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INTRIGUE

CORNERED AT CHRISTMAS

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Chapter One

The weather was warmer than usual for a late fall morning in North Texas, the heavy air loaded with the threat of a thunderstorm. Mitch Kent was gripping the handlebar of the double stroller so tightly as he stalked toward the medical plaza that his knuckles were turning white. Anger roared through him as reality sucker punched him. He'd already lost so much. A father twenty-three months ago. A wife less than that. The possibility of losing Rea, his infant daughter, gnawed away what was left of his gut.

Granted, all signs pointed toward positive news this visit for his younger and smaller twin. Life had taught Mitch how fast it could reverse and how devastating it could be when it took a wrong turn. He felt like he had about as much control as a sailboat in a hurricane. And that made him all kinds of frustrated. Mitch didn't go the helpless-victim route.

His cell buzzed in his pocket, breaking the pressure building between his shoulders that was threat-

ening to crack him in half. He fished it out and checked the screen. It was Amber, his sister and the youngest of six Kent siblings.

"Wish I could be there with you, Mitch." She skipped over hellos.

"It's fine," he said probably a little too fast.

"You're not and you don't have to be," she countered, her voice strained. He appreciated the concern, just not the fuss.

"We talked about it last night when you called. You're needed at the ranch and I can handle this," he reassured her. He hoped she didn't pick up on the emptiness in those words.

There was a long pause.

"Are you sure you want to do this by yourself?" she finally asked. He didn't want to do any of it alone but life had detoured, leaving him to roll with the turns and try not to get sucked into the current.

"I haven't had two minutes of privacy since the twins were born," he said with a half laugh. That part was true enough and he tried to lighten the mood with humor. Anything to keep his thoughts from taking the headfirst dive that always left him wondering how he'd do any of this without Kimberly.

"You know what I mean." She was the last of his siblings to call before the twins' one-year checkup. Each of his brothers—Will, Devin, Nate and Jordan—had done their best to lift Mitch's mood. During the appointment, he'd learn if his younger twin, the lit-

tle girl, was in the clear or headed for surgery. The thought of anyone cracking open her tiny body was a hot poker in his chest.

"I know you'd be here if you could, Amber. The ranch needs you more than I do." The Kent siblings had inherited their parents' North Texas cattle ranch nearly two years ago, following their father's death. Their mother had passed six months prior.

The one-hour drive into Fort Worth had been smooth and the twins had slept most of the way. But the two were wide-awake now and taking in the scenery as he pushed their stroller onto the center of the medical plaza. A maze of buildings surrounded them and there was a memorial fountain that was catching the twins' attention in the center of the complex. Mitch stopped in front of the three-story glass-walled structure attached to the hospital in the state-of-the-art building that contained the doctor his wife had handpicked for their babies.

"She's going to be okay, Mitch. You know that, right?" Amber said, and he could hear the concern in her voice even though she tried to mask it.

"There's every reason to hope based on the last couple of appointments," he responded. The last eleven months without Kimberly had been hell. Mitch Kent missed his wife. He missed the way her hair smelled like freshly cut lilies when she would curl into the crook of his arm every night in bed. He missed the feel of her warm body pressed to his,

long into the night. The easy way they had with each other, talking until the sun came up. And he missed coming home to her smile every night after a long day of working his family's cattle ranch. Losing her had damn near shattered him

First his mother, followed by his father. Then his wife. He'd lost so much

Mitch realized he was still tightly gripping the stroller with his left hand. He flexed and released his fingers to get the blood flowing again.

"Those babies couldn't have asked for a better father." With five rough-and-tumble brothers, Amber was the emotional voice of the Kent brood.

"They need their mother." There were more times than Mitch could count that he'd wished his wife was still alive. They might have dated only a few months before tying the knot, but he'd fallen hard. When a man met the woman he was supposed to spend the rest of his life with, he knew it. Hers had been cut way too short. "I'm glad they have you."

"Good. Because I'm not going anywhere. Call me Super Aunt." He could tell she was getting emotional based on the change in her tone and the lame attempt at humor.

"Sounds like a plan." He went with it.

"And don't forget Amy." She was referring to their cousin. Amber and Amy were close in age, and both were mostly sweet with wild streaks that got them in trouble from time to time. Both had hearts of gold,

and he couldn't have asked for better women to be in his twins' lives.

"Call or text the minute you get word." Amber made him promise.

"I will," he said before ending the call.

Mitch would learn today if his daughter, born two minutes after his son and almost two pounds lighter, was in the clear. In the best-case scenario, the small hole in the wall that separated the two lower chambers of Rea's heart was still too small to cause any serious damage, like overworking her heart and lungs or sending blood flowing in the wrong direction. Mitch blocked out another possibility. The one that involved a lot of medical jargon, some kind of fabric patch and cracking open the center of his baby girl's chest.

The appointment last month had gone off without a hitch. The doctor had said he was encouraged by what he heard when he listened to her chest. All signs were pointing toward good news. But doing any of this without his Kimberly seemed wrong. Then again everything that had happened in the past eleven months since her devastating car crash had been all wrong.

An all-consuming fist of guilt took another punch at him for not stopping her from walking out the door that day with her car keys in hand. For the sake of his children, he pushed the unproductive emotion aside. Reliving hell didn't ease the burns.

His courtship with Kimberly might've been a whirlwind but his feelings for his wife were anything but a passing storm. He'd known her barely two months before popping the question, which had surprised him even more than his siblings. They'd gone along with the wedding without protest after meeting Kimberly and seeing the two of them together. And they'd stood by his side on that cold rainy day when he'd first heard about the crash.

Mitch rubbed the scruff on his chin and blinked his blurry eyes, forcing back the barrage of thoughts racing through him. Letting his mind run wild wouldn't bring his wife back.

Exhaustion had thrown him off today. He gave himself a mental slap to shake off the bad mood.

He needed more caffeine.

Sleep and twins went together about as well as hot sauce and ice cream, and Mitch was beginning to feel the effects of being up for most of the night with the kiddos. Both were teething, which pretty much meant drippy chins.

The sounds of his daughter's babbling floated on top of the heavy fall air. He'd insisted on naming their little girl after her mother, but Kimberly had argued against it. They'd finally agreed on Andrea if she could go by Rea instead—Aaron and Andrea. Of course, he'd take back every disagreement if he could get back that last day with her and tell her to stay home instead of walking her out the door, hand-

ing her the car keys and telling her how much she needed a break.

Rea was growing into a talker. Mitch had no idea what the little tyke was saying, but that didn't stop his daughter from prattling on and on. Both he and Kimberly were quiet people, so he wasn't sure how his daughter had gotten the trait. Aaron was the silent one. He'd pick something up and examine it rather than chuck it across the room. Mitch had a babbler and a thinker.

Mitch thought about the labels he'd picked up in the past two years. Ranch owner. Husband. Father. *Widower*.

The worst part about being the latter—aside from the sobering fact that he'd lost the only woman he could ever love—was the cursed feeling that Kimberly was somehow still alive.

Granted, her body was never found. But Mitch's other cousin, Sheriff Zachary McWilliams, had assured him that there was no way she'd survived the accident. The car, her car, had been pulled out of the ravine with barely half a windshield. Based on estimates, she'd shot out of the driver's side like a cannon and ejected some twenty-five feet across the water before sinking. The official search had lasted six days. Flash floods and more severe storms had complicated the effort, and her body had most likely been swept away. Extra divers had volunteered to work on their days off once word had gotten around

that Mitch Kent's wife had been involved in a terrible accident. But getting a late start because of worsening conditions had meant recovering a body was less likely.

He'd requested privacy from the media, which was something he was certain his wife would've wanted. Zach had also assured him that it would minimize the number of crackpots coming out of the woodwork, trying to get a piece of the Kent fortune. Mostly he'd done it for his wife. She'd insisted on staying out of the spotlight. The family attorney, Harley Durant, had kept the entire story limited to a blurb on the last page of the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*. Harley knew how to move mountains. He also knew how to keep a secret, and he had enough connections to back it up.

Since losing Dad and inheriting the cattle ranch with his five siblings two years ago, Mitch had been getting a good feel for running the place, and that was in large part due to Harley. So far Mitch was the only one living on the land full-time, but construction was planned or in process for the others to join him on the property with homes of their own.

It had been him and his wife living on the ranch up until now. Mitch still half expected her to walk through the front door.

He'd been told by a well-meaning aunt that he couldn't expect closure because her body had never been found. The same person had encouraged him to join a support group and find a way to move on. Mitch didn't especially believe in that mumbo jumbo. It was most likely the fact that Rea's eyes and thick black hair made her look more like her mother every day. Both twins reminded him of Kimberly. And maybe that was the reason he saw her everywhere.

Mitch pushed the babies toward the double glass doors of the three-story building attached to the east side of the hospital.

His cell buzzed in his pocket again, so he fished it out and checked the screen. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of someone staring at him and a chill raced up his spine. Coming up on the anniversary of Kimberly's death must be playing tricks on him, because the woman was her height and had her figure, so his mind immediately snapped to thinking it could be her. Damn, he needed to get a grip.

Did he really think Kimberly would be at the plaza near the hospital and pediatrician's office? That was impossible. He'd buried Kimberly Kent at least mentally if not physically. Her grave was in the meadow she loved, not a hundred yards from the house, from her family.

"What's going on?" he asked his top cowhand, Lonnie Roark, aka Lone Star Lonnie.

"Found something near the base of Rushing Creek that I thought you might want to take a look at personally," Lone Star said.

"Okay. What will I see?" Mitch asked impatiently.

He wasn't frustrated with Lonnie; he was aggravated with himself for imagining his dead wife in the plaza.

Curiosity got the best of him, so he turned to get a better look at the woman. She shifted her purse to her other shoulder and he could've sworn her movements mimicked Kimberly's.

It couldn't be her, though. His wife had blue-black hair the color of a cloudless night sky that cascaded down her back. This woman had short, curly hair with so much bleach that it had turned white.

For a split second he locked gazes with her. She spun around, putting her back to him and tucking her chin to her chest. That was odd and it sent a cold ripple down his back. He strained to get a better look from this distance, but she'd moved next to a sculpture of some sort. He supposed it was modern art but he never did understand what that meant. The woman glanced back at him and his gut coiled.

Or maybe it wasn't that strange and he was just overly on edge. She sidestepped, breaking his line of sight as she blocked herself with the sculpture. What was Bleached-Blonde up to?

"It's one of the herd." Lone Star hesitated, which wasn't like him and set off a firework display of warning lights inside Mitch. This day was going to hell fast.

"What's going on?" Mitch tried to stifle his annoyance. He couldn't take his eyes off the partially blocked mystery woman. His need to get a closer

look to prove she wasn't Kimberly set him off. If he knew what was best, he'd walk away. Leave it alone.

So why the hell couldn't he?

"One of the heifers must've caught hold of something and it tore one of her hooves off. Thing is I've searched everywhere within a fifty-foot radius and can't find the darn thing. What's left of her leg is a mess."

"You got an opinion on what could've happened?" Mitch didn't like the sound of this and it darkened his already somber mood.

"I'd be throwing spaghetti against the wall. There's no other sign of trouble and it looks like she died from bleeding out."

Mitch winced at the slow death that would've been for her. He bit back a curse. "Any tracks leading up to her?"

"Nothing I can see."

"You were right to call," he said on a sharp sigh. The stress of the day that had barely started already wore on him.

