria. "Don't panic? Too late."

"Come on, you heard the doctor. You've had a traumatic experience. Once everything settles down, your mind will feel less threatened and your memory will probably return."

"Probably. What if it doesn't?"

He slid his hand from the wheel to grip her fingers. "We'll figure it out, Robin. I'm here to help you, okay?"

"Why?" she whispered. "What are you to me? Why can't I remember you?"

He drove with precise movements, showing his comfort with handling the large vehicle. For some reason that helped settle her. "You said you remember being hired to work at the lab. But you don't remember anything after that?"

"No. Why?"

"Because we met about a month after you started working there."

"Oh. So, we're friends?"

"Definitely friends."

She sighed. "I'm sorry I don't remember."

"It's okay. Or it will be. We just need to get you somewhere safe until the authorities can catch whoever blew up the lab."

"I'm all for them catching them, but I want to know more than who it was."

"What do you mean?"

"I want to know who and why."

"Yeah, the why would be good to know." He glanced

at her. "I'm wondering if you know the answer to both of those."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, someone obviously wants you dead. I overheard them talking in the woods."

"The woods," she said. "We were in the woods?"

"The woods behind the lab on campus. After you got out of the building, you ran into the woods and were hiding. Which is where I found you. Anyway, there were two guys talking. I couldn't see them—or hear them very well. I just caught some snatches of conversation but definitely heard them say something about killing you. Tonight."

She rubbed her forehead and winced when she accidentally pressed too hard against her wound. "So what now?"

"We get you some clothes and whatever else you need for a couple of days of hiding out."

"Hiding out? Where?" She had nothing but questions that needed answers.

"First, a motel. Then we'll work together to find a more long-term solution to keeping you safe."

"Like what?"

"I'm working on that."

While he drove for the next thirty minutes, Robin dozed off and on. The silence was tense but not awkward. Tense only because she could tell he was thinking about their next move.

"We need to fill your pain meds," he said when she blinked awake.

She frowned. "No. I don't want them." Her head and hands hurt, but the thought of a drugged unconsciousness scared her silly.

"You will when the current ones wear off. I've had a concussion before and it hurts. It may take you a while to recover"

"But if we fill the prescription, whoever's after me will be able to track us that way, won't they?"

"It's possible. The fact that you're thinking rationally is reassuring."

"Then we shouldn't stop to fill it, right?"

"By the time they show up—assuming they manage to trace it—we'll be long gone." He pulled off at an exit advertising food and lodging. "Let's try here. It's a small town off the beaten path. I think we'll be all right here for a bit."

"Okay." Robin had already made up her mind she was going to have to trust this stranger who claimed they were friends

"So, first, let's get food. What do you want?"

"Shouldn't you know that?" She raised a brow. "If we're friends like you say we are."

He barked a short laugh. "Okay, you're not really picky. You don't do fast food on a regular basis, but I know there's no way you're going to be willing to go inside a restaurant looking like you just survived the apocalypse."

Her jaw swung. "The apocalypse? Really?" "Okay, you're not that bad, but am I wrong?"

She huffed. "No." His spot-on assessment greatly reassured her that he knew her. The fact that she remembered nothing about *him* wasn't nearly as comforting. It was downright terrifying.

"So, do you want a burger or chicken?"

"Burger."

Once they'd ordered and received their food at the window, he pulled into a parking spot where they dug in.

"We need to get you some clothes," he said. "How do you feel about shopping?"

"I honestly don't know if I have the energy. Besides, what do you think after that whole apocalypse comment?"

He groaned. "You're going to hold that over my head, aren't you?"

She tilted her head and thought. "Yes. I think I am."

"All right. You can give me your sizes and I can grab a few things for you."

"I don't have any money. My purse, my—" She paused. "Where do I live? All I can picture is my two-bedroom apartment in Houston, Texas."

"When you took the job at the university, they offered you an apartment across the street from the university." He paused. "We live in the same building."

"Then I suppose all of my things are there."

"Except your cell phone. You always had that with you—usually in the pocket of your lab coat."

"I...don't know."

"You weren't wearing your coat when I found you, so you probably left it in the lab."

"Then the phone's gone if the fire was as bad as you say."

He nodded. "It was. I can get you a phone. As for your purse, I don't know where that would be. Sometimes you took it to the lab with you, sometimes you left it in your car—against my advice, I will say."

She'd always left her purse in the car when she didn't feel like carrying it. "Where's my car now?"

"I had it towed to your home while I was waiting for you to get out of the CT scan."

"I need to get it then."

"No, you need to be safe."

"But it has everything in there. My wallet. I—"

"Don't worry about the money, Robin. You almost died. Let me help you. You can pay me back later if it means that much to you."

She sighed. What choice did she have? "Fine. Thank you."

"Of course. Now. What size are you?"

She gave him her information and when they were finished eating, he found a large superstore and parked. "I don't want to leave you here alone."

"I'll be all right. It's busy. People are all around."

He shook his head. "I don't like it."

"You think we were followed?"

"I don't, but I just have a bad feeling about leaving you here."

"Then I'll come with you and just endure the sidelong looks I'll be sure to get."

"I've got a better idea." He pulled out his phone and dialed a number. She leaned her aching head against the window and relished the coolness of the glass against her cheek.

"Amber? Yeah. I need a favor."

Robin closed her eyes and listened as he spoke to the person on the phone. She'd almost drifted off to sleep when he hung up. She blinked at him. "Who was that?"

"A friend who is really good at protection detail. Her name is Amber Starke... I mean, Goode. She got married a couple of years ago to Lance who's a deputy in Wrangler's Corner."

"And she's coming here?"

"She's only about thirty minutes away. I'll put you two at the motel while I come back and get your prescription and some clothes for you."

Robin had no strength to argue. She just wanted a shower, then to rest her head on a pillow and shut her eyes. In that order. Before she knew it, they were parked in front of the motel.

"I've got us connecting rooms," Toby said. "Amber will be here in just a few minutes. She'll stay with you tonight and we'll figure out what to do in the morning." "Okay." Robin climbed out of the vehicle and winced when she shut the door. Her hands had been bandaged at the hospital, and they stung. When he opened the door to the room, she stepped inside. Two beds, a dresser that held a television, a refrigerator and a microwave. The scent of pine and new carpet hung in the air and Robin was grateful the place was clean. And nice. She went to the bed and sat.

Toby shut the door behind him and set the key on the nightstand. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Someone bombed the lab with me in it and tried to kill me last night," she said. "And again, today at the hospital."

He sat opposite her on the other bed. "You remember?"

"No. I just thought saying it out loud would help me process it. Or something."

"Right."

"It didn't work. I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"For not remembering." Tears spilled over her lashes before she could stop them.

He moved to sit beside her and pulled her against his chest and just let her cry. When her sobs quieted to sniffles, he handed her a tissue from the box on the nightstand.

She took it with her bandaged right hand and turned away to mop her face. "Sorry."

"Stop apologizing. None of this is your fault."

A knock on the door jerked him to his feet and she squelched a scream. He squeezed her shoulder. "It's okay. That's probably Amber. Bad guys don't knock. Usually."

She immediately mourned the loss of his arms but quickly focused on the woman now stepping through the open door. "Hi," Amber said.

Robin offered the pretty dark-haired woman a wan smile "Hi"

"Having a rough day, I hear." Her blue eyes flashed her sympathy.

"You could say that."

Amber nodded to Toby. "I've got this. Go take care of whatever it is you need to do."

"Thanks." With one look back at Robin, he slipped out of the room.

Amber engaged the dead bolt, then took the chair near the window. She placed a gun on the table in front of her, and Robin drew in a deep breath. "I'm going to take a shower if that's all right."

"Can you manage with your hands?" Amber asked.

"Yes. The cuts aren't too bad and Toby's bringing more bandages just in case."

"Okay. I don't think he'll be too long. I'll knock on the door when he gets back with the clothes."

"Thanks."

Toby didn't plan to be more than thirty minutes. Less, if possible. The store was right across the street from the motel. He parked and noted that while he didn't see anyone following him, he wasn't completely convinced he wasn't being watched.

But how? And by whom? With the hair on the back of his neck spiking, he made his way into the store, grabbing a cart and glancing into the mirror that hung at the entrance.

No one behind him looked suspicious. Two teenagers who could use a haircut, a young couple with a toddler and an elderly couple who held hands.

Bypassing the rows of Christmas decorations and aisles of toys, he headed straight for the toiletries section where he pulled up the list Robin had made for him in his notes app.

And then the man next to him caught his attention.

He'd pulled in two spaces down in the parking lot just as Toby had exited his own vehicle. Nothing about him suggested Toby should be alarmed, but just the fact that he was there was enough to make him keep his eyes peeled.

From the corner of his vision, Toby kept the man in his sights while he headed to the women's clothing section and found three long-sleeved T-shirts. He added them to his cart with a subtle glance over his shoulder. No sign of the man. Next, jeans. He found Robin's size and added two pairs.

Another glance around.

The guy was back. This time looking at the shirts on the rack behind him. Toby pulled his cell phone from his pocket and activated the camera as though he were going to take a selfie. He turned his back to the man and lifted the phone to an angle that had his shadow behind him.

Trying to be subtle but needing a good picture, he shifted so it wouldn't look like he was doing exactly what he was doing. He waited until the guy turned slightly, snapped the picture, then held the phone to his ear. "Yeah," he said to the device. "I can do that. Bye." Tucking the phone back into his pocket, he shot another look down the aisle. The person was gone.

One by one, he added items to the cart until he had everything, still keeping an eye out for the guy.

In spite of the fact that Christmas was just around the corner, the store was only moderately busy and within another ten minutes, he was checked out.

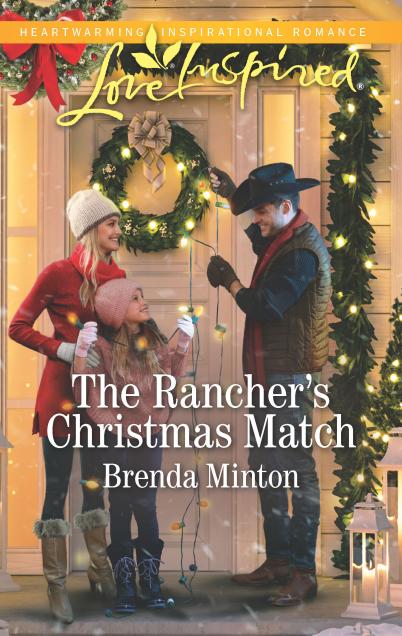
And looking for his tail.

Not seeing him but wanting his hands free, Toby transferred everything to the overnight bag he'd purchased and pocketed the receipt. With the bag slung over his left shoulder and his right hovering near the weapon in his shoul-

der holster, he walked out of the store, tension running through every muscle in his back.

He wanted to know who that man was and if he was connected to Robin. And if he was, Toby was going to deal with him.