"I know you have enough on your plate this morning, boss." The people closest to Mitch knew about Rea's condition. Lone Star was in Mitch's inner circle. Even though Mitch was the boss, he and Lonnie were longtime friends. Mitch knew most folks in town, having grown up in Jacobstown, and he and Lonnie had been schoolmates.

"This was worth the interruption. Keep her right

where she is until I can get back. You were right about me wanting to see for myself. Do me a favor and keep everyone else out of the area until I can check it out." Mitch didn't like the sound of this one bit. It could involve anything from bored teens who were up to no good or acting on a dare to cultists, and Mitch wanted answers. If this was a prank gone wrong, he'd deal with it. Anger fisted his free hand. There was no excuse for making an animal suffer. "Thanks for the heads-up. Give me a call if you find any others. For now I'm assuming this is the only issue."

"Haven't found others but I have the boys counting heads," Lone Star Lonnie confirmed. "I'll keep my eyes peeled just in case."

"Let's keep the rest of the herd away from the area." Mitch figured it would be a good idea to keep them closer to the south-facing pasture.

He glanced up to see the woman had disappeared. Curiosity had him scanning the area, searching for her

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a streak of blond hair jutting out from the front of a hoodie. The woman wore jeans, tennis shoes and sunglasses. He did a double take to make sure it was the same person. Had she noticed that he'd been staring?

Of course she had; otherwise why put on the hoodie that had been tied around her waist? Mitch

needed to turn around and get his tail in gear so he wouldn't be late for the doctor visit.

So why couldn't he force his boots to move?

Mitch rubbed his blurry eyes before ending the call with Lone Star. All kinds of scenarios ran through his mind about the mystery woman. Could Kimberly have survived the accident but had no idea who she was? Had someone saved her from the wreckage? Been keeping her all of this time?

No, someone would've put two and two together by now.

Lack of sleep wasn't doing great things for his brain. The woman couldn't be Kimberly. His wife was dead.

For whatever reason he couldn't take his eyes off her. Curiosity? Something else? Something more primal?

An ache formed in his chest. It was wishful thinking that had him wanting to get a closer look at the blonde. He'd already calculated the odds and knew this was a losing hand. Try getting his fool heart to listen to logic.

Mitch checked his watch. Technically he was ten minutes early.

Turning the stroller toward the mystery woman, he decided to double down on his bad luck. He scanned the area and noticed a pair of men on the opposite side of the plaza, standing with their faces angled toward her. She turned her head slightly to-

ward the men and he could see her tense up. She took a step closer to a light pole and Mitch realized she was trying to block their line of sight.

Now Mitch's curiosity really skyrocketed.

Call it the cowboy code, but he needed to know that she would be okay. The blonde seemed to be in some kind of trouble, and he didn't like the looks of the two men wearing their jacket collars upturned, reflective sunglasses and ball caps. Very little of their faces were visible and his experience had taught him that law-abiding citizens didn't hide their faces in public. Nothing about either of them said they were law enforcement, so he assumed the blonde wasn't doing anything illegal.

One of the men moved enough to see around the light pole. He had his phone out, angled toward the blonde. Was he stalking her? Was he an ex? Someone she'd rejected? More thoughts along those lines crossed his mind, and none of them sat well.

Of course, a stalker would be alone. The guy standing next to the picture taker seemed just as interested in her, and didn't that jack up more of Mitch's danger radar? Were the men targeting her?

The blonde seemed to realize something was going on. Good for her. She wouldn't be an easy mark that way.

Once again his thoughts circled back to how familiar this woman seemed. Was there any chance his wife had survived the accident but lost her memory?

Could she have been walking around for the past eleven months with no idea who she was or where she came from?

It might be a stretch but he'd heard stranger things had happened.

Or did he want to see his wife again so badly that he was confusing her with a stranger? A woman who was similar in size and shape, who also seemed to be alone and in trouble? Was he grasping at any sign of hope?

There was only one way to find out.

Chapter Two

Kimberly's husband turned toward her and took a few steps in her direction. *No. No. No. Go back.*

Seeing her babies, their sweet faces, was so much harder than she'd thought it would be. The twins were one-year-old now and she'd known their first-year checkup would be around this time. It wasn't difficult to call the scheduler of the pediatrician she'd meticulously vetted to get the exact day and time.

Pain nearly crippled her but she fought against the tide of emotion. She couldn't lose control. There was too much at stake.

Life was about to spin out of control. *Again*. Seeing her twins one more time was a risk that Kimberly Kent—*correction*, Lily Grable—had had to take. The past eleven months had been excruciating, like living in a cave with no prayer of sunlight breaking through the darkness.

Life had taught Kimberly how to deal with loss early on. But nothing had prepared her for walking away from the only man she could ever love and the babies she'd only dreamed were possible. Happilyever-after was for princesses, not orphans like Kimberly. And now she risked making all of that heartache count for nothing if Mitch recognized her. Or worse if the men watching her connected the dots to her family.

Panic seized her.

Let Mitch get a few steps closer and he would make a scene. She let herself take another look at him even though the grip around her heart from before tightened the minute she did.

Mitch looked even better than she remembered. At six foot four he'd always dwarfed her. His wide chest and ripples of muscles were visible underneath his Western shirt. Those muscled thighs... She could see wisps of his sandy-brown hair from the rim of his gray Stetson. The color of his hat would match the steel of his eyes.

Maybe she could play it cool and Mitch would stop. There was no way he could realize who she was with as much as she'd changed her appearance. *Right?* She looked at her husband from out of the corner of her eye and her stomach fell. He was too curious to give up, and that was bad.

He'd expose her, himself and the babies. She glanced toward the pair of men who'd found her. They'd seen her but had they pegged her? Did they know who she was? That was the big question.

Kimberly eased around the back of the sculpture, forcing her body to move away from Mitch when every muscle inside her wanted to run toward him instead. She breathed in the heavy Texas autumn air and tried to block out the memories of feeling safe in his arms. A storm was brewing and the humidity kicked up a few notches alongside her pulse.

Her heart pounded against her ribs at the thought she might be bringing the men who were chasing her right to her husband and children's doorstep. Whoever had killed her father and was now after her seemed ready to stop at nothing. The men wouldn't think twice about using her children or Mitch to draw her out. And even after two and a half years she had no idea what they wanted from her. All she knew was that her father had gotten himself into trouble. Beyond that she had no idea with whom or how. Her street smarts had kept her alive. She'd immediately changed her identity and gotten out of New Mexico.

But those creeps always seemed to catch up no matter how well she hid.

She'd had no choice but to disappear after giving birth, once the creeps had shown up in Jacobstown, Texas. She still had no idea what they wanted from her. Her father had left her a cryptic message to stay in the shadows until he cleaned up his mess hours before his death—a death that had been ruled an accident, but Kimberly knew better. There was no way her father would've drowned. He couldn't swim and was deathly afraid of the water, although he'd never admitted to that fear. The man had never once been out on a boat, so it made even less sense

that he would've rented one, taken it out and then—what?—decided to jump off the side and swim for the first time in his life?

Guilt nipped at her. She'd known he was in trouble but she had been too involved in work at the small craft boutique and night school to stop to ask why. Her father had been acting strange for months, missing their dinner dates and not picking up his cell when she called. His behavior had been erratic and she could kick herself for not pressing him for details about why he was acting so weird. She'd honestly and naively believed that he'd tell her if something was really wrong. He'd always been her rock and she'd been able to count on him. Losing her foster mom to kidney disease had been hard on both of them. At the time she had thought that most of her dad's antics had to do with grief.

Looking back she should've seen the signs. Should've taken him more seriously. Should've been a better daughter to the man who'd taken her in when she was at her lowest point and saved her life.

"You're scaring me, Dad," she'd admitted when he'd asked her to get rid of her cell and use the new one he'd handed her.

"I'm being cautious," he'd defended. "Make your old man happy and use the phone."

"Only if you promise to tell me what this is about," she'd said.

"I will. Give me a couple of days to get it sorted out first," he'd promised.

"You're sure this isn't a big deal?" It had felt like one with the way he was acting.

"I owe someone a little money and they're blowing it out of proportion." He'd winked at her. "Nothing I can't handle. I just don't want you being bothered until I get this sorted out."

The only reason she'd left it at that was because he'd seemed embarrassed. She'd thought maybe he didn't want his creditor calling her, so she'd left it at face value.

Guilt was a face punch. If she'd pushed him for answers, he might still be alive.

When Deputy Talisman had all but accused her of foul play in order to inherit her father's business, she'd been defensive. It had become clear to her pretty quickly that she was going to be the target of his investigation. And then two men had busted into her apartment in the middle of the night. She'd barely managed to escape and had been on the run ever since.

Marrying Mitch had been done on a whim. The almost-immediate pregnancy had been a shock. And she would pay the price for those lapses in judgment for the rest of her life, which would be short if the creeps following her caught up to her.

A part of her wondered if this whole ordeal would ever be over. Could she come back to the life she'd loved with Mitch and the babies?

Reality said it would be impossible.

Her heart galloped at the sight of her husband

moving toward her out of the corner of her eye, along with her sweet babies, who turned one today. Birthdays were supposed to be happy events. But being this close without being able to touch her children felt like knife jabs to her chest.

Knowing that the twins would be at the office of the pediatrician she'd meticulously vetted prior to having those two little miracles had made it far too tempting. Going anywhere near Jacobstown, Texas, or the ranch was and had been off-limits. Those were lines she knew better than to cross. No matter how much she wanted—no, needed—to see her babies again, she couldn't risk bringing the creeps she'd been running from for an exhausting two and-a-half years to their doorstep. And then there was Mitch...

Seeing him again hurt.

Leaving a question mark in her husband's mind about her death wasn't ideal—a determined man could be dangerous. And part of her wished she could've confided in him, wished he could save her. She'd been close to confessing in the days before finding out she was pregnant. She'd known he would put his life at risk and she'd needed him to focus on protecting the twins.

How stupid had she been when she'd met him to think she could ever have a normal life? A normal life with kids and a man she loved, who loved her in return more than anything else?

That kind of love had been too powerful to turn her back on and had seduced her into thinking she could disappear into obscurity in the small town where she'd been hiding.

Mitch was everything a man should be to her—strong, virile...honest. Lying to him about her identity had been even more difficult because of that. Kimberly had been lying to herself for so long that she'd all but forgotten how to be truthful anymore. And maybe that's what had drawn her to the serious rancher with the steel-colored eyes.

Falling for Mitch Kent had been the easy part. She'd done that hard. Apparently she'd knocked a few screws loose when she'd made that tumble, because she'd landed in a fantasy that said if she kept a low profile, everything in her life would magically work out. But there were a few determined men who wanted to erase her presence. By the time she'd met Mitch, she'd already been running for six months.

A part of her wished—prayed—that he would forget all about her. The other part—the selfish part—couldn't go there even hypothetically. She wanted him to remember her, to love her.

"Kimberly," he said from behind her, and there was certainty in his voice instead of a question.

Certainty would kill them all.

A glance to the right said Mitch wasn't the only one about to close in on her. She felt like a mouse trapped in a maze.

There had to be something to use to create a distraction so she could get out of there. The air thinned, making it difficult to breathe.

A middle-aged woman wearing jeans and a light sweater walked toward her from the south with a black Lab on a leash. Kimberly bolted toward the woman and forced a smile.

"Can I pet your dog, ma'am?" she asked, pouring on the sweetness.

The woman beamed.

"Of course," she said as she went on about the dog's age and pedigree.

Kimberly dropped down to one knee before unhooking the leash in the bustling complex.

"I'm sorry," she said to the confused woman before popping to her feet. She shooed the dog. "Run!"

The black Lab darted toward the fountain as the woman gasped and then called after him.

Okay, Kimberly felt awful for doing that and wished there'd been another way to create a diversion. In the heat of the moment, that was all she could think of.

With another quick apology, Kimberly wheeled left and sprinted away from the pediatrician's building. A pair of heavy footsteps sounded from behind and she could tell by their rhythm that they were faster than her, racing closer and gaining ground.

At least Mitch would be stopped because of the stroller. Seeing those angelic round faces threatened to cripple her, but she couldn't afford to give in. She had to protect what was hers. Stuffing her feelings down deep helped her focus.

Kimberly's best chance to lose the pair of creeps

catching up to her was to get lost inside the hospital behind the pediatrician's office. She knew the area and that would give her an advantage. There would be armed security and the men following her wouldn't risk making themselves the center of attention by pulling something stupid. She hoped.

At least she could draw them away from Mitch and the babies. Kimberly sprinted around another building, trying to lose the men in the maze of buildings. Her thighs burned and her lungs were starting to wheeze.

The footsteps behind her stopped. Her worst fear seized her. Were the men circling back for Mitch?

Her breath caught and her heart screamed *no*.

How stupid and selfish had she been to come here? The past eleven months had been about taking calculated risks and watching her back at every turn. She'd just led those men practically to Mitch's doorstep. Kimberly bit back a few choice words, refusing to let negativity drag her under.

With the stroller, it would be impossible for Mitch to catch up to her. She'd cleared a few buildings and had crossed over to the front of the hospital, slowing her pace to a brisk walk as she entered through the automatic glass doors.

Activity buzzed all around her, and the modern lobby looked like a coffeehouse, with tables sprinkled around and folks on their laptops. The main difference was the fact that doctors and nurses cut across the open space, making their way to restricted-access areas.

Taking a chance, Kimberly checked behind her for the men. Nothing. Her heart took a dive.

Where were they?

MITCH FLEXED AND released his hands on the grip bar of the stroller. He'd scared a woman half to death by thinking she was his dead wife. Wasn't this turning into a banner day?

He wished he'd gotten a good look at Bleached-Blonde's face before she'd put her arm up to shield it and then disappeared in the commotion after a dog got loose from its owner.

Great. Now he could add scaring strangers to the already stressful morning he was having.

Thankfully the twins were clueless. Rea happily cooed and chatted, and Aaron took everything in while sucking on a pair of his fingers.

The men who'd been eyeing the Bleached-Blonde seemed to have given up on her. They'd returned to the plaza before heading toward the parking lot. It was probably Mitch's imagination that had him thinking those two were after her. He could add paranoia to his growing list of deficiencies.

The news from Lone Star Lonnie had thrown Mitch for a loop, on top of everything else he was dealing with, and maybe he was starting to crack. That was the only explanation for why he believed that he'd just seen his dead wife. She was on his

mind even more than usual today. It was time to get back to reality, including getting his babies to their appointment.

Mitch pushed the stroller through the opened double doors and then took the elevator up to the third floor. He checked in and then waited.

A few minutes later he was ushered into the blue room to wait for the doctor and find out how much his life was about to change. Again.

Good news came from the pediatrician. Rea looked to be growing out of her heart defect. She'd have to continue to be monitored, which he'd expected, but the hole in her lower valve seemed to be closing on its own. Gratitude washed over Mitch, bringing a few stray tears to his eyes.

The drive from Fort Worth to Jacobstown gave him the chance to fill in his siblings and cousins, thanks to Bluetooth technology and his cell phone. Joyce, the twins' caregiver, met him on the driveway. She'd decorated the dining room with balloons and went to work serving lunch and cake to celebrate before taking the kiddos up for their naps.

Mitch had kissed both babies before picking up the fresh flowers he'd ordered and heading out the back door.

Joyce was a sweet woman in her late sixties who'd helped bring up Mitch, along with his siblings. She'd managed to wrangle six Kent children before retiring years ago but when she'd learned one of her "babies" was having babies, she'd insisted on returning to care for them

Lucky for him, Kimberly had welcomed Joyce's help. The fact that she'd taken to the idea had caught him off guard at first. Kimberly had always been a private person. And that was where his luck had run out

Sitting on the bench he'd carved out of solid wood beside the tallest oak on the property, he looked down at the marker. Kimberly Kent—loving wife and devoted mother.

She wasn't supposed to be buried there. His mind pointed out that she technically wasn't. It didn't matter. Kimberly Kent was gone.

He crossed his boots at the ankles.

When the twins were old enough, he'd bring them here to see their mother. He set the fresh flowers down—lilies. Her favorite. They reminded him of her, of her fresh-from-the-shower scent.

The wind started to pick up as a few more gray clouds rolled in, reflecting his somber mood. Rain was in the forecast, in the air, and it had been drier than a salt lick all week.

The feeling of being watched settled over him. Amber? One of his brothers? He scanned the meadow but saw nothing. Further proof that he was losing it.

The idea anyone could be in the meadow without his knowledge hit hard. Someone had been on the ranch undetected. The sheer amount of acreage owned by the Kent family made it impossible to monitor every inch. But still...

His gaze dropped to the plot of land in front of him.

"I saw you outside the pediatrician's office today," he said to the green grass over an empty grave. "Even though it couldn't have been you, I wanted her to be." He paused, choking back the emotion threatening to consume him—emotion that he'd successfully buried. "Rea's doctor visit was good. She's going to be just fine." Another pause to get his emotions in check. "I miss you, Kimberly."

Mitch cursed. Now he was talking to dirt.

He pushed up to stand as an empty feeling engulfed him, threatening to drag him under and toss him around before spitting him out again like a deadly riptide.

Pain made him feel alive after being hollow inside for months. The ache in his chest every time he took in air was the only reminder he was still breathing.

A prickly feeling ran up the back of his neck, like when someone said a cat walked over a grave.

Mitch didn't do emotions, so why the hell were his like a race car at full speed, careening out of control and toward the wall today? His baby sister's words from last year kept winding through his thoughts, drowning out logic and reason, the two things he was good at.

What if she's alive? What if she's still out there? Mitch touched the grave marker, dragging his fin-

gers across the smooth granite and into the grooves made by the letters of Kimberly's name.

And then he tucked his feelings down deep before texting Lone Star Lonnie that he was on his way to check out the heifer before it rained.

Walking away from his wife's grave was especially tough today. His thoughts were heavy as he made his way to the base of Rushing Creek, on the northeast side of the property.

Even though he'd prepared for the worst, the site still caught him off guard. Blood was everywhere. His heifer was on her right side in a pool of red on flat land. There was no sign of a trap that could've taken off her hoof and messed up her leg like that. She'd bled out and that would've been a slow death.

Anger roared through him as he thought about how much she'd suffered. It was inhumane to do this to an animal. Lone Star Lonnie had downplayed the situation with the heifer, Mitch thought as he stood over her.

Everything inside him felt as torn up and drained as the lifeless heifer next to him.

Whoever had done this would be brought to justice.

Chapter Three

The pitch-black night sky was a dark canopy overhead. Thick clouds smothered the moon, blocking out any possibility of light. Rain came down in sheets. The conditions were a problem. There'd be tracks. Kimberly couldn't afford to leave a trail or any sign she'd been there.

If the storm continued, there'd be no issue. Flash floods were common in this area of Texas and could wash away her hiking-boot prints. If the weather dried up, anyone could follow her based on the imprints she made.

She stepped lightly, careful to weave through the low-hanging branches rather than break them—again another way to track her movements. Being on the run had taught her to leave the smallest footprint possible. Leave a trace and someone would find her—the creeps following her had already proven that more than once. She'd racked her brain, thinking how they could've picked up her trail leading to the pediatrician's office earlier.

Kimberly cursed under her breath as tears threatened. How could she have been so careless? So stupid?

Guilt nearly impaled her.

She couldn't sit by and watch the only people she loved get hurt because of her. She had to make this right. She prayed that she could find the right words to convince Mitch to leave with the babies and disappear.

Seeing her alive would shock her husband. And he would hate her for what she'd done to him, to their family. Not that she could blame him. Sharp stabs of pain spiked through her, because she would feel the same way if the situation was reversed.

That wouldn't stop—couldn't stop—her from doing what she needed to do.

Being on the ranch brought back other memories. Memories that punched her in the stomach. Memories of being under this same sky on a starlit evening with Mitch's arms around her, feeling like she could slay her fears and stay right there for the rest of her life. Then there were all of those Sunday-morning breakfasts in bed after passionate nights.

They'd when she'd rented a cabin on Lake Orion. On her weekly trip into town for supplies was when she'd first seen him. She'd been at the lake for a couple of days already and had worn her hair down around her face, a light cotton T-shirt and a simple pair of jeans with tennis shoes.

Mitch had come up behind her while she stood in

line with her small cart filled with everything she'd need for two weeks for a single person. He didn't speak to her right away, but she turned to look at him the minute she felt the strong male presence. It seemed like every single woman in the place came over to say hello while he stood in line behind Kimberly. Mitch was handsome—no question about that—but he also had a sexual appeal that made women blush when they spoke to him. The pitch in their voices raised and it was so easy to tell they were flirting.

Kimberly thought her eyes would roll into the back of her head when one of the women nearly knocked over the media stand while she complimented his boots. There'd been so much bemusement in his voice—a deep voice that trailed down the sensitive skin of her neck and wrapped around her—when he thanked the woman that Kimberly had almost laughed out loud. The ladies had been so sickeningly sweet that Kimberly wanted to throw up.

Her reaction must've been written all over her face when she turned to get another look at the allmale presence stirring up all of the commotion behind her. Yeah, she'd been rubbernecking but she couldn't help herself. She had only a couple of weeks to be in town and she needed to see what all the fuss was about.

The second she turned and got a good look, she realized her mistake. Her cheeks flamed, her throat

dried and a thousand birds fluttered inside her chest, leaving her to wonder, *Who is this man?*

Her hand fell slack and she dropped her wallet, spilling change all over his boots, which actually were nice. If embarrassment could kill a person, she would've dropped dead on the spot. Lucky for her, it couldn't. And the tall, muscled cowboy had dropped down to help her collect her things.

He'd been gracious and generous and all of the things she figured a cowboy code would require. But when his fingers grazed her palm as he handed over her quarters and pennies, pure electricity shot through her. Her body hummed and based on the look in his steel-gray eyes when their gazes connected, he felt the current every bit as much.

After introducing himself, he'd asked if she would have dinner with him that night.

It took a few seconds for logic to kick in and for her to remember how dangerous that would be for both of them, but it did and she refused—albeit without conviction. She thanked him for helping her, turned and was grateful she was next in line. The cashier acknowledged her with a smile as she busied herself placing her items on the motorized belt. Inside, she concentrated on trying to breathe as the cashier ran her items across the scanner.

Kimberly's pulse raced and all she could think about was getting out of there and back to the privacy of the cabin on the lake. She fumbled for the right dollar amount. Using cash was another way to stay off the grid.