Want to know what happens next? Order your copy of *Holiday Amnesia* by Lynette Eason today!



Chapter One

Isaac West stood at the door of the feed store, letting his eyes adjust to the late November sunshine pouring down on Hope, Oklahoma. Some days a guy just preferred clouds. This happened to be one of them. The bright sunshine made his head spin and needlelike jabs of pain above his temple warned that a headache would knock him down before he could get back to the ranch.

It had been a good two months since he'd had the last headache. He'd kinda hoped he'd seen the last of them.

"Isaac, are you okay?" Mrs. Adams, the owner of the feed store, called out to him, her voice filtering through the long tunnel that had been his hearing for the past six years.

"I'm good."

"You're looking a little on the pale side. You want me to call Jack and have him pick you up?"

He didn't bother with denials. In a town the size of Hope, everyone knew everyone else's business. Mrs. Adams meant well. After all, as she liked to point out, she'd known him since he was knee-high to a grass-hopper.

"Nah, I'm good," he assured her. "Right as rain."

He pulled a toothpick from his pocket and stuck it between his teeth. Might as well just get it over with. He pushed the door open and headed down the sidewalk in the direction of his truck. He stumbled a bit as he stepped down off the curb and lurched to the left, falling against a bright red sports car. The driver of that car slammed her door and glared at him.

He cringed a little. Partly from the madder-than-awet-hen look on her face, mostly because the slamming car door vibrated through his skull.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" She spoke with a sweeter-than-honey Oklahoma accent that matched her honey-blond hair and big brown eyes. But the spark in her voice said she was more than a little put out.

If it had been any other day, and if he'd been any other man, he would have flirted. Today wasn't a good day for being charming. He did try to tip his cowboy hat in a way that appeared chivalrous, when really, he just wanted to get home and away from everyone. Even pretty women.

"Sorry, ma'am, I lost my balance."

She came around the back of her little car and stepped in front of him, blocking the path to his truck. She was a head shorter than his almost six feet, and she was too thin. She was kind of pale, too. Like she didn't sleep much.

He shouldn't judge. It wasn't like he got a full eight hours every night. More like eight hours every two days. And a woman definitely didn't want someone pointing out that she needed a steak, mashed potatoes and more sleep.

At that moment she was surveying him with a lessthan-appreciative gleam in her milk-chocolate brown eyes.

"Balance, my foot. Hand over your keys." She tipped her chin up. "I have a nine-year-old daughter, and the last thing I want is someone in your condition behind the wheel of a car. Or a truck."

He grinned a little and her eyes narrowed.

She extended her hand, nails manicured to perfection with the prettiest dark pink polish, and arched an eyebrow at his reluctance to hand over his keys. It took him at least five seconds to realize she thought he was drunk. He almost laughed. Almost.

She was pretty enough that he didn't mind the insult. After all, she had no way of knowing. People, he realized, saw what they wanted to see.

As it happened, she smelled like sunshine and he wouldn't mind a ride home.

"Stop grinning and say something!" she demanded. Most women waited until they'd known him at least a day or two before they reached that level of outrage.

The two of them were causing a scene. People were starting to stare. A few locals grinned and marched on by, willing to leave him to his fate. He pulled the keys out of his pocket and dropped them in her very lovely hand.

"Where do you live?" she demanded, a little less confident now that she had his keys. He figured she might be afraid.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

At his declaration she stepped back, and her throat bobbed as she swallowed a little bit of her outrage and dealt with her fear. If he had to guess, she wasn't usually the kind of woman who made impulsive decisions, and demanding his keys had been a rash one.

"Of course you won't," she stated. "I have a child in my car. I really do not want any trouble."

He noticed her lips were the same shade as her nail polish, and she bit down on the bottom one, her gaze darting about.

"Looking for a better option?" he asked. "I assure you there isn't a taxi or Uber in sight."

"Of course there isn't." She looked at the keys in her hand. "Get in my car."

He wanted to say a mighty loud, "Thank you, God." But he refrained. His head was killing him and he didn't really care what she thought of him. He slid into the passenger seat of the tin can she called a car and pulled his hat down over his eyes.

Miss Sunshine and Happiness got in on the driver's side. Man, she smelled good.

She said something, but since she was talking into his bad ear he didn't catch a word of it. He glanced her way, started to ask her to repeat, then noticed she really did have a child in the car. The little girl appeared to be nine or ten. She had wide brown eyes and the same honey-colored hair as her mother.

"Mom, didn't you say we never talk to strangers?" she asked, a cheeky grin on her face. He instantly liked the kid. She might be a replica of her mother, but there was a happy sparkle in her eyes. Life was still an adventure at that age.

He shifted his gaze from the girl to the woman in the driver's seat. The movement caused a sharp pain in the side of his head. At this point he usually had a cup of his sister-in-law Kylie's tea in hand as he crawled into a dark room.

"I said to buckle up," Miss Sunshine and Happiness said with a dose of aggravation, which meant she'd already said it once.

He guessed it was too late to explain that he wasn't intentionally ignoring her. He buckled up.

"Where do I take you?"

"Mercy Ranch."

"Mercy Ranch? The ranch owned by Jack West?"

"The same. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, I have an appointment with Mr. West."

Interesting. She'd been on her way to the ranch. She didn't look like a veteran. Jack and his ranch for wounded warriors had become nationally known in the last couple years. But then, what did a wounded warrior look like? They weren't all men with big scars on the sides of their heads, or missing limbs. Some injuries were internal. Some were heart deep and resulted in nightmares and anxiety.

He was curious, but not curious enough to continue the conversation.

"Do you work at the ranch?" the child in the back seat asked

It was difficult to hear when her voice had to compete with road noise, the whistle of wind battering the window of the car and the oldies station playing on the radio. Any other time he might have glanced back. At the moment, movement was not his friend and it was best to remain still, his head turned toward the driver.

As a matter of fact, his stomach was suddenly making him feel less than manly.

"My daughter asked you a question," Miss Happiness and Sunshine informed him.

"Yes." The one word came out a little curt. He could do better than that. "I work at the ranch."

"Are you going to be sick?" the child asked.

"Maybe," he muttered.

He thought of a scenario a little more to his liking, one in which he rescued this woman and showed her that a real man didn't need to be given a ride home, didn't need to be coddled and talked to like he was five. He had a feeling this woman, Miss Happiness and Sunshine, didn't like being rescued. She didn't strike him as a damsel in distress.

She probably slayed dragons and stormed castle walls. He could do those things on an average day. Unfortunately, today wasn't his best knight-in-shining-armor day.

The random thoughts worked, the way they sometimes did, to calm his brain and lessen the head pain. Not moving happened to be another key to ridding himself of the knife-sharp ache.

"You do look a little green," the woman said as she gave him a quick glance. What was her name? he wondered

"Paula," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Trying to guess your name." He slid the hat back a fraction just so he could see her face. He caught what might have been the beginning of amusement hovering in her eyes. "Rachel?"

"No."

The child in the back seat laughed. The sound bounced around the vehicle. "Rebecca. Her name is Rebecca."

Isaac's eyes widened and he reached for the door. "Stop the car."

The woman quickly pulled to the shoulder and he practically fell as he escaped the car and stumbled to the ditch. He didn't lose his lunch, but came pretty close to losing his confidence.

Rebecca Barnes glanced at the driveway just fifty feet from where she'd pulled to the side of the road. They'd almost made it to Mercy Ranch. An arched entry with the name emblazoned in wrought iron, and an open gate, heralded their destination. But she couldn't consider herself arrived if she was standing on the side of the road. The cowboy she'd given a ride to stood in the ditch, bent over, trying to catch his breath.

"Do you think he's okay?" Allie asked from the back seat. She had raised herself up a bit to eye their passenger.

"Get your seat belt back on," Rebecca warned. But she watched closely, waiting to see if he would need help. She'd been chastising herself this entire time, because she'd gone and done it again. She'd been in Hope for less than an hour and she'd immediately bumped into what had to be the classic description of a bad boy. And she had a "no bad boys" policy. She didn't want trouble in her life, so she avoided men who appeared to be trouble, hinted at trouble or were confirmed trouble.

It was a fairly new motto, put in place when the latest disappointment, a friend, had exited her life with a large chunk of her business profits.

"He's fine," she answered her daughter. "Just a little under the weather."

"You think he's drunk," Allie stated, with a knowing tone to her voice.

"Allie, that isn't for you to say."

"I know, Mom." She now sounded contrite. Rebecca didn't have to look at her daughter to know the tone wouldn't match the look on her face.

Rebecca sighed and reached for the door. "I'm going to make sure he's okay, and then we'll head on to the ranch for the appointment with Mr. West. Are you okay?"

Allie nodded, but her attention was glued to the man in the ditch. He had straightened and now shifted his cowboy hat, wiping his brow with his arm. He glanced toward Rebecca as she got out of the car.

"Need help?" she asked.

"Nope." He trudged up the hill, slowly, but far more steady on his feet than he'd been when they first met.

Bad boy or not, he was easy on the eyes. Tall, just broad enough through the shoulders to think he'd be easy to lean on, and even in late November he'd held on to a golden tan. His hair was dark and his eyes were the gray of clouds bringing a winter storm.

She nearly sighed at her own ridiculous inventorying of his good looks. He was a cowboy. The kind that wore faded jeans and scuffed up boots. He was obviously trouble. And she needed to stay on task and not fall prey to anything or anyone that would distract her from her mission.

With Aunt Evelyn gone, Rebecca and Allie were the closest they'd ever been to being on their own. But they had each other, a nest egg to fall back on and a plan. Part of that plan included meeting with Jack West.

The cowboy had returned to the shoulder of the road

and he seemed a little more clear-eyed than he'd been a short time ago. A shaky hand brushed through his hair before he replaced his black cowboy hat, neatly hiding the scar that had drawn her attention. It snaked from the side of his face to the portion of his scalp just above his ear.

She guessed he was one of Jack West's veterans.

"Ready to go?" he asked, as he walked with her to the driver's side of the car. He opened her door and motioned for her to get behind the wheel.

"Yes. And thank you." She didn't know what else to say as he closed her door and headed back to the passenger side.

Moments later they were easing down the paved driveway of Mercy Ranch. It appeared to be a sprawling place, with rolling hills of winter-brown grass. White vinyl fencing split the land, creating corrals, smaller pastures, then wide-open fields. Her passenger pointed toward a large, log-sided home, but beyond that she saw an older white farmhouse, a metal building that appeared to be living quarters and, to the left, a large stable.

She parked next to the log house. The place glittered in the late-afternoon sun as the light reflected off the windows. A dog, a big yellow Labrador, lazed on the front porch.

"Here we are," he said. But he sat there a moment, not moving.

"Are you going to be sick again?" Allie asked from the back seat. "Does your head hurt? Is your vision blurry?"

"Allie," Rebecca warned.

He didn't seem offended. But he did turn and ask Allie to repeat what she'd said. She did and he smiled.

"I do have a headache and I'm not going to be sick. And my vision is just fine."

He got out of the car and said to Rebecca, "If you need to see Jack, I can get him for you. Oh, and I'll take my keys."

She handed him the keys she'd dropped in her purse. "I'm thirty minutes early."

"He won't mind that you're early." Isaac closed the door and walked away.

She hadn't planned on getting out, but the cowboy had stopped walking and leaned against the front of her car.

"I think he needs help, Mom," Allie piped up.

Rebecca closed her eyes and sent a rare petition for aid from above. "Come on, let's help him to the house and we'll see if Mr. West is available."

"Good!" Allie jumped from the car and hurried around to pet the dog that had meandered off the porch to greet them.

"Allie, you don't know the dog." Rebecca called out the warning, but it was too late. Allie had her arms around it and the animal didn't seem to mind.

"Decide to come on up to the house?" the cowboy asked.

"Allie thought you might need assistance."

"That's kind of her. It isn't usually this bad."

"Maybe you should see about getting help."

He didn't take her advice at all seriously. Instead, he leaned on her a bit.

She considered putting some distance between them,

but at that moment he stumbled. She put a steadying hand on his arm.

"If you can help me to the house, I'll get Jack for you."

They were halfway there when the door opened and a man stepped out on the porch. He looked like an older version of the cowboy, but broader through the shoulders, and his dark hair had grayed. At the sight of the two of them, he shook his head.

"Isaac, I've been wondering what kept you."

Isaac. She groaned, because now she understood his amusement with her name. Isaac and Rebecca, the Bible couple, parents of Jacob and Esau. She wanted no part of it. She didn't want to be a biblical reference.

"Dad, let me introduce you to Rebecca. She gave me a ride home when it appeared I might be intoxicated." He winked at her. "Rebecca, meet Jack West."

Jack stepped down off the porch, his left side trembling as he navigated the stairs. His arm jerked a bit and he said something under his breath. Even with his obvious physical problems, he appeared strong, and he smiled at her with all the charm she'd expected after reading articles about him and speaking with him on the phone.

"Miss Rebecca, I'm glad you're here. And that must be your little girl, Allie. I'll apologize for Isaac. He isn't as funny as he thinks he is. But he's most definitely sober."

With a tip of his hat, Isaac headed for the stairs. "Sorry to disappoint you, darlin', but I needed a ride home and your offer came at the right time. I'm going to leave you all to your meeting."

His gaze shot past her, to where Allie played with the yellow Labrador. His smile dissolved. "Maximus, stay."

His command caught Rebecca's attention and she turned to witness the dog leaning close to Allie as her daughter froze and then fell to the ground. As the seizure took control, Maximus stretched out beside her. Rebecca felt the world close in around her as she hurried to Allie, rolling her to her side. Allie's body jerked, and as the seizure continued, Rebecca glanced at her watch, timing the event.

Jack and Isaac had come over to sit next to her, and Isaac was on the phone.

Finally, the seizure ended and Allie lay motionless, her body curling in a fetal position as tears streamed down her cheeks. The dog licked her face and remained still, but near her side. Rebecca waited a moment, then gathered Allie in her arms.

"I'm sorry, Mr. West, this meeting was a bad idea. I can't do this." She blinked away tears that threatened to fall.

"Now, let's all stay calm." He had a hand on her shoulder, the way a father or grandfather would. She shut her eyes, wondering what that would feel like to have a father who cared.

"I called Carson, and he's on his way." Isaac West spoke, his voice steady. He was obviously sober. Sober, steady, calm. How had she missed that?

He stood up and held a hand out to his father. Jack clasped it readily and rose to his feet.

"Can we take her inside now?" Isaac asked.

Rebecca nodded and tried to stand, while still holding her daughter close. Isaac reached for her child, his

gray eyes warm with sympathy. Without thinking, she tightened her hold. Allie whimpered in protest.

"I'm only going to carry her inside for you," Isaac offered.

Rebecca closed her eyes again, aware of the stillness all around her, the stillness of the child in her arms. Jack West's strong hand again settled on her shoulder as she remained on the grass, cradling Allie close.

"Let Isaac help you. We'll get you both inside and warmed up. My other son Carson is a doctor. He'll be here in just a few minutes to examine her."

She looked down at Allie. Slowly, she loosened her grip and Isaac took the child from her arms. Jack offered a surprisingly strong hand and pulled her to her feet.

The dog, Maximus, remained near Isaac, his intelligent eyes focused on Allie.

"He knew," Rebecca said, reaching a hand to the animal and letting him lick her fingers.

"He knew," Isaac said softly, a different version of the man she'd met in front of the store.

This version was a different kind of threat. His gaze rested on the little girl in his arms, concern shifting his features. Less than thirty minutes ago he had been having a hard time walking out of the local feed store. She tried to take her daughter from his arms.

"I can carry her," she said, as she reached for Allie. "You help Jack and I'll manage," he said, winking at her.

"But you were just..." She was unsure how she should put this without hurting his feelings.

"I'm fine. The balance issues come and go."
She didn't know what to say, but she really didn't

have time to think about it. Allie had begun to cry as the effects of the seizure abated and she came back to herself a bit more.

"Trust me," he said.

Trust wasn't easy for Rebecca. Especially where Allie was concerned.

Life had proved to her that there were few people she could trust. There were few individuals she counted on. People had a tendency to let Rebecca and her daughter down.

That was her reality.

She'd come to Hope to create a new reality. She wanted Allie to have family in her life, people she could count on and a community she could grow up in. Since she had to start somewhere, she thought she might as well start by trusting this man.

Chapter Two

Isaac knew that life was all about choices. He'd made the choice to join the army, partly to serve his country and partly because he knew it would make Jack West, his father, madder than anything. He'd made a choice that morning to tease the pretty blonde who had assumed he'd been drinking.

The decision to join the military had changed his life. Forever. It had matured him, scarred him and left him with nightmares he wouldn't wish on anyone. Accepting the ride from Rebecca Barnes was not going to be one of those life-altering choices. It had only been a ride home, nothing more. As he entered the house carrying the little girl, Allie, he knew better than to fool himself into thinking Rebecca was a woman who wouldn't change a man's life. She had a past. It was written all over her face. It was the lack of trust in her eyes. It was the hesitant reply when Jack told her she could trust his son.

It was the little girl in his arms, no bigger than a minute and wearing a dazed look in eyes that matched her mother's.

She whimpered a bit and Rebecca immediately moved closer, bottom lip between her teeth as she studied her daughter.

"You're okay," she said. The words seemed to be as much for herself as for her child.

"I'm going to put her on the couch, and if you want, you can grab the quilt off the rocking chair to cover her." He smiled down at Allie. "You're okay. I know it always takes me a minute to get my bearings back when I have a spell."

Mischief lit the little girl's eyes. "Like when you got carsick."

He settled her on the leather sofa. "Grown men do not get carsick."

"You did," she said with a teasing tone. "But I won't tell."

"How much is it going to cost me?" he said, sitting on the coffee table not too far away from their young patient.

"Hmm," she said, closing her eyes. "I'll have to think about that."

Rebecca appeared at his side, quilt in hand. She smoothed it over her child and then leaned down to kiss Allie's forehead. "You're okay?"

"Mom..." the child pleaded. For normalcy, Isaac realized. She didn't want her health questioned. She wanted to run and play and didn't want people to watch, waiting for her to have another seizure.

The back door slammed and voices drifted to the living room. Carson had arrived. And with him, Kylie. She'd been a friend to Carson when the two were teens. She'd also been a wounded warrior living on the ranch when Carson returned a little over a year ago.

"That would be my brother, our resident doctor. He'll take good care of you." Isaac pushed himself to his feet and gave Rebecca more room to sit with her daughter.

"You're not leaving, are you?" Allie asked.

Huddled beneath the quilt, the little girl seemed smaller. But her eyes were bright and Isaac knew she'd be just fine. He also knew she needed Carson, not him. He needed to escape, because the last thing he wanted was for her to think he was the guy she should count on.

"I'm afraid I have to go," he told her. "I'm going to talk my sister-in-law into making me a cup of tea."

At that moment Kylie entered the room with her husband, Isaac's half brother. Her gaze darted from the child and her mother to Isaac. Carson took over and Isaac slipped from the room, aware of the mother in a way that he wished he wasn't. He was conscious of her fear for her daughter, and also that she smelled like something soft and floral. He'd been cognizant of her dislike for him and he'd known when that feeling had shifted just the smallest amount.

And all of that meant he needed to mind his own business and let the others tend to Rebecca and her daughter.

Kylie followed him to the kitchen, a large room that was the center of activity for the ranch house Jack had built ten years ago. The house stood as a testament to Jack's recovery. He'd conquered his past, overcome alcoholism and turned his life around in a way few people had expected.

Then he'd started Mercy Ranch, a place where wounded warriors could find a safe place to heal and start over. The mission and ministry had started when Jack picked Isaac up at a VA hospital. He'd looked

around, seen people a lot like himself and realized he could do something for those having a hard time starting over.

The kitchen was blessedly dark, with just the dim lights over the sink for lighting. The headache appeared to be back in full force and the last thing Isaac wanted was to stand around in the sunny living room with a dozen people all talking at once.

Kylie moved quietly, scooping tea into a cup and setting a kettle on to boil. "The oil is in the cabinet," she told him.

Her special blend of oils, made for headaches. It wasn't a cure-all but it helped when nothing else would. He refused to continue taking prescription pain pills. He'd realized early on that genetics were a thing and he had a fear of turning into Jack. Or the man Jack had been, before conquering his addiction.

He poured a few drops of oil in his palm and applied it to his temples as he waited for the cup of tea to steep.

"How'd you find them?" Kylie asked.

"Find them?"

"The girl and her mother?" Kylie slid the tea across the counter to him.

"I was at the feed store, ordering grain, and she offered me a ride home." He shrugged, as if it hadn't been a big deal.

Kylie's eyes widened. "A woman with a little girl gave a random stranger a ride?" She leaned on the counter.

"Something like that," he offered.

"You're not that charming," she said.

"No, I'm not. She thought I'd been drinking and didn't want me driving."

Kylie chuckled. "That sounds more like it. And you were only too willing to take her up on the offer, huh?"

Isaac grabbed his cup, tipped his hat at his well-meaning sister-in-law and decided it was time to find a dark corner.

"I never took you for a coward," she called out to his retreating back.

"I never said otherwise," he called back to her without turning.

He pulled his sunglasses out of his pocket. With the shades in place, he headed out the back door and in the direction of the old farmhouse that Jack had remodeled for the men who called Mercy Ranch home.

The cool November air revived him a bit as he crossed the wide expanse of lawn in the direction of the two-story house that had been Jack's when Isaac first came to live here. Or more accurately, when his mother had dumped him here at the ranch. She'd told Jack that his son was getting difficult and she'd done her time as parent.

Done her time. As if parenting had been a prison for her.