The handsome cowboy had followed her to the parking lot as she loaded groceries into the plastic container she'd fixed onto the back of the dirt bike she'd bought from a seventeen-year-old boy who went by the name Smash. Based on the condition of the dirt bike, he'd earned that nickname, but she didn't care. All she'd needed was reliable transportation to get her to and from the store and something she could use for a quick escape if the need arose.

Experience had taught her to be prepared for anything and especially the pair of creeps who always seemed to be one step behind.

"You sure about dinner?" he'd asked with the kind of smile that made women go weak at the knees as he held out a fistful of coins. She knew for sure because her legs almost gave.

It had most likely been that moment of hesitation—that too-quick smile—that had him showing up two days after she'd refused him in the lot.

The rain had been coming down in sheets on that day, too.

"What are you doing here?" she'd asked as she opened the door to find him standing on her porch, waterlogged and even more handsome than she remembered.

"I haven't stopped thinking about you for two days," he'd said, and her heart pounded so hard against her ribs, she thought they might crack. There

he stood, with rain trailing down the brim of his gray Stetson. He wore a black V-neck T-shirt that, soaked with rain, outlined every one of his mass of muscles. "Tell me to leave and I will. I'll leave you alone. You have my word. Agree to have dinner with me and we can go anywhere you like."

As he stood there, with rain dripping from his tall, muscled physique, all of her willpower—and good sense—took a hike.

"Only if we stay here," she'd said. "We have to stay inside."

His face had broken into a wide smile—the same one that had seduced her willingly by the third night. And then less than two months later he'd proposed.

Tears sprang to her eyes at the memories. Walking away from Mitch Kent had been one of the most difficult things she'd ever done.

And setting foot in the house they'd once shared was going to be right up there.

MITCH RUBBED BLURRY eyes as he heard a noise come from another room for the second time. He glanced at the clock as he muttered a curse. The twins shouldn't be up for another few hours.

In a past life, he would've slept right through the small creak. Having babies had trained him to jump at the first noise. If he entered the room fast enough, sometimes he could solve the problem before the other woke up. Let it go even for a few seconds, and he'd be dealing with two fussy babies and not enough

arms to hold them both. Joyce had volunteered to move into the guest room half a dozen times, but Mitch had refused every request. Her heart was in the right place; she wanted to make his life easier. But Kimberly wouldn't have wanted it that way. She might've agreed to receiving Joyce's help during the day, but she wouldn't want another person taking care of their babies overnight.

Another creak sounded and he was awake enough to hear it clearly now.

He threw off the covers and slid into the jeans on the chair next to his bed. This noise in the next room had nothing to do with the twins.

Was someone inside his house?

His hardwood floors creaked in exactly three places in the hallway. The first two had already made noise.

And now came the third. His adrenaline surged, flooding his body with heat.

Someone was walking toward his bedroom.

The twins' room was across the hall and a fleeting thought struck that someone was coming for them. But who could that be? And how in the hell did the person get past ranch security?

It took a minute for that to sink in.

Another thought struck that it could be one of his family members, but that couldn't be right, either. His brothers and sister would've called if there'd been an emergency. There was no way his cousins, Zach and Amy, would show in the middle of the night

without calling. Those would be the only people who could get past security.

Mitch double-checked his cell in case he'd silenced his phone instead of switching it to vibrate. He thought about the heifer, and for a split second he thought the butchering might've been a warning.

The doorknob turned, so he jumped into action. Whoever thought they were going to get the best of him had another thing coming.

In two seconds he stood next to the door. It opened toward him, so it would shield him as the intruder stepped inside.

This probably wasn't the time to realize his shotgun was locked in a gun cabinet, a precaution he took for the sake of his children. Even if he could get to it, it wouldn't do any good. The shells were locked in a drawer.

As the door eased open, Mitch held his breath. He had his physical size, athletic conditioning and the element of surprise on his side, and that was about it. He had no idea what could be pushing through on the other side of that door.

In that moment he regretted not arming the alarm. He'd put one in, based on his wife's insistence, but never used it now that she was gone.

Another few seconds and he'd be ready to grab whoever crossed that threshold. And he hoped like hell it was only one person.

Mitch flexed and released his fingers. He was ready. A smallish—at least in comparison to his size—

figure slipped inside. He took a step toward the intruder and grabbed whatever he could, wrapping his hands around the person's upper arms. The intruder seemed familiar but he dismissed the thought.

Until the person kicked where no man wanted a foot and he gulped for air. The intruder put their hands on top of his and then dropped to the floor, breaking his grip. This person had skills.

"Stop it and I won't hurt you," he warned through sharp intakes of air. He was still trying to regain his footing after taking a hit to the groin.

Before the intruder could scoot away completely, he had a fistful of shirt material. He took another knee in the same spot, ignoring the pain shooting up his abdomen and causing his gut to clench.

Fists flew at him until he wrangled the stranger's arms under control, but in pulling him or her close he ushered in a scent—lilies—and froze.

The intruder scooted out from underneath him.

"Whatever you do, don't turn on the light," the familiar voice warned through gasps.

"Who are you?" he asked but he already knew the answer—an answer that was a throat punch.

"It's me. Kimberly."

Want to know what happens next? Order <u>Cornered at Christmas</u> by <u>Barb Han</u>, available now, wherever books are sold!



RAEANNE THAYNE Coming Home Christmas



Chapter One

This was it.

Luke Hamilton waited outside the big, rambling Victorian house in a little coastal town in Oregon, hands shoved into the pockets of his coat against the wet slap of air and nerves churning through him.

Elizabeth was here. After all the years when he had been certain she was dead—that she had wandered into the mountains somewhere that cold day seven years earlier or she had somehow walked into the deep, unforgiving waters of Lake Haven—he was going to see her again.

Though he had been given months to wrap his head around the idea that his wife wasn't dead, that she was indeed living under another name in this town by the sea, it still didn't seem real.

How was he supposed to feel in this moment? He had no idea. He only knew he was filled with a crazy mix of anticipation, fear and the low fury that had been simmering inside

him for months, since the moment FBI agent Elliot Bailey had produced a piece of paper with a name and an address.

Luke still couldn't quite believe she was in there, the wife he had not seen in seven years. The wife who had disappeared off the face of the earth, leaving plenty of people to speculate that he had somehow hurt her, even killed her.

For all those days and months and years, he had lived with the ghost of Elizabeth Sinclair and the love they had once shared.

He was never nervous, damn it. So why did his skin itch and his stomach seethe and his hands grip the cold metal of the porch railing as if his suddenly weak knees would give way and make him topple over if he let go?

A moment later, he sensed movement inside the foyer of the house. The woman he had spoken with when he had first pulled up to this address, the woman who had been hanging Christmas lights around the big, charming home and who had looked at him with such suspicion and had not invited him to wait inside, opened the door. One hand was thrust into her coat pocket around a questionable-looking bulge.

She was concealing either a handgun or a Taser or pepper spray. Since he had never met the woman before, Luke couldn't begin to guess which. Her features had lost none of that alert wariness that told him she would do whatever necessary to protect Elizabeth.

He wanted to tell her he would never hurt his wife, but it was a refrain he had grown tired of repeating. Over the years, he had become inured to people's opinions on the matter. Let them think what the hell they wanted. He knew the truth.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

There was a long pause, like some tension-filled moment just before the gunfight in Old West movies. He wouldn't have been surprised if tumbleweeds suddenly blew down the street.

Then, from behind the first woman, another figure stepped out onto the porch, slim and blonde and...shockingly familiar.

He stared, stunned to his bones. It was her. Not Elizabeth. Her. He had seen this woman around his small Idaho town of Haven Point several times over the last few years, fleeting glimpses only out of the corner of his gaze at a baseball game or a school program.

The mystery woman.

He assumed she had been there to watch one of the other children. Maybe an aunt from out of town, someone he didn't know.

Luke had noticed her...and had hated the tiny little glow of attraction that had sparked to life.

He hadn't wanted to be aware of any other woman. What was the point? For years, he thought his heart had died when Elizabeth walked away. He figured everything good and right inside him had shriveled up and he had nothing left to give another woman.

Despite his anger at himself for the unwilling attraction to a woman he could never have, he had come to look forward to those random glimpses of the beautiful mystery woman who wore sunglasses and floppy hats, whose hair was a similar color to his wife's but whose features were very different.

For the first time since he had pulled up to Brambleberry House, he began to wonder if he had been wrong. If *Elliot* had been wrong, if his investigation had somehow gone horribly off track.

What if this wasn't Elizabeth? What if it was all some terrible mistake?

He didn't know what to say, suddenly. Did he tell them

both he had erred, make some excuse and disappear? He was about to do just that when he saw her eyes, a clear, startling blue with a dark, almost black, ring around the irises.

He knew those eyes. It was her.

There was nervousness in them, yes, but no surprise, almost as if she had been expecting him.

"Elizabeth."

She flinched a little at the name. "No one has...called me that in a very long time."

Her voice was the second confirmation, the same husky alto that had haunted his dreams every single night for seven years.

The other woman stared at her. "Sonia. What is going on? Who is this man? Why is he calling you Elizabeth?"

"It is...a really long story, Rosa."

"He says he is your husband."

"He was. A long time ago."

The anger simmered hotter, flaring up like a controlled burn that was trying to jump the ditch. He did his best to tamp it down. He would not become his father, no matter the provocation.

"I'm still your husband. Nothing has changed. Until we divorce or you are declared dead, we are very much still married in the eyes of the law."

Her mouth opened again, eyes shocked as if she had never considered the possibility. Maybe as far as she was concerned, her act of walking away without a word had terminated their marriage.

It had in every way except the official one.

"I...guess that's probably true."

"That's why I'm here. I need you to come back to Haven Point so we can end this thing once and for all." He was unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "It shouldn't be that hard for you. You know the way. Apparently you've been back to town plenty of times. You just never bothered to stop and say hello to me or your two children."

Her skin, already pale in the weak December afternoon light, seemed to turn ashen, and Luke was immediately ashamed at his cruelty. He tried to be better than that, to take the higher ground in most situations. He was uncomfortably aware that this unwanted reunion with his long-missing wife would likely bring out the worst in him.

The other woman looked shocked. "You have children? I don't understand any of this, Sonia."

She winced. "It's so complicated, Rosa. I don't know...where to start. I... My name isn't Sonia, as you've obviously...figured out. He is right. It is Elizabeth Hamilton, and this...this is my husband, Lucas."

The other woman was slow to absorb the information, but after a shocked moment, her gaze narrowed and she moved imperceptibly in front of Elizabeth, as if her slight frame could protect her friend.

It was a familiar motion, one that intensified his shame. How many times had he done the same thing, throwing his body in front of his mother and then his stepmother? By the time he was big enough and tough enough to make a difference, his father was dead and no longer a threat.

"Are you afraid of this man?" Rosa demanded. "Has he hurt you? I can call Chief Townsend. He would be here in a moment."

Elizabeth put a hand on the other woman's arm. It was clear they were close friends. The wild pendulum of Luke's emotions right now swung back to anger. Somehow she had managed to form friendships with other people, to completely

move on with her life, while he had been suffocating for seven years under the weight of rumor and suspicion.

"It is fine, Rosa. Thank you. Please don't worry about me. I...I need to speak with...with my husband. We have... much to discuss. Go on inside. I'll talk to you later and... and try to explain."

Rosa was clearly reluctant to leave. She hovered on the porch, sending him mistrustful looks. He wanted to tell her not to waste her energy. He'd spent years developing a thick skin when it came to people suspecting him of being a monster.

"I'm here," she said firmly. "I'll wait inside. You only have to call out. And Melissa is in her apartment as well. We won't let anything happen to you."

"Nothing is going to happen to me," Elizabeth assured her. "Luke won't hurt me."

"Don't be so sure of that," he muttered, though it was a lie. Some might think him a monster but he suspected Elizabeth knew he could never lay a hand on her.

First of all, it wasn't in his nature. Second, he had spent his entire life working toward self-mastery and iron control—doing whatever necessary to avoid becoming his father.

After another moment, Rosa turned around and slipped through the carved front door, reluctance apparent in every line of her body. On some level, Luke supposed he should be grateful Elizabeth had people willing to stand up and protect her.

"How did you...? How did you find me?"

He still didn't know everything Elliot had gone through to locate her. He knew the FBI agent had spent long hours tracking down leads after a truck driver came forward years later to say that on the night Elizabeth disappeared, the trucker thought she gave a woman resembling Elizabeth's description a ride to a truck stop in central Oregon.

Somehow from that slim piece of information, Elliot had undergone an impressive investigation on his own time and managed to put the pieces of the puzzle together. If not for Elliot, Luke wouldn't be here in front of this big oceanfront Victorian in Cannon Beach and this familiar but not familiar woman.

Thinking about Elliot Bailey always left him conflicted, too. He was grateful to the man but still found it weird to think of his former best friend with Megan, Luke's younger sister. After several months, he was almost used to the idea of them being together.

"I didn't." He jerked his attention back to the moment. "Elliot Bailey did. That's not really important, is it? The point is, now I know where you are. But then, I guess you were never really lost, were you? We only thought you were. You've certainly been back to Haven Point in your little disguise plenty of times over the years."

It burned him, knowing he hadn't recognized his own wife. When he looked closer now, knowing what he did, he could see more hints of the woman he had loved. The brows were the same, arched and delicate, and her lips were still full and lush. But her face was more narrow, her nose completely different and her cheekbones higher and more defined.

Why had she undergone so much plastic surgery? It was one more mystery amid dozens.

"What do you want, Luke?"

"I told you. I need you to come home. At this moment, the Lake Haven County district attorney's office is preparing to file charges against me related to your disappearance and apparent murder." "My what?"

"Elliot has tried to convince the woman you're still very much alive. He hasn't had much luck, especially considering he's all but a member of the family and will be marrying my sister in a few months. The DA plans to move forward and arrest me in hopes of forcing me to tell them where I hid your body."

"Wait—what? Elliot and Megan are together? When did that happen?"

He barely refrained from grinding his teeth. "Not really the point, is it? This has gone on long enough. I'm going to be arrested, Elizabeth. Before the holidays, if my sources are right. The district attorney is determined to send a message that men in her jurisdiction can't get away with making their wives disappear. I'm going to go to jail, at least for a while. Our children have already spent enough Christmases without one parent. Do you want them to lose the other one?"

"Of course not."

He didn't know whether to believe her or not. How could he? He didn't even know this woman, despite the fact that she had once been closer to him than anyone else on earth.

"Then grab your things and let's go."

Her eyes looked huge in her face as she stared at him, making him more angry at himself for not recognizing her. He should have known her. Yes, she had worn sunglasses and hats, but he somehow still should have sensed Elizabeth looking back at him.

Once, those eyes had looked at him with passion, with hunger, with a love that made him ache. Now they were filled with fear and reluctance. "I... You want to leave right this minute?"

No. If he had any choice, he would keep her out of his life

COMING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

and the lives of Cassie and Bridger forever. Circumstances and a zealous district attorney had made that impossible.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"I can't just...just leave."

"Why? Seems to me you're really good at leaving."

She gripped her hands tightly together. "I have a life here in Cannon Beach. Responsibilities."

"What's the problem? You have a husband and two kids here that you don't want to walk away from?"

Though he told himself this wasn't the way to accomplish what he needed from her, he couldn't seem to stop his cruel words.

He was so damn angry. It didn't matter how many times he told himself he needed to stay in control. She had ripped apart the entire fabric of his life seven years ago, destroyed everything they had tried to create together.

He had thought she was dead. He had grieved, filled with raw guilt and wrenching pain that he hadn't been able to help her. For seven years, he had imagined the worst.

He had said earlier that she had never been lost, but both of them knew that wasn't strictly true. Seven years ago, the wife he had cherished with all his heart had been lost to him, trapped in a deep, dark place, a tangle of postpartum depression and grief over the accidental deaths of her parents.

He hadn't been able to reach her. Nor had any of the professionals he had taken her to or any of the therapies they had tried.

For seven years, until Elliot Bailey took up the search and found Sonia Davis, he thought his beloved Elizabeth had surrendered to that vast chasm of depression and taken her own life.

He had never imagined that she had simply moved away,

changed her appearance and her name and started a life without him and their children.

He let out a breath, pushing away the deep betrayal. "We have to go."

"I...I was planning to go to Haven Point next week. I have a plane ticket and everything."

"Not good enough. Sources tell me charges are being filed this week. The DA's office won't listen to reason, but I figure she'll have to listen when the supposed victim herself shows up. We have to get back to town before then. This storm is only going to intensify and I would like to beat it. Grab your things and let's go."

He wouldn't let her slip away this time. His children depended on it.

Luke was here.

After all these years, he was here, standing on the porch of Brambleberry House.

She couldn't quite believe this was really happening. Her day had started out so normally. She took her dozen different medications, meditated, went through the routine of exercises she used to keep her battered body from seizing up. She had gone to the greenhouse for a few hours. Her hands still smelled like the pine branches she had woven together for evergreen wreaths.

All in all, it had been a routine day. She never expected that before the day was out, she would be here talking to her husband, the man she had loved since she was eighteen years old.

She had imagined this day so many times, had dreamed of the chance to see him again, to explain the choices she had made and the terrible consequences that had resulted from those choices. Now that he was here, she felt tongue-tied, constrained by all the years and miles and choices between them.

What could she say? No words would ever make up for what she had done.

Of course she couldn't go with him. She had a job here. She worked at the garden center and was busy this time of year selling Christmas trees and wreaths, working on floral arrangements, planning ahead for the growing season.

She was also responsible for the gardens here at Bramble-berry House—though admittedly, that wasn't a very good excuse this time of year. She had already supervised the Christmas decorating in the garden and wouldn't have anything to do until spring began its slow return to this part of the Oregon Coast.

Returning to Haven Point didn't terrify her. As he pointed out, she had been back a dozen times over the last several years.

It was the idea of returning to Haven Point with Lucas Hamilton that made her blood run cold.

Her stomach twisted into knots. He wanted her to drive there with him. It was eight hours from here. Eight hours in a car with a man who had every reason to despise her. She couldn't possibly do it.

But what choice did she have? If she could believe him—and she had no reason to think he was lying, as he had always been honest with her—she had to return to Haven Point or he would be arrested. She couldn't let that happen. She had already put him and their children through so very much.

She owed him. This was the least she could do.

Accused of her murder! How was that even possible? Luke had never raised a hand to her, and she hated that there were apparently people in Lake Haven County who didn't know him well enough to understand that.

"Hurry up." Her husband's voice was resolute. "You can take your return flight once we're done with the legalities or you can rent a car in Boise and drive back."

She wished that were possible, but the simple act of driving a vehicle was one of the abilities she had lost.

Wild tendrils of panic made her palms sweat and her stomach roll. She wanted to go back to her second-floor apartment and curl up in her bed with the covers over her head.

"I...I need time to make arrangements." She tried one more time. "I can't just leave town without a word."

His raised eyebrow made her all too aware of the irony of what she just said. That was exactly what she had done seven years ago when she had walked away from him and their children and the life she had destroyed.

"One hour. You have one hour and then I'm coming to get you, wherever you are. You're going back to Haven Point, even if I have to tie you up and toss you into the bed of my pickup. Don't think I won't."

He was so cold, hard as tungsten. This version of Lucas Hamilton was very different from the one who had been all sweet tenderness during their dating years and the first glorious months of their marriage.

She had created this version. She had forced the joy out of him, not only because she left but during those troubled years in between.

It was time to make things right. She had to do her best to fix what she had destroyed.

"All right," she finally said, trying hard to keep the trembling out of her voice. "I can be ready in one hour. What will you do in that time? Do you...? Do you want to come in?"

She did not want him in her home, her sanctuary. Bramble-berry House had become her refuge over the past few years. She wouldn't say she had completely healed here, but this was at least where she had started the process.

"No. I'm fine."

"There are several nice...restaurants in town, if you need to grab a...bite to eat."

Did he notice the way she stammered now, the awkward pauses she hated? Of all the things she had lost, tangible and intangible, fluent speech was one of the gifts she missed the most. She hated scrambling around for words, having them right there on the tip of her tongue but not being able to find them.

"I have a sandwich in the truck. I'll eat there. To be honest, Elizabeth, I don't want to leave this spot. If I go anywhere, who knows if you would still be here when I come back?"

She nodded, hating his contempt but knowing that she deserved every bit of it. "I'll...try to be quick."

Her hands were shaking. *Everything* was shaking. She felt nauseous, and her head hurt. Oh, sweet heaven. She did not want to have a seizure today. They were mostly controlled these days but tended to sneak up on her when her reserves were low.

She slipped back into the house. As she had expected, Rosa was waiting inside the entryway, along with Melissa Fielding, the tenant of the first-floor apartment.

"What is going on?" the nurse asked, eyes filled with worry. "Rosa tells me that man says he is your husband and that your name is not Sonia Davis but Elizabeth something-or-other."

She sighed. "Rosa is right. Both of those things are...true. I'm...I'm sorry I didn't tell you. It is a very long and painful story. A past I...thought I had put behind me."

It was a lie. She hadn't put the past behind her. She lived with it every single day, haunting her every waking moment. Luke. Cassie. Bridger. They were etched on her heart.

The only bright spot about Luke bursting back into her life was the possibility that she might see her children beyond random glimpses from a distance. She might be able to talk to them. Hug them. Perhaps try to explain, if she could find the words.

"What does he want?" Melissa trailed after her up the stairs, Rosa behind her.

"He wants to...take me back to the place where I lived with...with him. Haven Point, Idaho."

"I hope you told him *no way in hell,*" Melissa said. "You don't need to go anywhere with him. He might be your husband, but that doesn't make him your lord and master. He can't just show up out of the blue and drag you off like some caveman."

"Luke is not like that," she protested. "He is a good man. That is...that is why I have to go with him."

She paused outside her apartment door, desperate to be alone—to breathe, to think, to recover—but also well aware she needed to convince her friends not to call local law enforcement on her behalf. They were so concerned about her, she wouldn't put it past either of them.

"Look, I know you're...worried about me. I am grateful for that. More grateful than I can say."

She reached for their hands, these two women who had taken her into their generous hearts and befriended her. She had lied to them. She had deceived them about her identity, about her past, about everything.

It was yet one more thing to feel guilty about, though small compared to all she had done to her family.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have time to explain everything. I can tell you only that I made a...a terrible mistake once, many years ago. I thought I was doing the right thing at the time but...nothing turned out the way I planned. Now my... my husband needs me to go with him so that I can begin to try to make amends. I have to, for his sake and for our...for our children."