In a way, he guessed it had. She'd had to occasionally think of someone other than herself. Which meant she'd kept a supply of soup in the cabinets and he'd fended for himself while she'd been off partying with friends.

In the beginning, life with Jack hadn't been much better. Isaac had been a rebellious preteen. Jack had been a raging, heavy on the rage, alcoholic.

Isaac sipped his tea as he walked, inhaling the bitter brew that tasted as bad as it smelled. As long as it helped the headache, he didn't mind.

Ted, the Australian shepherd he'd brought home

more than a dozen years ago, met him as he approached the house. The dog had slowed down a bit. Old age and a bad run-in with a car on the road had left the dog as gimpy as some of the men who lived at Mercy Ranch. But Ted was loyal and just about the best company Isaac knew of. As he climbed the back porch steps, he settled his hand on the dog's dark gray head.

"They're right about dogs being man's best friend, Ted. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise." He'd gotten the dog during his rougher-than-a-dirt-road teen years. The animal had been waiting for him when he returned from Afghanistan, wounded and angry.

"I guess that means I'm not your best friend?" Joe Lawson, another resident of the ranch, called out from the kitchen.

"You're a friend," Isaac responded. "But you're kind of worthless at arm wrestling and not much of a right-hand man."

"I never get tired of that joke," Joe grumbled, doing a decent job of fixing a pot of coffee with his left hand. He'd lost his right arm when an IED exploded in Kabul.

"I never get tired of saying it," Isaac responded. It was the same joke and the same comeback every day. Routine. They lived for routine.

They all had their stories. They didn't share much of their past or even much about what had brought them to Mercy Ranch. People called them wounded warriors but they were survivors.

"Going to bed?" Joe called out as Isaac headed for the stairs.

"Yeah."

"Bad?" the other man asked.

"Not the worst, but I'd like to head it off at the pass."

Joe came out from behind the counter, wiping his hand on the apron that hung from his neck. Joe found therapy in cooking.

"Eve said a woman brought you home. Her little girl had a seizure."

If there'd been a list of things, that subject would have come under the heading Last Thing in the World Isaac Wants to Discuss. But Joe knew that. And Joe didn't care.

"I'm going to my room. Make sure no one knocks on my door."

"Gotcha."

He pretended he didn't hear Joe's laughter following him up the stairs.

"She's fine," Dr. Carson West assured Rebecca as he sat back in the chair he'd pulled close to the sofa.

He winked at her daughter, who had his stethoscope in her ears, listening to her own heartbeat.

Of course Allie was fine. Rebecca drew in a deep breath at his reassurance. No matter how often this happened and how many times she heard that everything would be okay, it didn't get any easier. As a mother, she wanted to fix everything for her child. She wanted to take away the seizures, the fear, all of it.

"Has she always had them?" he asked, turning to face Rebecca.

"Five years."

"She could outgrow this," he offered.

"We hope she does. They've been happening less frequently."

"Only twice this year." Allie sat up a little, pulling

the stethoscope from around her neck and holding it out to Carson

"How does it sound?" he asked.

"Like normal." Allie leaned back into the pillow and pulled the quilt up around her shoulders. "Where did Isaac go?"

Carson placed the stethoscope in his doctor bag. "He probably went to his room. When he has a headache, he's kind of a bear to be around."

"He carried me inside," Allie informed him. "He seemed nice. Even if my mom did think he had been—"

"That's enough," Rebecca held up a hand to cut her daughter off.

"I wouldn't suggest a long trip anytime soon," Carson said as he returned to the topic of Allie's health. "Let her rest up, and if you're staying in town, I'd like to see her in a couple of days."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

Jack cleared his throat. "Where are you staying, Rebecca?"

She avoided his clear gray eyes, the eyes of a concerned parent. Why did that come to mind? And why did it bother her so much? She'd ceased missing her parents. She'd given up on any type of normal relationship with them. The last time she'd called her father, Pastor Don Barnes, he'd told her he didn't have a daughter.

Who was she kidding? His comment had hurt. It had opened up the wounds she'd buried at eighteen when he'd disowned her. It had ached deep down because he didn't want to meet his granddaughter.

And yet here she was, in Oklahoma and a short drive from where she'd grown up. Because even if family wanted nothing to do with her, she wanted to know they were nearby. If something happened, she wanted to know they had someone close.

She'd come to Hope to talk to Jack about the business opportunity he'd advertised nationally. Jack West was offering people free rent if they would commit to keeping their business in Hope, Oklahoma, for one year. But first he had to approve the business and the business plan.

"I thought we would have our meeting, and then I would drive to Tulsa and stay with a friend."

"We can discuss where you'll stay while we're going over your business plan," Jack continued. "We may need a few days to look over your business and I'm afraid the hotel in town is booked up. There's a festival in Grove and the entire area is overrun with visitors. Which we aren't going to complain about."

"I'll find us a place." She smiled, looking over at Allie.

Jack's attention slid to the girl and he winked at her. "I think you all should stay right here on the ranch."

"We couldn't," Rebecca replied. Allie loved animals and anything country. But they couldn't stay here.

"I don't see why not," Jack continued. "You have a briefcase that I'm sure contains a business plan. And I have a shop looking for a new owner. The only way I can connect you to that shop is if I have an opportunity to look at what you have in mind. If you need an opinion other than mine, that you need to stay put for a while, I think Carson has already given it."

"I don't want to take advantage of your generosity," she told him.

"I didn't mean to put you on the spot," Jack said

softly. "If staying here makes you feel uncomfortable I'm sure we can find somewhere else for you to stay."

She had to be a grown-up about this.

The dog, Maximus, pushed his golden head against her leg. She stroked the soft fur and found courage. But hadn't she been drawing on that same courage for the past year? The death of her aunt had been a difficult blow.

It had taken courage to sell their salon and leave Arizona. It had taken more courage to return to Oklahoma, where she knew she'd meet her past head-on.

For Allie's sake she needed to make this work. For Allie she would do whatever it took. With that in mind she lifted her gaze to find Jack West watching her, his expression kind. She nodded, accepting the offer. "We'll stay."

Allie let out a weak shout and the dog quickly returned to her side, snuggling against her, his head resting on her shoulder. She ran a hand down his back and the dog pushed even closer.

"But we don't want to put you to any trouble," Rebecca added.

Jack waved off her concerns. "We have plenty of space. There's a nice couple of rooms in the women's dorm."

Kylie West came in the room and laughed. "Women's dorm' is a fancy way of saying that there's a garage that's been remodeled and turned into apartments."

"Nice apartments," Jack countered.

Kylie inclined her head. "I'll agree with that. I lived in one of those apartments for several years."

"You don't live here?" Rebecca asked.

"Carson and I built a house just down the road."

Kylie pulled a chair close to Rebecca's. "There are a dozen people living on this ranch, plus family. I promise you won't be an imposition. And it looks like Maximus is begging your little girl to stick around."

"Thank you," she said to Jack. "I really do appreciate this. And thank you, Dr. West, for coming over here."

"Please, call me Carson. And if you have luggage, I'll help get you moved to your rooms."

Jack's head jerked a bit as he nodded, but his smile remained bright. "And if Kylie doesn't mind, she can take you on out to the garage and introduce you to the other ladies."

Moments later, Kylie led Rebecca and Allie out the back door of the ranch house and across the lawn to a garage turned living quarters for the three women who lived on the ranch. There was nothing garage-like about the structure, Rebecca realized. The garage doors had been removed and the building included a covered patio.

Inside, it appeared that Jack West had designed the building with a purpose. The doors were wide, for wheelchairs, the floors were hardwood, the furniture sparse with plenty of room for easy access to the living areas and kitchen.

For the next few days they would call this place home. Allie had already hurried to the windows that overlooked stables and fields. Rebecca sighed because she knew that in three days it would be difficult to tear her daughter away from Mercy Ranch.

And it wasn't just the ranch that would make Allie want to stay, it was the people. Especially a slightly off-balance cowboy with an easy smile and gray eyes that hinted at pain.

Chapter Three

Isaac ran a brush down the horse's side as Ted, the Australian shepherd, snoozed on a bale of hay. Shorty stomped when the brush hit a ticklish spot. Isaac moved the brush to the animal's back. He didn't normally get distracted when taking care of livestock. Clearly, he knew better than to daydream while working with a horse. Even a horse like Shorty that he'd spent a good amount of time with. In the business world, Shorty would have been his partner. They'd moved a lot of cattle together, he and Shorty. They'd spent long days riding fences, doing repairs, and they'd even won a few events in cutting horse competitions.

But he was distracted. Because he'd woken up this morning to the memory of Rebecca Barnes and her daughter. He'd actually smiled as he made his morning eggs and toast. Because she'd been unexpected and had a streak of courage that he guessed most people overlooked.

Some would have called it foolishness, to approach a stranger, ask for his keys and then offer him a ride home. If he ever saw her again he'd warn her not to do that. She was fortunate that he really was just a guy needing a ride home.

If Jack gave her a building, Isaac guessed he would be seeing her again. She'd be in town, maybe around the ranch. They would be in one another's lives.

"Is the horse ticklish?" a small voice asked from behind him

He nearly jumped out of his skin. A grown man wouldn't want to admit that to just anyone, but considering that whoever had said it giggled at his reaction, he wouldn't stand a chance at denying. Doing his best to appear composed and tamping down the grin that tugged at his mouth, he faced the girl, who stood inside an empty stall, a scrawny, gray tabby kitten in her hands.

"Yep, horses are ticklish." He pushed his hat back to get a better look at her. "You feeling up to snuff today?"

"I don't know what that means, but I think it means I'm good. I always am. After." Her lips drew in as she contemplated him. "Are *you* up to snuff?"

He laughed. "Yeah, I am."

"Your dad says you sleep off the headaches. Does that help?"

She had a lot of questions for a little girl. The questions were bigger than she was, but he guessed with her seizures she had a maturity most nine-year-olds didn't possess.

"Yeah, it helps. I drink tea and I sleep. Usually when I wake up I'm better."

"Is it because of the scar on your head?"

There was no easy way to dodge these questions and no telling when she'd stop asking them.

"Yes, it's because of the scar."

"I don't have any scars. My mom says sometimes kids just have seizures. And I might outgrow it."

"That would be good."

"Will you outgrow your headaches?" she asked, completely serious.

"I might. Does your mom know you're out here?"

She shook her head and held tight to the kitten, which decided it might be time to make a break for it. "Did I ask too many questions? My mom says I'm nosy. I don't think I am. I just like to know stuff, and you can't know if you don't ask."

"I guess you have a good point." He gestured at the tabby, which had started to yowl. "You might want to let that kitten go before you get scratched," he warned.

The kitten jumped free and scampered sideways out of the stall, hissing as it ran for cover at the other end of the stable. Allie stepped out in turn and watched it make its escape.

"I was going to name him Stripe." She let out a big sigh.

"I'm sure he won't mind a name."

She frowned. "Yeah, but now he's gone. I've never had a cat before. We couldn't have pets at our apartment in Arizona."

He beat down the desire to ask his own questions. Questions were dangerous. Because they resulted in answers and that meant knowing a little too much about people.

The young person standing in front of him seemed to be making a valiant attempt to fight tears. If she hadn't looked sad he wouldn't have handed her the horse brush. As much as he didn't consider himself to be a kid person, he'd kind of grown fond of smaller humans since Carson had shown up with his two. Maggie and Andy were as cute as two kids could be. This one seemed the same. She was smart and funny, and when a tear trickled down her cheek she dashed it away with an aggravated flick of a finger.

"How about brushing Shorty for me?" he offered.

She looked at the brush and looked at the sixteenhand Quarter Horse. She didn't seem quite as sure of herself as she had when she first peeked up over the stall door

"So where's your mom?" he asked as he grabbed a step stool and lifted her to stand on it. She looked unsure, so he guided her hand to brush the horse's neck.

As she brushed Shorty, Isaac glanced toward the double-door entrance to the stable. No sign of anyone looking for a runaway kid.

"She's meeting with Mr. West. That's your dad," she informed him.

He chuckled and she kept brushing.

"Did you stay in town last night?" he asked. He hated that he was so curious. But there was something about Rebecca Barnes. She was a mix of strength and sweetness, and then there was that slightly wounded and notso-trusting glint in her eye.

Someone had hurt her. Maybe more than one someone.

He shook off the questions that he considered asking the little girl, who was busy brushing his horse, talking to it as if they were sharing their best-kept secrets.

"Nope." Allie handed him the brush. "We stayed here."

"Here?"

She gave him a curious look. "Are you going to be sick again?"

"I wasn't sick," he insisted. "And no, I'm not. I'm just surprised. I didn't know you stayed here."

"Because you were sleeping," she said, sounding matter-of-fact. "We had dinner with Jack. He told us Maria made the casserole. It was better than anything my mom can cook. She burns stuff. She says it's because she's distracted."

"She wouldn't want you telling everyone that she can't cook," he warned.

"You're not everyone. Anyway, we stayed here. In the garage. It's a nice garage with no cars in it, so I don't know why it's called a garage."

They'd stayed on the ranch. The thought unsettled him.

How much could he or should he ask without seeming too curious? He felt like a sixteen-year-old with a crush on the new girl. That wasn't happening. No way. No how.

"Hey!" A shout from the front of the stable caught his attention.

"Hey back," he returned.

Eve, a resident of the ranch, glared at him, then managed to soften her expression as she approached. Smile or no, she didn't appear to be too happy, and it seemed his pint-size stable hand might be the reason.

"You ran off." Eve pointed at the girl. "And you didn't ask permission or tell me where you were going. That really isn't very nice."

"Eve," he warned.

If there was another person on the ranch not naturally kid friendly, it was Eve. She'd come around by degrees as she'd gotten attached to Carson's children. But she would be the first to admit that she didn't have a lot of experience with children. She'd been an only child to what she referred to as her "hippy parents."

He wanted to laugh, because somehow she always got stuck babysitting.

"Do I look like a day-care provider?" she asked him.

"You seemed to do a pretty good job," Isaac teased. "Except you have a tendency to lose children. That can't be good."

"I wanted to see the horses," Allie explained. "I should have told you, but I thought you'd say no."

Eve maneuvered her chair around the horse, giving the animal a less-than-trusting glance. Shorty didn't even twitch.

"What if something had happened?" Eve asked the little girl.

Allie's shoulders hunkered forward and she sighed. "I didn't think about that. I just wanted to see the animals. Did you know there's a llama?"

Eve melted. She could act tough but on the inside she was a marshmallow. "Yeah, I know there's a llama. Do me a favor—next time ask. And if you're going to wander, take Maximus. Now we need to head back to the house. Your mom will be finished talking with Jack and she'll be looking for you."

"Do we have time to see the llama?" Allie moved close to Eve's chair and leaned on the armrest.

"I think so. But I don't do well in the dirt out there, so Isaac will have to take you." Eve shot him a look.

He glared back, the way he would have done if he'd had a little sister that pestered him. He did have a little

sister, a half sister named Daisy. But since they'd never met, he didn't know if she was a pest.

"I'm kind of busy."

Eve smirked. "Doing what?"

He glanced down at Allie. "Work."

"What work would that be?" Eve continued.

"Believe it or not, Eve, ranch work is real work. There are fences to fix, cattle to work, horses we're training."

She saluted. "Gotcha, Sarge."

He held a hand out to the child at his side. "Even a spitting llama is better than a stubborn female."

As he walked away, Allie's hand in his, Eve called out, "When you get done, could you take her to the house? I have to get some work done."

"No problem," he called back to her.

Allie was silent for a minute. "Isn't she your friend?" He glanced down at the blond-haired child. "She is my friend."

"Did you date and get mad at each other?"

"No, we just like to tease. She knows how to..." He cut off the explanation because a kid wouldn't understand Eve getting under his skin the way she did. "We just like to give each other a hard time. But no, we haven't dated. We're just friends."

Neither of them dated. It was the code on the ranch. This was a place for healing, for getting lives back in order. Relationships were unnecessary baggage for people dealing with physical and emotional problems they'd brought back from war.

The last thing he needed was to drag a woman into his messed-up life. He remembered all too well what it had been like living on this ranch with Jack, back when he was still fighting the nightmares of Vietnam. He remembered Jack climbing into the bottle and not climbing out for weeks, the ranch crumbling around his ears and livestock begging to be fed.

He wasn't Jack, but he feared the what-ifs.

What if he became Jack? What if he hurt a woman and children the way Jack had hurt his wife and kids?

Nah, it wasn't worth that kind of guilt. And fortunately there'd never been a woman who had made him consider getting serious.

The room Jack West used as an office was on a back corner of the sprawling log home. Massive windows offered a view of the wide-open fields belonging to the ranch. One wall of the room was lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases. The shelves were filled with books and family pictures, as well as trophies the ranch had won at different rodeo events in the tristate area. Tristate meaning Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri.

Jack had explained it all at the beginning of the meeting. He'd shared personal details that had been uncomfortable to hear. Stories of his wife, his children, his road to recovery and, now, today, trying to forge a relationship with his estranged, adult children.

So far Carson was the only one of the three who had agreed to meet with him. Isaac was not a full brother to Carson and his siblings, Colt and Daisy.

"I'd love to show you the building I have available," Jack told Rebecca. "I think a salon with the potential to expand to a day spa is a terrific idea. I could see how it would benefit the resort we're renovating. Now I admit, I'm concerned with your ability to bring in local traffic."

"I think you might be surprised," she countered. "Also, we could advertise in nearby communities, like Grove. If people want to get away for the day, go to a top-notch salon, perhaps eat at the tearoom you say is going to be opening in the spring, then why not come to Hope?"

"Why not come to Hope?" He grinned at that. "Good point. We should use that in advertising to local communities."

She couldn't help but smile at his approval. Goodness, she had to stop needing this man's approval and she had to stop basking in his praise. He wasn't her father. And if he learned about her past, he might not be as easygoing as he appeared.

"Yes, why not come to Hope?" Rebecca repeated. Jack gave her a long look. "Why did *you* come to Hope, Rebecca?"

The question took her by surprise. What should she tell him? She had a feeling he would find out her secrets somehow, some way.

"My parents live in Grove. After my aunt passed away last year, I realized Allie and I were adrift in Arizona with no support system. I had friends, but they were busy with their own lives. I decided to move closer to home and I saw your advertisement. My parents..." They wanted nothing to do with her or with Allie. But that didn't matter. If something happened to Rebecca, her parents would be there for Allie. She had to believe that. After all, she was their only child. Allie their only grandchild.

"Rebecca?"

She shook her head at the question. "I'm sorry, I got lost in thought."

"If you ever want to talk..." he offered. And then he grinned. "If you ever want to talk, Kylie is a good listener. I give too much advice and have too many opinions. Or at least that's what the folks hereabouts like to say."

"I'll keep that in mind." She glanced out the window, gathering thoughts that continued to go astray.

Thoughts that could get a woman in trouble. Thoughts of a cowboy with steel-gray eyes and a smile that flashed often and with a ton of mischievous charm. He'd disappeared yesterday after Allie's seizure and she hadn't seen him since. Not even when several of the ranch residents had gathered for dinner in the big dining room that connected to the kitchen.

No one had mentioned him. No one said anything about checking on him to make sure he was okay. Not that it mattered to her.

Her focus needed to stay on taking care of Allie and providing for them as best she could. She was a single mom with only herself to rely on. And now, strangely, she seemed to have a friend in Jack West. With that in mind, she had to do her best. She had to make a success of this salon.

Another quick glance out the window and the object of her thoughts appeared. And next to him, her daughter. They were standing at the fence, and Allie had climbed the bottom rail to stand next to him, her hand reaching for the white-and-black animal.

Rebecca stood. "I should go get Allie. I didn't mean to impose on Eve. And now it seems Isaac has taken over babysitting duty."

She diverted her attention back to Jack, who remained sitting in his deeply cushioned office chair.

He, too, had spotted Isaac and Allie, but didn't look concerned.

"She might have had to get some work done," he said of Eve, who had been a longtime resident of the ranch. "I'm afraid I hadn't planned on our meeting taking quite this long. And I apologize to you for that. Why don't you head on out there and make sure things are okay? Later we'll drive to town and take a look at the building. I'd like for you to see it in person and then we can compare your design ideas to the actual structure. If you like it, it's all yours."

"Thank you, Mr. West."

"Jack." He smiled as he corrected her.

"Thank you, Jack."

A moment later she was cutting across the lawn in the direction of the small enclosure where her daughter remained next to Isaac, her hand reaching for the llama, which seemed less interested in the grass in Allie's hand and more interested in the man next to her.

The llama must be female. He probably charmed all females, young children, animals. Not Rebecca, of course. She couldn't be charmed. She had no desire to be charmed. Ever again. Because charming men usually had an agenda and it usually ended with her being hurt.

"Hey," Rebecca called out. Allie glanced her way. Isaac continued to stare straight ahead. Ignoring her, of course.

The phone in her back pocket buzzed. She wanted to ignore it, but pulled it from her pocket and answered.

"Rebecca Barnes?" The voice wasn't a familiar one. It had been years, but her first thought was that something had happened to her parents.

"This is she."

"My name is Jared Owens. I'm a parole officer out of Springfield, Missouri."

Her heart dropped. This call could go only one way. It would bring back the past. It would bring back the guilt and the pain.

"Okay." She focused on Allie, who had turned around to watch her. Rebecca waved and smiled, as if the call hadn't left her cold inside.

"Miss Barnes, Greg Baxter was released from prison one month ago. He's missed two appointments with me and I have reason to believe he might be in Oklahoma."