Rosa and Melissa gazed at her, wearing identical expressions of concern. "Are you certain this man, he means you no harm?" Rosa asked, her Spanish accent more pronounced than usual.

She was not certain of anything right now, except *that*. Despite his fury, Luke wouldn't hurt her. She knew that without one fiber of doubt.

"I will be fine. Thank you both for worrying about me. I should only be gone a...a few days. When I return, I can tell you...everything. All the things I should have said a long time ago. But now I really do have to go and pack a bag."

She could see the worry in their frowns. Rosa looked as if she wanted to argue more. She might be small, but she was fierce. Elizabeth had long sensed that Rosa herself had walked a dark and difficult road, though her friend never talked about it. Elizabeth had never pried. How could she, when she had so many secrets she couldn't share?

Melissa reached out and hugged her first. "If you're sure—and you seem as if you are—I don't know what else we can do but wish you luck."

"Thank you." Her throat was tight with a complex mix of emotions as she returned the hug.

Rosa hugged her next. "Be careful, my dear."

"Of course."

"You have our numbers," Rosa said. "If you are at all wor-

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ried about anything, you call us. Right away. No matter what, one of us will come to get you."

Those emotions threatened to spill over. "I will. Thank you. Thank you both."

"Now. What can we do to help you pack?" Rosa asked.

Everyone deserved friends like these, people to count on during life's inevitable storms. She had once had similar friends back in Haven Point and had turned her back on everyone who tried to help her.

She would not make that mistake again.

"I have a suitcase in my room, already...half filled. Can you find that while I...grab my medicine?"

"You got it."

She deliberately focused her attention on the tasks required to pack, not on the panic that made her feel light-headed.

After all this time, she was going back to Haven Point. As herself, this time, not as the woman she had become seven years ago when she walked away.

Chapter Two

She didn't take an hour to pack. She already had most of her travel things ready, preparing for the trip she had planned to take in a few days to Haven Point.

By now, she had a routine whenever she returned to the area. She stayed in the nearby community of Shelter Springs at the same hotel every time, an inexpensive, impersonal chain affair just off the highway to Boise.

The hotel was on the bus route to Haven Point, which made it easier for her to get to the neighboring town. She ate the continental breakfast offered by the hotel early enough to avoid most business travelers and either made her own lunch in her hotel room with cold cuts or cups of soup or chose the same busy fast-food restaurants where no one would pay any attention to her.

When her visit was done, she loaded up her bag, caught the shuttle back to the airport and flew home.

Alone, as always.

The system was elaborate and clunky, designed specifically so that she did not run the risk of bumping into someone who might have known her back then.

She probably stressed unnecessarily. Who would recognize her? She wasn't the same person. She did not look the same and certainly did not feel the same. All that she had survived had changed her in fundamental ways.

She carefully packed her medicine and the collapsible cane she hated but sometimes needed, then grabbed chargers for her electronic devices, the things she always tended to leave behind.

After one last check of the packing list she kept on her phone for her frequent trips, she zipped the suitcase, then sat on the edge of the bed.

While she had something to do, her attention focused on preparing to leave, she could shove down the wild turmoil of her emotions at seeing her husband again. Now that her bag was packed, she felt them pressing in on her again, a mixture of apprehension and fear blended with an undeniable relief.

He couldn't possibly believe her but she had planned to tell him her identity when she returned to Haven Point next week. It was time to come forward. Beyond time. She could no longer hide from the past.

She sat for several moments longer, breathing in and breathing out, trying to find whatever small measure of peace she could in this creaky, quirky old house. Finally, she released one more heavy breath, then rose unsteadily from the bed, extended the handle on her rolling suitcase and walked out the door of her apartment, locking it behind her.

She wasn't at all surprised to find Rosa and Melissa waiting for her in the small furnished landing outside of her apartment. Melissa's daughter, Skye, and Rosa's dog, Fiona, a beautiful Irish setter, waited, too. Her own little makeshift family.

"Are you sure about this?" Melissa asked, her tone as worried as her expression. "I have to tell you, I don't think you should just take off with some man we've never seen before—someone who just shows up out of the blue and expects you to drop everything and leave town with him."

She wasn't surprised at their objections. For some reason, Melissa and Rosa thought it was their job to take care of her, whether that was helping her with her laundry, giving her rides to the grocery store or taking her to doctor appointments.

She had found no small degree of comfort from their concern, but she needed to stand on her own.

"I have to. Please don't worry. I'll be fine."

"Will you be back for Christmas?" Skye asked, worry knitting lines across the girl's forehead.

Her heart ached but she managed to muster a smile for the girl. "I should only be gone a few days. Maybe a week."

"You promised you would help me put out carrots for the reindeer on Christmas Eve."

"I won't forget, sweetheart."

She had done her best to steel her emotions against Skye, to protect herself from the hurt of seeing this girl growing up happy and strong under her mother's loving care.

Her own daughter was only a few years older than Skye. For the past seven years, Cassie and her brother had been without their mother. Elizabeth knew she couldn't make it right, all the hurt she had caused by her disastrous decisions, but she could at least give Luke and their children a little closure.

"I'll be back before you know it," she told them all.

"Are you very sure?" Rosa asked one last time.

When she nodded, her friend sighed but took the handle of the suitcase and headed for the stairs to the ground floor.

When they all reached the entryway, Elizabeth felt tonguetied with all she wanted to say. She didn't have time for any explanations. Luke would be waiting.

She hugged her friends and saved her biggest hug for Skye. "You watch over my garden for me, will you?"

"You bet," Skye said. "And Fiona will help."

"I know. She's a great dog."

She petted the dog's head, filled with intense longing for slow summer evenings when she could sit on a bench in the garden with Fiona curled up at her feet while the ocean murmured its endless song.

Finally, she couldn't put it off any longer. It was time to face her husband.

She straightened, gripped the handle of her suitcase and walked out to the wide wraparound porch.

He was waiting for her. No surprise there. Her husband was a man of his word. When Luke said he would be somewhere in an hour, he meant an hour.

She thought she saw that flare of awareness in his eyes again, but he quickly blinked it away before she could be sure. His mouth tightened. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to come in and drag you out."

She didn't bother with a response. For all his hard talk, she knew he wouldn't go that far. Or, she corrected, at least the man she had left seven years ago would never behave like a caveman. She wasn't entirely sure about this version of Luke Hamilton, with the unsmiling mouth and the hard light in his eyes that hadn't been there before, even during the worst days of their marriage.

"I'm ready," she said.

"Let's go, then. We've got a long drive."

Without waiting for her to respond, he grabbed her suitcase and marched toward his vehicle through the lightly falling snow. He threw it into the back of the pickup, which at least had a covered bed to keep out the elements.

Her bones ached as she walked down the steps and limped toward the pickup truck. She did her best to ignore the pain, as she usually did. The low pressure system from storms always seemed to make the pain worse. She had already taken the maximum dosage of over-the-counter pain medicine but it wasn't quite taking the edge off. She didn't trust herself with anything stronger.

At the door of the vehicle, she hovered uncertainly, struck with the humiliating realization that she was stuck. She couldn't step up into the vehicle. It simply was too high. She couldn't move her bad leg that far and didn't have the upper body strength to pull herself up.

"We've got to move," he growled. "Storm's going to get stronger."

How could she possibly tell him she needed help? She closed her eyes, shame as cold as the wind blowing off the water.

She could do this. Somehow. Over the last years, she had discovered stores of strength she never would have guessed she had inside her. She gripped the metal bar beside the door—the sissy handle, her dad used to call it—and tried to step up at the same time, but her foot slipped off the running board.

Luke made a sound from the other side of the truck but came around quickly.

"You should have said something," he said gruffly.

Like what? *Sorry, but I have the muscle tone of a baby bird?*

Without a word, he put his hands at her waist and lifted her into the pickup as if she weighed nothing, less than a feather from that baby bird.

It was the first time he'd touched her in seven years. The first time any man had touched her, except medical professionals.

The contact, fleeting and awkward, still was enough to fill her with an intense ache.

She had craved his touch once, had lived for those moments they could be together. She had loved everything about his big, rangy body, from the curve of his shoulders to the hardness of his chest to the line of dark hair that dipped to points lower.

The memories seemed to roll across her mind, faster and faster. His mouth on hers, his hands in her hair, falling asleep with his warm skin against her.

Until this moment, she hadn't realized how very much she missed a man's touch. Not just any man. *This* man.

She gave a shaky breath as he closed the vehicle door. Then she settled into her seat and pulled her seat belt across with hands that trembled.

She couldn't do this. Eight hours alone in a vehicle with Luke Hamilton. How could she survive it?

He climbed in and fastened his seat belt, then pulled away from Brambleberry House. As she watched her refuge disappear in the rearview window, she told herself it was only a drive. She could endure it.

She had lived through much worse over the past seven years.

Luke drove at a steady pace through the falling snow, heading east on the winding road toward Portland. On summer

Sunday evenings, Elizabeth knew, this road would be packed with tired, sunburned beachgoers heading back to Portland for the week ahead. Now, on a Sunday evening in December, they encountered very little traffic going in either direction.

He said nothing, the silence in the vehicle oppressive and heavy. With each mile marker they passed, she felt as if the weight of the past pressed down harder.

"How did Elliot find me?" she finally had to ask again.

He sent her a sideways look before jerking his gaze back to the road. "You will have to ask him. I don't know all the details."

"I'm still having a hard time believing he and...Megan are together. Last I knew, she was still grieving Wyatt Bailey. Now...you tell me she's marrying his brother."

"She grieved for Wyatt for a long time. But I guess people tend to move on eventually."

He said the words in an even tone but guilt still burned through her. She had earned his fury through her choices.

"What is Megan up to? Is she...still running the inn?"

He didn't answer her for a full moment, focused on driving through a tight series of curves. Finally, he glanced over. "Don't expect that we're going to chat the entire drive to Haven Point." His jaw was firm, his hands tight on the steering wheel. "I don't want to talk to you. I don't want anything to do with you. In fact, I'm going to pretend you're not here, which isn't that hard since you haven't been for seven years."

She folded her hands in her lap, telling herself she couldn't let his words wound her. "You don't want to know...what happened or why I left?"

"I especially don't want to hear that. I don't give a damn, Elizabeth. After all these years, I can honestly say that. You can spill all your secrets, spin all your explanations, to the district attorney."

She wanted to argue but knew it would be pointless. Her words would tangle and she wouldn't be able to get them out anyway. "Fine. But I'm not going to...sit here in silence."

She turned on the radio, which was set to the classic rock she knew he enjoyed. She was half tempted to turn the dial to something she knew would annoy him—Christmas music, maybe—but she didn't want to push.

After several more moments of tense silence, the leaden weight of everything still unsaid between them, she settled into the corner and closed her eyes. She intended only to escape the awkwardness for a moment, but the day's events and the adrenaline crash after the shock of seeing him again seemed to catch up with her.

She would never have expected it, but somehow she slept.

Elizabeth.

Here.

Sleeping next to him. Or at least pretending to—he couldn't be sure. Her eyes were closed, her breathing even and measured, but he couldn't tell if she was genuinely asleep or simply avoiding conversation. He couldn't really blame her for that, since he'd shut her down hard when she tried to talk to him.

She was close enough he could touch her if he wanted—which he absolutely didn't.

His hands tightened again on the steering wheel. At this rate, his fingers would stiffen into claws by the time they reached home.