"How did you get my number?" She hadn't been in contact with Greg in years. Not since he robbed a store, shortly after she'd realized she was pregnant with Allie. She'd been eighteen at the time and Greg had been a mistake. Her attention remained on Allie, who was definitely not a mistake. She was something beautiful from something so ugly and hurtful. Her daughter.

"Your mother gave me your number," he continued. "Miss Barnes, we have reason to believe that Greg will try to locate you and his daughter."

"No." The one word emerged from deep within. "He can't see her."

"I understand that. I agree that he should not be in your lives. I want you to understand that there is a warrant out for his arrest. He violated the conditions of his parole and it's our intention to bring him back to the state of Missouri. This is a courtesy call because I wouldn't want you to be taken by surprise should he try to contact you."

"Thank you. I do appreciate that."

"Miss Barnes, if he does contact you, please phone us. I'll give you my direct line."

"I'll put it in my phone." She managed to minimize the screen and switch to Contacts. With fingers that felt cold and clumsy she entered the name and number. The call ended. Her world shifted precariously as she considered what it meant to her life, to Allie's life, that Greg Baxter had been released. She drew in a deep breath and then exhaled. She wouldn't let him take anything else from her.

Over the years people had told her to have faith, to realize God had a plan. She'd been unable to find faith since the day her dad had told her that Allie's seizures were a direct result of Rebecca's sins.

"Mom?" Allie called out, her happy grin faltering.

Rebecca hurried forward, plastering a smile on her face and avoiding eye contact with the man who studied her with a knowing expression.

"We were meeting Mama Llama," he finally said.

She had to look at him, had to pretend that everything was just fine. Had to prove she wasn't shaking inside, threatened by the past and the memories.

"Mama Llama doesn't appear to like you very much," Rebecca said, pointing to the animal, which had drawn back and bared its teeth at Isaac.

"Yeah, females sometimes take an instant dislike to me. I can't imagine why."

"He let me brush his horse," Allie chimed in. It seemed not all females disliked the cowboy.

"That must have been fun. And where is Eve?"

Allie shot Isaac a worried look and Rebecca pretended not to notice his wink.

"She had to get some work done," he explained.

Not only had he charmed her daughter, now he was aiding and abetting her. Rebecca pinned him with a

look, and like her daughter, he squirmed a little with guilt.

"And she brought Allie to you?"

Allie groaned. "I might have sneaked off while she was on the phone. I saw the horses."

"Telling the truth," Isaac said. "Always good for the soul."

Rebecca held out a hand to her daughter. "We're going to town for lunch and then we will meet Mr. West at the shop. Isaac, thank you."

He pushed against the llama as it reached across the fence to nip at his sleeve. The animal came back and grabbed his hat. Allie laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks, and the tension inside Rebecca eased.

Isaac pointed at Rebecca. "Was that a giggle, Ms. Barnes?"

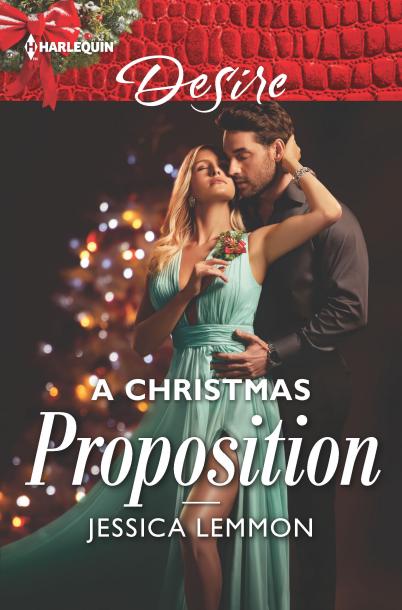
"I'm an adult. I don't giggle." Rebecca smiled as he pushed his hat, tooth marks and all, back on his head.

"It most definitely was a giggle. And for that, I'm buying lunch."

Rebecca tried to object. She seriously wanted to tell him he couldn't. But before she could respond, Allie had jumped down off the railing, a huge grin on her face, obviously thrilled with the idea.

So she accepted. For Allie's sake. Nothing else.

Want to know what happens next? Order your copy of *The Rancher's Christmas Match*by Brenda Minton today!



One

December 20

Source: thedallasduchess.com

EXCLUSIVE:

STEFANIE FERGUSON AND BLAKE EASTWOOD REUNION

Good morning, Dallas!

As maven of this fine city, the Dallas Duchess makes it her job to know the happenings of local royalty. In this town, no royalty is finer than the Fergusons.

"Princess" Stefanie Ferguson, socialite, heiress and party girl, has been spotted once again on the arm of cunning and charming Blake Eastwood, who just so happens to be the mayor's *biggest* opponent. (Naughty, naughty!) And, my savvy duchess dolls, you're all aware that the mayor=Stefanie's gorgeous

and recently betrothed brother. Yes, ladies, another of Dallas's eligible bachelors is about to bite the dust.

(As an aside, you longtimers may recall my breaking story about the mayor shacking up in Montana during a snowstorm with his old flame. Hotcha! You always hear it here first.)

But back to Princess Stef and her dashing bad boy... By now you've no doubt seen the photo circulating on social media of Blake and Stefanie dancing cheek to cheek at a Toys for Tots fund-raiser. And if you're an astute observer like *moi*, you felt the sparks flying from that photo. As of right this very minute, I can confirm what my pitter-pattering heart was hoping for the most:

Stefanie and Blake are together!

Recently, I spoke with Blake and while I couldn't get him to commit to a timeline, I did learn a *verrrry* juicy bit of intel.

Dallas Duchess: I have to ask for the sake of my readers. Are you and Stefanie Ferguson seeing each other again?

Blake Eastwood: [emits a sexy chuckle] Um. Yes. We are.

DD: [squeals of delight] Can you tell me more?

BE: I can tell you that it's new, but serious.

DD: Put-a-ring-on-it serious?

BE: Come on, Duchess, I can't let every cat out of the bag.

DD: But it's almost Christmas! Surely you can give us one teeny-tiny hint?

BE: Christmastime is Stef's favorite time of the year. She whispered in my ear just yesterday that it's the perfect time to shop at Tiffany & Co. I'm a man who knows how to take a hint.

Ladies, gentlemen. If that's not a confirmation that Blake is popping the question Stefanie is *begging* him to ask, I don't know what is!

Go forth and share across social media with the links below. Looks like a Christmas engagement could be forthcoming!

Stefanie Ferguson paced the shining white floor of her sister-in-law's home office in a pair of knee-high, spike-heel Christian Louboutin boots. Unlike the last public relations hiccup she'd gotten into with Blake, this one couldn't be handled over a cup of coffee at Hip Stir.

Late last night, she'd been sipping on hot cocoa with Sambuca when she received a text from Blake.

Dallas Duchess has some news to share tomorrow. Me and you, gorgeous.

She'd pecked in an angry "Go to hell" followed by "Leave me alone" and then erased both lines in favor of ignoring him.

Lord only knew what he would've done with the screenshots if she'd texted him. It had taken everything in her not to respond to his baiting. Blake was Bad News with a capital *B* and *N*.

Last year, he'd gone to the Dallas Duchess via one

of her brother's staff members to break the story about Miriam Andrix returning to Chase's life. The write-up was in defense of Chase and almost lecturing Miriam for ruining the city's chaste mayor. Ridiculous. It was clear to anyone who saw them together that Miriam and Chase were gaga over each other—even Stefanie could see that, and she was Chase's sister.

Blake's original motivation for his nefarious smear campaign was building a new civic center, which he wanted to erect *very close* to Ferguson Oil property. Chase had been saying no for years. Blake had promised to "ruin him" if it was the last thing he did, as if he were some sort of mustache-twisting bandit.

Stef reminded herself, again, that she hadn't known the dirty details when Blake charmed her into his hotel bed one lonely night a few years back. She certainly had never expected him to release pictures of them leaving the hotel together.

Penelope Ferguson had summoned a PR magic spell to bail Stef out of her Blake-related problem then, and she'd had a hand in smoothing over Chase and Miriam's relationship last year. With Chase's imminent reelection looming—Stef refused to consider the possibility of him losing—she had zero worries that Pen would be able to work her magic again and smooth this one over, as well.

"You should've called me the second Blake the Snake sent you that text," Penelope scolded from where she sat in front of her computer screen. Her full mouth was a firm line of displeasure, her eyes narrowed in frustration.

Stef stopped pacing and wrapped herself protectively in her own arms. "It was late. I didn't want to bother you."

And she hadn't wanted her sister-in-law to hear the

raw vulnerability in her voice. Stef might have refused to respond with the intent of letting Blake know how little he'd affected her, but in truth he had. Like the first time those hotel photos saw the light of day, she felt cheap and used.

He'd been charming and—she'd thought—vulnerable the night he'd told her he wanted her. She'd been fresh off a breakup and vulnerable herself. A night with an attractive man who appreciated her—even one who disagreed with her brother the mayor—was supposed to have boosted her confidence and relieved a long drought of physical affection.

They'd both been attending a boring fund-raiser at the time. Champagne had flowed and he'd been accommodating and, she knew now, lying. He'd been seeking revenge on Chase and would take any of the Fergusons as his pound of flesh. She'd allowed herself to be talked into going to bed with him and she still felt the sting of embarrassment and anger at her naïveté.

The next day, the photos had surfaced and she'd been accused of slutting around with the mayor's nemesis.

And now this.

"When was the fund-raiser where this was taken?" Pen turned her laptop screen to show the most recent leaked photo of Blake and Stef cheek to cheek on the dance floor.

"Last weekend."

"You're looking cozy."

"He asked me to dance by taking my hand and dragging me to the floor. I didn't want to cause a scene by telling him where to shove his invitation."

She'd caused enough problems for her brother and his campaign. Chase didn't hold her accountable, but she couldn't unshoulder her fair share of responsibility. "What you don't see in this photo is that I'm telling him off. I used some very unladylike language, hence my leaning in close. I told him if he didn't leave me and my family alone, I'd castrate him with a pair of dull shears."

Stef smiled, proud. At least she'd stood up for herself then. Pen wasn't smiling with her.

"What you did was step into a snare of his making, Stefanie. *Again*." Pen shook her head. "He timed the release of this photo on purpose, to coincide with the reelection. Why is he hinting that you two are going to be married?"

Stef felt her cheeks warm as she recalled the rest of her conversation that night. "That...is partially my fault."

Pen raised her eyebrows and waited.

Stef, you'll be single forever with a mouth like that. You have to be a good little girl if you ever hope to land a husband. Blake had swept her in another circle on the dance floor while her ire had risen to dangerous levels.

Ha! You're one to talk. Is there a female on this planet who would willingly perch in your family tree or do you have to trick them all into going to bed with you?

You came willingly. A few times if memory serves.

"He was holding me tight, and twisting away didn't loosen his hold on my waist." Stef licked her lips, regretting her words now that she'd felt the sting of retaliation. "I may have mentioned something about a 'tiny prick' and 'faking it' and that if he didn't let me go, I'd tell everyone within earshot how unsatisfying it was to be bedded by Blake the Snake."

Pen's eyebrows climbed higher on her forehead, and just when Stef was sure she'd be read the riot act, her sister-in-law's smile burst forth like the sun after a hard rain

"You know how to find trouble, don't you?" Pen asked through a laugh. She must've caught Stef's crestfallen features when she looked up because she was out of her chair in a shot. "I'm sorry I said that. Ignore me."

Pen grabbed Stef's shoulders and Stef felt the wobble in her chin paired with heat behind her eyes.

"I don't try to."

"I didn't mean it that way. Seriously." Pen pulled Stef into a hug.

Stef felt like a fragile piece of china lately, not wanting to be in the way of Chase's campaign or too involved while Pen and Zach raised their daughter. Heck, even Mom and Dad were going through a second honeymoon phase, so Stef was trying to stay out from underfoot in that capacity, as well.

"You can fix this." Stef swallowed her budding tears. "You have unraveled some of the biggest knots in Dallas since you moved here. Tell me the easiest, fastest, most succinct way to crush this fake news."

"As a woman who had her own false engagement to contend with—" Pen smirked "—I have had experience with this sort of thing. Only the 'groom' was your brother and part of the plan."

"And Blake's a renegade douchebag."

Of all the bad decisions Stef had made during her thirty brief years on this planet, why this one? Why had she fallen victim to that man's false charms?

"If you were anyone other than my sister-in-law, I'd advise you to get married."

"To Blake?" Stef practically shrieked.

"No! My God. No. I'm saying the best way to trump

Blake's claim that he's engaged to you is to marry someone else. Know any eligible bachelors?"

Stef was staring in shock. This certainly wasn't the advice she'd expected to get from Penelope.

"I'm *joking*." Pen gave Stef's shoulders a little shake before moving back to her desk. Laptop open, she started typing. "I'll craft a plan to detangle this mess that will work for you and your brother the mayor."

"Thank you."

Pen smiled up at her. "And I promise it won't involve nuptials."

Two

Emmett Keaton had been Chase Ferguson's close friend, arguably his best friend, since college.

He could say with authority that Chase rarely allowed his feathers to ruffle. But today his feathers weren't only ruffled, they were scattered to the four corners of the earth.

Since it was Emmett's job to keep the mayor's office safe, he'd have to assume the role of "the calm one" today. As the scandal currently wreaking havoc had to do with Stefanie, he found it challenging to bank his own anger.

The youngest Ferguson had a talent for finding trouble.

"When I get my hands on that sniveling weasel," Chase grated out through teeth that were welded together, "I swear on everything holy—"

"Chase." Penelope—wife to Chase's brother, Zach—

stood in front of Chase's desk, arms crossed. She was dressed in a white pantsuit, her long blond hair pulled into a neat twist at the back of her head. Her stance broadcast one undeniable truth: she wasn't intimidated by power. She'd handled many a powerful man as a public relations specialist over the years, and had become a trusted friend when Chase hired her to care for Stef the first time she stepped in it with Blake fucking Eastwood.

Because Chase trusted her, Emmett did, also.

"I've got this," Pen said. "You have nothing to worry about."

A muscle in Chase's jaw ticked but he gave his sisterin-law a curt nod. She returned it with one of her own and spun on one very high-heeled shoe to leave.

Once she was out the door, Chase glanced at Emmett with irises so dark they bordered on black.

Chase punched a button on his phone. "Cynthia. Get my sister on the line."

"Yes, sir."

"Sure you want to do that, boss?" Emmett asked.

Chase didn't answer.

A moment later, the desk phone rang.

"Where the hell are you?" Chase barked into the receiver. A brief pause and then, "You have thirty seconds." He slammed the phone down on its base and glared at the only target in the room. Emmett took the blow without flinching. "She was already on her way."

"Good."

Chase needed to redirect his anger? Fine.

It was better than him unleashing it on Stefanie.

The door burst open almost exactly thirty seconds later. Stefanie strode into the office in a short red designer dress, tall boots with dangerous-looking heels and a painted pout in siren red.

"I saw Pen on my way in." Stef tucked her cell phone into an oversize handbag. "She warned me that you weren't in the best mood. I'm assuming you're mad at me."

Nostrils flared, Chase pulled in a deep breath through his nose. When he spoke, his words were carefully measured. "I'm not angry with you, Stefanie. I'm—"

"Don't say *disappointed*." She dropped the handbag onto the leather chair in the corner of the room and sent Emmett a derisive glare.

Typical.

She hated him for reasons he'd yet to discern. He'd only ever offered assistance when she'd needed him—whether she'd asked or not. If memory served, she'd never asked.

"I'm *concerned*," Chase said, and her head swiveled back to her brother. "Your Christmas retreat is soon, yes?"

"Yes." A smile of pure delight crested her red mouth.

That smile lit her face like a string of holiday lights. Emmett had never seen someone so in love with the idea of Christmas. Loving the holiday was as foreign to him as understanding anything else about the lush lifestyle his best friend's family led. In spite of his own amassed fortune, Emmett had no desire for frills of any kind. And he certainly had no desire to celebrate an occasion that brought forth bad memories and worse consequences.

"Where is it this year?" Chase asked.

[&]quot;San Antonio."

[&]quot;Cancel it."

Her face morphed into tortured shock. "What? Never. Absolutely not."

"That wasn't a request. There was no question mark at the end of my sentence." Chase pointed at her, his quaking arm revealing his anger. "Because you don't have the sense to stay away from Blake Eastwood, my campaign is suffering from the fallout."

Emmett's hands balled into fists at his sides.

He was rarely in disagreement with his friend, but in this case, Chase's comments were out of line. Stef had been briefly involved with Blake—whom Emmett would love to go a round or two with, bare-knuckle—but the accusation that she was to blame was harsh.

"Whatever you have to do in San Antonio with your girlfriends can be done from Dallas just as easily. You're not leaving the city, and if you do go out, you're going to be chaperoned. Do you understand me?"

Her stricken expression faded into a laugh of disbelief. "You can't ground me, Chase. You're not my father. And even if you were Dad, he can't ground me, either. I'm thirty years old!"

"Then why are you acting like a spoiled teenager?" Chase roared.

"Hey!" Emmett's outburst was so unexpected that both Fergusons faced him wearing shell-shocked expressions.

He took a step closer to Chase, instinct more than decision driving him. "Let's keep the blame where it should be. *On Blake*. Stefanie's been through enough. She doesn't need you piling on."

Chase's lips pressed into a thin, frustrated frown. Then he pinched the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath and leaned both hands flat on his desk.

Emmett flickered a glance over at Stefanie, who, for

the first time in her life, regarded him with something akin to gratitude. He wasn't sure what to do with that.

"I'm asking, Stefanie—" Chase addressed his blotter before sitting in his chair and meeting his sister's eyes "—for your cooperation."

"Penelope is amazing at her job. There's no reason she can't—"

"I'm asking," Chase repeated, his voice firmer.

"I look forward to this retreat every year. I can't cancel an event that happens in four days."

"Why not?" Chase's forehead dented. "Can't you and your girlfriends drink champagne and talk about fashion another time? Mail them their gifts. Hell, invite them here. You can host at my mansion."

"I...can't do that." She regarded her impractical boots, appearing tormented by the idea of canceling.

Disappointment, Emmett could understand. Torment didn't make a hell of a lot of sense.

Stef loved her family above all else. Over the years, Emmett had witnessed the special bond she and Chase had—she respected her brother. And she would never lie to him. So why was Emmett getting the distinct impression that she was trying hard not to do just that? Why couldn't she party here in town? Why did she have to travel to San Antonio?

She wasn't lying—not yet—but she was definitely keeping from saying too much.

"Plans can be changed. I'll foot the bill for it, if you like," Chase told her. "I'll grease some palms and find you a last-minute venue in Dallas. You can't leave town with this mark on your back. I forbid it."

"What mark? Do you think I'm going to be kidnapped by Blake's henchmen or something?" Stef let out an exasperated laugh. Emmett didn't find it funny. His back went ramrod straight, his senses on high alert at the idea that any harm would befall her.

He forbade it.

"You do things without thinking," the mayor said. "Who knows what could happen?"

"Chase, that's enough." Emmett took a step closer—to Stefanie this time.

His friend was right to watch out for his youngest sibling, but he was handling this wrong. Not that Emmett had much experience with sensitivity—he had been raised by Van Keaton, after all. But Emmett knew Stef and he also knew the situation. He couldn't keep from stepping at least one toe in her corner.

"You can stand down," Stef snapped. "I don't need your protection from my stupid brother."

"You need protection from yourself," Chase interjected.

This conversation was getting nowhere.

"I'm going to San Antonio tomorrow," she said. "I'll be back in a few days. I'm sure your *precious* campaign will be intact when I return." She grabbed her handbag and slung it over her shoulder as Chase rose from his chair, his face a beet-worthy shade of red.

"I'll drive you," Emmett blurted.

Again he was faced by both Fergusons. But only one of them looked upset by his offer. The cute blonde one.

"Yes. Great idea." Chase nodded. "Emmett will be your escort."

"I don't want an escort!"

"I don't care!"

"Knock it off." Emmett bodily moved himself to stand between Stefanie and Chase. "I'll drive you to San Antonio. Book me a room wherever you're staying." "It's a bed-and-breakfast and it's *full*." She raised her chin, her aquamarine eyes flashing in warning.

"I'll sleep in my SUV." Emmett tipped his head in challenge. "It's either this or you don't go. Your brother's right about it being dangerous. Your image is plastered all over social media. I've seen you in the spotlight before. Paparazzi chase you, Stef."

She was beautiful and young and easily the most famous female billionaire in Dallas, if not the state of Texas. The combination of her it-girl reputation and a rumor that she was going to marry the mayor's sworn enemy made for tempting media fodder.

She opened her mouth, probably to argue.

Emmett lifted his eyebrows, silently communicating. *Give me a break, okay?*

Miraculously, rather than arguing, she gritted out, "Fine."

"Great. Get out," Chase said. "Both of you."

So, his best friend was prickly. So what? Emmett wasn't one for being handled with kid gloves. His rhino-tough hide had been hewed at a young age.

"Come on," he told Stef, opening the mayor's door for her to exit. "I'll give you a ride home."

Emmett held open the passenger door of his black SUV, a gas-guzzling, tinted-windowed, way-too-big-for-a-road-trip vehicle.

"You can't be serious about taking this beast to San Antonio. We'll have to pull over every fifteen miles to refill the tank."

"Get In"

She glared up at his chiseled jaw and perfectly shaped head beneath very short, dark brown hair. He wore it cropped close and rarely was it more than a few inches long on top. He was bedecked in what she'd come to think of as his "standard uniform." A crisp white shirt open at the collar and dark slacks. His brawn and bulk and attitude were better suited for a T-shirt and sweats, but his job title required a dab of formality.