Since the moment Elliot had handed him that piece of paper with a single name and an address, he had imagined this moment, when he would see her again. His whole world had been rocked by the revelation that she wasn't dead. Months later he still hadn't recovered. He had done his best to put it aside, figuring if she wanted him to know where she was, she would have told him herself.

After finding out about the district attorney's plans the day before, that choice had been taken out of his hands.

He had to retrieve her and take her back to Idaho so he could clear his name. He had been so focused on the task at hand, though, that he hadn't given the rest of it much thought.

The grim reality was sinking in now. He would have to spend several hours trapped in a vehicle with the wife who had walked out on him and their children without a backward look.

Or had she looked back? He had to wonder. If she hadn't looked back, why would she continue returning to Haven Point to check up on her children?

He thought of her the last time he had seen the mystery woman, at a play Cassie's school had performed for Halloween. Cassie and a couple of her friends had played a trio of witches trying to prove they weren't as bad as everyone thought. He remembered seeing the intriguing stranger—how again hadn't he guessed she was Elizabeth in disguise?—sitting in the back row, clapping enthusiastically.

That jarring information seemed again to twist everything he thought he knew about her.

He cringed, remembering he'd actually had the wild idea at the play that the next time he saw her, he should strike up a conversation to at least ask her name and what child she was there to support.

What if he'd done it, walked up to her and tried to talk to her without knowing she was his own freaking wife?

He felt like a fool.

He released a breath, fighting down the resurgence of anger.

How was he supposed to endure several more hours of this proximity with her?

He could handle it. For the sake of his children, he had no choice. He had to clear his name. A cloud of suspicion followed him everywhere he went in Haven Point and it was long past time he shed it.

He knew Cassie and Bridger heard the whispers. While he had his undeniable supporters, with his sister and her friends chief among them, plenty of people in Haven Point still believed he had murdered his wife and dropped her body down an abandoned mine shaft or carried it up into the mountains where it had never been found.

Hell, the new Lake Haven district attorney was so convinced Luke had done just that, she was willing to press charges above the protests of nearly everyone in local law enforcement.

He had to move on. He had known where Elizabeth was for months. He could have hauled her back to town long ago and this whole thing would have been done, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to face her.

He hadn't been ready, he supposed, and had needed time to absorb the new reality that she hadn't taken her own life—she had only chosen to walk away from the one they had created together.

The winds began to blow harder as he left Portland, swirling sleet and snow against the windshield. It was taking most of his concentration to keep the vehicle on the road, yet Elizabeth slept on soundly, face tucked against the leather seat as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Once, she had been the best thing in his life, the one who made him laugh and see the joy and beauty around him.

Sometimes he felt as if he had loved her forever, but it hadn't been until the summer after her junior year of college that he'd really known her as anything more than one of his younger sister's friends.

They had been at a party, some Fourth of July thing at the lake. He hadn't wanted to go, too busy working construction and studying for the tests he needed for his general contractor license to take the time, but a friend had dragged him along.

She had worn a light blue swimming suit with stars on it, he remembered, and her smile had been brighter than the hot summer sun glinting off the lake.

He had fallen hard, right then and there.

He had dated plenty of women. He'd been twenty-five, not an innocent, but none of them had been as funny or as smart or as openhearted as Elizabeth Sinclair. Somehow that night while fireworks exploded over the lake, he had tumbled in love with her. To his everlasting astonishment, she had fallen right back.

They had married a year later, after she graduated, and he still remembered the magic of their first months of wedded bliss. They thought they could do anything, could conquer the whole world. She was working as a secretary/receptionist at an insurance office in Shelter Springs while he had continued working construction. Before they married, they had saved up for a down payment on a house and made an offer on the little house on Riverbend Road in need of serious repairs.

Together, they had started fixing up the place, and everything had been exciting and wonderful. For the first time in his life, he felt as if fate had dealt him a pretty good hand. They had even started working toward having a family. Neither of them wanted to wait.

Then her parents had been killed in a tragic boating acci-

dent on Lake Haven, her mother falling out of a fishing boat and her father drowning while he tried to rescue her.

Everything had changed.

Elizabeth had gone from happy and loving and generous to lost and grieving and withdrawn in a blink.

She had been dealing with hard things. He understood that. The deaths of her parents had hit her hard, knocking the legs out from under her. The Sinclairs had adored their only daughter and she had loved them back. They had been a warm and loving family, one of the first things that had drawn him to her.

He had tried to support her, to say all the things he thought she needed to hear, to simply hold her when she needed it. None of it had been enough. Instead of turning toward him, she had turned away.

A month after her parents died, she found out she was two months pregnant with Cassie. She had burst into tears when she told him, not happy tears but grief-stricken that she could no longer share the joyous news with her parents, two people she loved so dearly.

Though he knew she tried to be happy about the pregnancy, to compartmentalize her pain over losing her parents and focus instead on the impending birth, he sensed she was only going through the motions. Her smiles had been too bright, her enthusiasm not quite genuine.

He thought the birth of their daughter would jolt her out of the sadness she couldn't shake. Instead, what he understood now was postpartum depression had hit her hard.

Treatment and therapy had helped, but Elizabeth never quite returned to the woman she'd been the first year of their marriage.

Time would heal, the therapists said, and he held on to

that, praying they could find each other again once things returned to normal.

When she told him she wanted to have another baby, he resisted hard, but eventually she had worn him down and convinced him things would be different this time, that it would be the best thing for their marriage.

It hadn't been. The next two years were hell. This time the postpartum hit with harsh ferocity. After Bridger was born, she had days when she couldn't get out of bed. She lost weight and lost interest in all the things she usually enjoyed.

They went to round after round of specialists, but none of their therapies seemed to make a difference. By the time she disappeared, when Cassie was almost three and Bridger less than a year, he couldn't leave her alone with the children. He hired someone to stay with them through the day and took care of them all night.

He had lost his wife long before she actually disappeared.

Anger and misery were a twisted coil in his chest as he drove east through the increasing snow along the Columbia River.

He wanted those early days back, that heady flush of love they had shared, with an ache that bordered on desperation. Right now they didn't even seem real, like a home movie he had watched of somebody else's life.

He couldn't have them back. All he could do now was move forward: clear his name, get the divorce and let her walk away for good this time.

It was what he wanted and what his children needed.

For their sake and his own, he couldn't let this unexpected attraction he felt for Elizabeth 2.0 get in the way.

Chapter Three

Sleep had become her sanctuary over the past seven years. Here, in dreams, Elizabeth could escape into the life she ached to recapture. She was free of the pain that had become her constant silent companion, the grinding headaches that could hit out of the blue, the muscle spasms that left her in tears. Especially the terrifying seizures that she had to fight off with every ounce of her strength.

She could be with her family again. Cassie, Bridger. Luke. While she was sleeping, she could become the best version of herself, the mother she had *wanted* to be. She sat on the floor and played with her children; she held them in her lap and rocked them to sleep; she could read to them for hours on end.

Though she did have the occasional nightmare, for the most part, sleep was just about the best thing in the world, and she loved sliding into her bed in her room by the big windows at Brambleberry House, pulling the soft blankets up around her shoulders and escaping into the heavenly fantasy.

Alas, morning always came. While she might have liked to hibernate, nestled under the covers for months where her mind could live in that joyful fantasy world, her body had pesky physical needs, like food and drink and medication. Plus, she unfortunately had to go outside of the house and work at a job that could provide enough income to pay for those necessities.

The transition was never easy. Her subconscious fought the return to reality, trying to squeeze out as much REM as possible. She always awoke slowly, reluctantly. This time, the journey to consciousness seemed harder than usual.

Her eyes fluttered open. For a few seconds, she couldn't remember where she was or why she had this vague sense of dread surrounding her. She sensed movement but didn't know where she was going. It was dark. She was a passenger in a moving vehicle. Outside the darkened windows, she saw the gleam of snow in headlights.

Panic, thick and hard, hit her then, and she suddenly couldn't breathe. Another night. Another storm. Searing, devastating pain.

Sometimes the idyllic refuge of her dreams could shift to a nightmare in an instant.

A cry escaped her and the sound of her own voice dragged her further to the other side of sleep.

"Easy. It's okay."

Odd. What was Luke's voice doing in her nightmare? It was a discordant, jarring note in the otherwise familiar setting. He hadn't been there that night. She had left him and their children.

Reality hit her like a fist punching through the windshield. She opened her eyes the rest of the way, turned in her seat and found him through the darkness, hard and unforgiving as he drove through the storm.

"Luke."

He shifted his eyes briefly from the road. "Were you expecting someone else when you woke up? Hoping you could open your eyes and find out I was just a bad dream?"

He was a good dream. Always the best dream.

"No. Sorry." She sat up, trying to ignore a wicked cramp in her leg.

"Where are we?"

"About a hundred or so miles past Portland. You slept a few hours. I need to pull off at the next town for gas."

He was driving slowly through the storm, she could tell by the trees inching past the window. She could see few other cars on the road.

"Something's wrong," she said, panic surging again. "There's no...traffic coming from the other direction."

"I know." He kept his gaze focused on the road. Now she noticed his knuckles were white on the steering wheel. Was that from her presence or from the storm? Or both?

"Maybe...maybe it's an accident or something else has closed the freeway."

"Maybe."

"You don't think so."

"Don't know. I've been trying to get news on the radio but can't find any local stations."

He pointed to a sign on the shoulder indicating an exit two miles ahead with services. "Maybe we can find out more when we fill up."

A lifetime crawled by in the time it took him to cover those few miles. He drove silently, the only sounds in the vehicle the hum of the heater and the beat of the wipers. By the time he took the exit, she felt wrung dry from the tension. The gas station was part of a cluster of rural houses, maybe six or seven. She was struck by the Christmas lights gleaming a welcome through the snow. Elizabeth had almost forgotten Christmas was only a week away.

Luke drove up to a gas pump, then finally shifted toward her. "Do you need to go in?"

Mostly, she wanted a minute away from him and this tension. If nothing else, moving might help ease the muscle cramp in her leg.

"Yes. I'll only be...a moment."

Blowing snow hit her as she opened the vehicle door. She shivered but gripped the door frame and lowered herself out gingerly. For one horrifying moment, she was afraid her leg would not support her weight, but she willed all the strength she had into it and was able to make her painstaking way inside the convenience store.

"Hello," the clerk greeted her.

Elizabeth forced a smile and made her way straight to the restroom. There, she looked at herself in the mirror, struck as she always was when she looked at her reflection by the woman there who was her but wasn't her.

When she emerged from the restroom, she found Luke walking through the empty snack aisle with a basket over his arm. He had a deli sandwich, a bag of chips, a couple of protein bars and a banana that looked a few days past its prime.

"Would you like anything?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm good."

"You need to eat. Grab something. This is dinner."

She wanted to argue that she wasn't hungry and wasn't sure she could eat as long as she was with him, but that would simply be foolish. She had to eat to maintain her strength, something she was quite certain she would need over the next few days.

She grabbed a bag of nuts and some dried apple slices. Luke gave her a look and deliberately picked up a second premade sandwich and added it to his collection.

The cashier set down her magazine when they approached the checkout. She was in her sixties, her skin weathered, and she sported red hair in a shade that couldn't possibly be natural. "Where you folks heading?"

"A town east of Boise. Haven Point."