She tossed her purse inside and grasped the SUV's door handle and the front seat to climb in. Emmett's warm, broad palm cupped her elbow to steady her, and she nearly jerked away in shock. If she wasn't mistaken, that was the first time he'd ever touched her.

It was...alarming.

And not in the get-your-damn-hands-off-me kind of way. His touch had felt...intimate.

Once she was inside he dropped his voice and leaned close. She ignored the clean leather smell of him. Or tried to, anyway.

"Heads up. There's a suspicious cyclist over there." He shut her door and walked around to the driver's side.

She scanned the immediate area outside her brother's office twice before she spotted a casual-looking guy on a bike with a cell phone conspicuously propped on the handlebars and pointing at the SUV.

Damn.

As much as she hated to admit it, Chase might have had a point about media attention.

Emmett settled into the driver's seat and turned over the engine, sending her an assessing, stony gray stare. Typically, his eyes held a note of blue, but today they mirrored the cloudy skies above.

"What?" she barked. "Do you want me to congratulate you because you're right?"

He smirked. "Buckle your belt."

"Let's get one thing straight, Neanderthal," she said

as she jerked the belt over her torso. "You may believe a woman's place is in the passenger seat. Or that I can't handle anything on my own without one of you *big strong* men to help me out, but FYI, I am not yours to command."

Though some foreign tingly part of her suggested that Emmett might be the perfect specimen to take commands *from*.

She swallowed the rest of her speech about being an adult and handling her own problems, mainly because they both felt like stretches of the truth. In all of her attempts not to involve her family in her life, she'd somehow managed to tow them in. Her parents, Chase, Penelope, Zach and now Emmett.

Angry with herself more than her driver, she stared out the window in silence as the SUV pulled away from the curb.

Three

Stef had gone to bed late last night, staring at the ceiling for a long while, her mind lost on her current predicament.

She hadn't stayed up late to pack—she'd done that already and her matching luggage was lined up dutifully next to her apartment door. Knowing that Emmett would pick her up promptly at 7:00 a.m., she also hadn't indulged in more than one glass of sparkling rosé before bed. No, her insomnia couldn't be blamed on a lack of planning or too much alcohol. She'd lain awake, earning this morning's puffy eyes and groggy brain for one reason.

She was tired of being everyone else's problem.

It wasn't enough to tell her parents and her brothers that she was an adult. She had to *show* them. In order to show them, she needed to take care of the Blake situation herself.

Penelope was equipped to handle any PR disaster, but the more Stef thought about it, the more Pen's plan to "wait and see" sounded like a slow track to a solution. Chase's election was less than six months away. Stefanie refused to let Blake continue to drag her family's good name through the muck.

Chase had made it clear last fall that he didn't hold Stefanie accountable for her act of indiscretion with Blake. In spite of his absolving her, her guilt remained.

That Blake held this much power over her infuriated her. She refused to let him cause her to lose even one more minute of sleep.

Last night while staring at the ceiling of her apartment, she'd decided not to let Blake have that power over her family, either.

Penelope's words rang in her ears.

If you were anyone other than my sister-in-law, I'd advise you to get married.

Well, why hadn't that been Pen's suggestion? It shouldn't matter that Stefanie was her sister-in-law. A solution was a solution! There was only one *eensy-weensy* problem. Stefanie would have to find someone to marry, and fast.

She wasn't sure who to approach, let alone how to ask. She'd climbed out of bed during the wee hours, unhooked her phone from the charger in her kitchen and poured one more small glass of wine. Then she started scrolling through her contacts in her phone's address book.

Every prospect she thumbed through seemed worse than the last. She passed over ex-boyfriends, hookups and acquaintances alike. None of them were marriage material—not even temporarily. Plus, how would she ask for a favor like that from someone she hadn't talked to in months, or years in some cases?

Hi, I know you haven't heard from me for a while, but would you mind marrying me for a few months?

Not to mention she would need her groom to keep their marriage arrangement a secret. The entire purpose of the ruse would be to convince the press and that horrible blogger woman that Stefanie wasn't involved with Blake. Then Blake would be forced to recant his bullshit statement.

After she'd thought it through, she decided an engagement announcement would look like a desperate cover-up. It gave Blake too much wiggle room, and she couldn't risk him slithering into her family's life again.

Wineglass empty and fatigue finally overcoming her, Stef had dragged herself to the couch, pulled a blanket over her body and caught about three hours of tossing-turning sleep.

The knock on her front door came way too early, even though she was ready for it. She'd pulled her hair into a sloppy bun on top of her head, dashed on a layer of makeup and donned big, dark sunglasses so that *if* a photo was snapped of her in the wild, she wouldn't look like she'd had a sleepless night fretting over Blake.

Stef had called Pen yesterday afternoon and suggested releasing a statement that she was no more marrying Blake than she was marrying Kermit the Frog, but Pen had recommended against it.

We can't turn this into he said, she said, especially while you're out of town. Let's let the dust settle and we'll handle things in the new year. Enjoy your Christmas party!

Despite what she'd led everyone to believe, Stef wasn't going to a Christmas party with her girlfriends.

She was hosting a massive charity dinner that she'd arranged for some of the poorest families in Harlington, a city outside San Antonio.

Over the last three Christmas Eves, she'd hosted similar dinners and, so far, had kept her little Christmas secret. She didn't want publicity or attention for it—not yet. She wanted to do it her way, and *without* input from family members on how to arrange the place settings or what kind of food to serve.

Providing for the less fortunate and giving back filled her with a sense of satisfaction like nothing else. To Stef, this dinner party was about more than writing a check. She'd personally witnessed gratitude and happiness on the faces of men, women and children who otherwise wouldn't have had a merry Christmas.

Hiding what she was doing from her family wasn't too difficult, but keeping her identity a secret from her guests was a bit trickier. So far so good—no one had recognized her yet. She might be widely recognized by the snooty Dallas upper crust, but to the hardworking people of Texas proper, she was simply a young woman helping out.

Her goal was to grow the charity event larger starting next year, which would mean she'd need to reveal her true identity in order to expand and give it the attention it deserved. But she couldn't do that while living in the Ferguson shadow or tiptoeing around her brother and his career as mayor.

Yes, going public would mean she'd have to do a bit of pruning to her own reputation before next Christmas.

"Coming!" she called when the knock at the door came again.

She rushed to the door and held it open, but rather

than ushering Emmett forward, she ended up walking outside into the cold with him.

"Is that snow? Oh my gosh, that's snow!"

Snow in Texas was a rare occasion. Typically this time of year temperatures hovered in the forties.

"Yeah—hey, where are you going?"

She ignored him to step out onto her upstairs front stoop. The snow wasn't sticking, sadly, but the flakes were enough to fill her heart with joy. Each delicate, sparkly and, yes, *sloppy* flake was a reminder that her favorite holiday was nearly upon them.

"It's beautiful."

"It's wet. Inconvenient. And not why I live in Texas." She frowned at Emmett. In a black leather coat, his white collared shirt visible just beneath the open zipper, and his standard black pants and leather boots, he should look like a tall, attractive, sturdy man she could count on. Instead, he was a grousing, grumpy individual set on ruining her good mood.

"It's *magical*. And I refuse to let you make me feel bad about that."

She slapped a palm against his broad chest, shoving him aside. Okay, so she didn't so much shove him as push against a chest made of solid muscle that had no give whatsoever. No matter! Emmett Keaton was not going to ruin her day. She'd already given that power away, and all too recently. It was a mistake she vowed not to repeat.

"I'll just take these *magical* bags out to my *mystical* SUV and wait for you to float on down, then," he said as he picked up her luggage.

Humming a Christmas tune to drown out Scrooge Keaton, she snagged her coffee thermos out from under the single-cup coffee maker and snapped on the lid. She might have to spend several days with him, but thank God the car ride was only four hours long.

How much damage could he do in four hours?

Hour One

"No Christmas music."

"That's inhumane."

She stabbed the button on the radio to turn it on and Emmett pushed a button on the steering wheel to shut it off.

"Can you explain to me how I am on my way to a Christmas celebration—that you have volunteered to drive me to, by the way—and yet I'm not allowed to listen to Christmas music on the drive over?"

"My car. My rules."

"That was rhetorical. Don't be a grump." She turned on the music again, and again Emmett turned it off. "What if the volume is really, really low?"

He didn't pull his eyes from the road, not even to glare at her.

"Fine. I'll talk instead." She cleared her throat. "So, I found this dress for my mother's art show next month. It's blue and sparkly and goes perfectly with my new shoes that I bought from—"

A long-suffering sigh sounded from his chest, and Emmett powered on the radio in surrender. He thumbed down the volume button on the steering wheel, but she considered it a win.

Hour Two

"I don't see why we couldn't stop at a decent restaurant and order takeout." She held the fast-food bag

between a finger and thumb and eyed the grease spots that had seeped through the paper dubiously. "There are approximately a million calories in this bag. If I'm going to consume a million calories, it'd better be a gourmet meal."

Emmett stuck his hand into the bag and came out with one of the cheeseburgers. She watched as he unwrapped the sandwich, took a huge bite and, because that move took both hands, drove with his knee.

Because he was big enough to drive with his knee.

One booted foot firmly on the floor, his left knee kept the SUV perfectly positioned in the center of the lane

What an irritatingly sexy move that was. Why did he have to be so damn capable at everything?

She rummaged through the bag until she found her sandwich. A fish sandwich had been the least calorie-laden item on the menu. It was roughly the size of a silver dollar, smashed flat, and half the cheese was glued to the cardboard container rather than on the bun.

"Great."

Emmett's hand plunged into the bag again and he came out with a container of fries. The burger held in one hand, he wedged the fry container between his big thighs and shoved three or four fries into his mouth. Even with one cheek stuffed like a chipmunk's, he didn't appear any less capable.

She'd been around strong men all her life. Her father and her brothers were all strong, commanding, decisive men.

Emmett had those traits as well, but it came in a less refined package. Sure, he dressed well, but there was a rough-hewn edge beneath that Armani shirt.

It bothered her. It bothered her because it didn't make any sense.

It bothers you because you find it attractive.

Just like she'd found Blake attractive? Just like she'd found plenty of other men who were all wrong for her attractive?

She nibbled on the edge of her fish sandwich, sending a longing look to the fries nestled between Emmett's legs.

"See something you like?" He crumpled the empty burger wrapper and tossed it into the fast-food bag at her feet.

She jerked her gaze to his face and was alarmed to find him smiling over at her.

"No. I don't," she argued a little too fervently.

His smile remained. Eyes on the road, he proffered the container of fries.

Rather than resist, she plucked out three perfectly golden, salty potatoes and reminded herself that the bossy, attractive man in the driver's seat was as bad for her as this meal.

Want to know what happens next?
Order your copy of *The Christmas Proposition*by Jessica Lemmon today!