She squinted at them. "Haven't you been listening to the weather report? It's nasty out there. This storm is hitting hard. They're telling people to stay off the freeway tonight."

"It's never as bad as they say it will be," Luke said.

"Usually I'd agree with you but this one is a doozy. About an hour east of here, you're going to be fighting black ice and blizzard conditions. There was a big pileup that's closed all traffic coming this direction."

"That's why we didn't see anyone," Elizabeth exclaimed, her stomach muscles clenching.

"We'll be fine. I'm in a big truck with four-wheel drive."

"It's always the guys with four-wheel drive who think they can get through anything and end up off the road," the cashier said. "That won't do you diddly if it's icy. Four-wheeldrive vehicles slide off just as easy as front-wheel."

"Thanks for the reminder," Luke said. "But we've got to keep going. Family emergency."

"Well, good luck to you, then," she said, shaking her head in a pitying sort of way.

Luke paid for their supplies and the gas, and they walked back outside. Just in the short time they'd been inside, the wind had picked up. Now those snowflakes felt like tiny icecold missiles, and visibility had dropped to only a few hundred feet.

Elizabeth tried to fight down her panic, remembering another night, another storm.

She did not want to be out in this. She wanted to be safe at home next to her fireplace at Brambleberry House with a mug of hot cocoa and a mystery novel.

Luke was a good driver, she reminded herself as he helped her inside the truck again and she fastened her seat belt. He always had been.

He would keep her safe.

She repeated that mantra for the next half hour, with Luke driving no more than twenty miles per hour. Neither of them said anything, focused only on the increasing fury of the storm.

After what seemed a lifetime, he released a frustrated sigh.

"We're not going to make it any farther tonight. Might as well catch a few hours of sleep while the storm blows over and then take off again in the morning when the roads are clear. Look online and see if you can find us a couple of rooms in the next town."

This sparsely populated and remote part of Oregon wasn't exactly overflowing with towns that boasted four-star hotels. Add in the storm that was basically crippling transportation and she wasn't optimistic about their chances. Still, she was grateful she still had cell service and something to do to take her mind off the weather conditions and the fear that hovered just on the edge of her mind.

Sure enough, she searched on her phone for hotels in the next town and found only two. When she called, neither had vacancies. Not so much as a broom closet.

She had more luck with the town after that, about ten more miles along the interstate.

"Looks like there's one room with two beds in a motel in the next town," she said, looking at the hotel app she used to book her trips to Haven Point.

"Call them and book it. I'm afraid it might take us a half an hour or more to get there and I would hate for it to be sold out when we show up. You can take a credit card out of my wallet."

He lifted a hip to pull it out, then handed it over, still warm from being in his pocket.

She took it quickly so he could return both hands to the wheel. Using the light from her phone, she opened it and started to search for a credit card. Before she could find one, she stopped on a snapshot inside the wallet, in a little pocket with a clear cover.

Their children.

Cassie and Bridger were hugging each other, faces turned to the camera with matching smiles.

Next to them was another picture. Older. This one was of a much younger Luke with his arm around a woman with blond hair and blue eyes. They looked at each other with a love that was as plain as if hearts and flowers suddenly floated off the image.

She felt as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the vehicle, as if her lungs couldn't expand enough to take in the necessary air.

She missed them, this couple who had been so in love. She missed the evenings they would spend snuggled together, sharing secrets and dreams; she missed the pure contentment she felt in his arms; she missed the serenity of knowing someone loved her completely.

She missed that woman, too.

It had been seven years since she'd seen a picture of herself the way she used to be.

She had forgotten. The angle of her nose and the little bump where she had broken it in second grade trying to ice-skate down the slide at the playground. The mouth that looked like the mother she had never forgotten, even during the time she considered the blank years.

Luke looked so young. Not at all like the hard, forbidding man who sat beside her. He had been closed off when they married, his spirit bruised by a cruel, abusive father, yet there had been a softness to him then. A sweetness. She had always attributed that to Megan's mother, Sharon, his stepmother from the age of about six, who had loved and nurtured the lost little boy he had been.

She fought the urge now to rub her finger on that familiar, beloved face, as if she could absorb him through her skin and somehow resurrect some of that sweetness and joy.

"Well? Did you find a credit card?"

She jerked her gaze from the picture to the man beside her. "Sorry. Just a minute." She dug out a card and flashed it to him. "Will this work?"

"That's fine."

With great reluctance, she closed the wallet on that picture and dialed the number to the hotel, then pushed the required sequence of numbers to connect with an operator.

The line rang at least ten times before a woman answered, sounding flustered.

"Riverside Inn."

"Hi. I was...wondering about booking a room tonight. We are...traveling and stranded by the storm."

She hated her hesitant, faltering voice and hated most of

RAEANNE THAYNE

all that Luke heard it. So far she had been able to conceal the way her mind tangled sometimes over the right words. At other times, the right ones slipped away completely.

"You and everyone else, honey."

"Your...your website said you had availability."

"I've got one room left. How long will it take you to make it here?"

"I...don't know. But I was...hoping I could reserve it with a credit card."

"That works. Good thing you called. That's probably the last available room in a hundred miles. Let me open up a reservation."

After they went through the particulars of booking the room on Luke's card, Elizabeth thanked the woman.

"I hear it's ugly out there. Be safe, Mrs. Hamilton."

No one had called her that in so many years. "I... Thank you."

She disconnected the call and carefully slid Luke's credit card back into the pocket of his wallet, fighting the urge to flip through the pictures again and stare at all of them. He probably had more of the children, maybe when they were younger.

"All set?"

She nodded and carefully closed the wallet again. "It was the last room. You were right about booking it over the phone. Here's your wallet."

"I can't put it back in my pocket while I'm driving. Just set it on the console," he said before turning his attention back to the road and the snow blowing across.

Now that she had nothing to do but focus on the storm, her anxiety increased. Even closing her eyes didn't keep it at bay because she could still hear the wipers on high and the tires churning through the snowy conditions.

"I don't know how to get to the motel," he said as the next exit loomed ahead of them. "Can you find directions?"

Did he sense she could cope better when she had a task? "Of course," she answered, and punched in the coordinates of the inn to her phone, then recited the turn-by-turn instructions to him. It seemed like forever but was probably only a few more moments before he found the building with the neon sign out front that read Riverside Inn.

He pulled into a parking space, one of the few remaining. "Took a while but we made it. You okay?"

Sure. She was going to be spending the night in a little hotel room with the only man she'd ever loved—a man who happened to hate her with every fiber of his being. Why wouldn't she be okay?

"Fine," she answered, quite certain he knew it was a lie.

The hotel's website hadn't exaggerated its charm, as websites often did. It was actually quite lovely. Red and green Christmas lights ran along the eaves and a brightly lit Christmas tree twinkled a cheery welcome through the blowing snow.

"You need help getting out?" he asked.

"No. Grab the bags," she answered.

He nodded and went to the bed of the pickup truck to collect their luggage.

She opened her door and slid down into ankle-deep snow. Sometimes she could be so stupid and stubborn. She should have accepted his help. She could have used her cane but it was back with her suitcase. Stupid her.

The prospect of walking the twenty feet from the pickup truck to the front door of the inn through the snow was as daunting as climbing Mount Hood. Her balance wasn't the greatest under the best of circumstances. Throw in icy conditions and she seemed predestined for a fall.

Still, she started out after him and had only made it a few faltering steps when he returned without the luggage.

He thrust out his arm. "Here. Grab hold. I should have thought to help you first before taking the bags."

His words weren't quite an apology but close to it. She was torn between embarrassment that she needed his help and gratitude that he saw the need and stepped forward so that she didn't have to ask.

"Sorry. I'm not very...stable on ice."

In her fleeting glance at his features, she saw questions in his eyes, but his mouth tightened and he remained silent. She turned her attention back to the sidewalk. He had to wonder about her physical condition and the obvious speech issues that were new since she had left him, but he didn't ask.

Luke dropped her arm as soon as they walked through the outside door into the welcome warmth of the inn's lobby. She told herself she had no right to be hurt by his obvious unwillingness to touch her, but it still stung.

A half dozen people stood in line, either looking for rooms or waiting to check in.

"I'm sorry but we don't have anything left," the flustered clerk was saying to a desperate-looking couple. "I understand an emergency shelter has been set up for stranded travelers at the elementary school, which is two blocks to the east."

Oh dear. The situation was worse than she'd thought. She wasn't looking forward to spending the night in a hotel room with Luke, but at least they had a room with beds and wouldn't have to sleep on a cot in a classroom somewhere.

"Take a seat and I'll check us in," Luke said, gesturing

to the only open spot in the lobby, next to a very pregnant woman who was trying to entertain a toddler on her lap with her cell phone.

Elizabeth made her way to the seating area, surrounding a river rock fireplace where a gas blaze cheerfully burned.

The woman with the toddler smiled at Elizabeth. "This is crazy, isn't it? I thought we were taking a simple trip to visit my folks in Boise before the holidays. It's my dad's seventy-fifth birthday tomorrow. This blizzard came out of nowhere. When we checked the weather, they said it would only be a few inches, so we thought we were fine."

Poor thing. Traveling with little ones had to be tough enough without road emergencies. "Do you have a room?" she asked, with some vague, crazy idea of giving her theirs. Elizabeth wouldn't want to sleep at the elementary school, but it would be better than having to live with the guilt at knowing she sent this pregnant woman and darling little girl back out into that storm.

"We do. We called ahead and were fortunate enough to book one of the last two rooms in town."

"I think we got the other one."

The woman smiled at her. "Yay us." She nodded to the line at the reception desk. "Is that your husband in line behind mine?"

She wanted to say Luke wasn't her husband, but it seemed foolish to protest. He was, anyway. She just hadn't been any sort of wife to him for the last seven years.

Instead, she simply nodded.

"Lucky you," the woman said with a grin. "I'm Lindsey Lowell, and this is my little girl, Aubrey."

"Hi, Aubrey. Hi, Lindsey. I'm...Sonia Davis."

She caught a little on the name that had been given to her

seven years ago. Even after a few hours, she was already back to being Elizabeth in her head.

"Hi," Aubrey said. "I'm this many."

She held up two fingers and Elizabeth smiled. "That's big. What are you playing?"

"Balloons. I share." The girl held out the phone for Elizabeth.

"Um. Thanks." She wasn't quite sure what to say or do.

"I show you." Without waiting for permission, Aubrey climbed from her mother's lap to Elizabeth's, demonstrating how to pop the balloons on the phone app.

"Aubrey. Honey. Come back."

"No. It's fine," Elizabeth said. She didn't have the chance to interact with an adorable little girl very often. If nothing else, it would give the pregnant mom a break for a moment.

A few moments later, she was engrossed in the girl, who delighted in showing her how to blow the balloons up bigger and make them float across the screen, then how to pop them rather violently with a finger.

It was actually calming in a zen sort of way, a little like playing with Bubble Wrap.

"Pretty," Aubrey exclaimed, clapping her hands when Elizabeth inflated a purple balloon until it filled the whole screen. The girl pointed her chubby little index finger at the phone and popped it with a relish that made Elizabeth smile.

She was so busy playing with the girl, she didn't notice Luke return until she suddenly sensed his presence. She looked up in time to see something dark flash across his expression.

She had rarely played with their own children like this. She had wanted to, had ached to be the mother they needed, but the dark emptiness had been overwhelming.

We would all be better off without you.

COMING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

The memory of those words coming from his mouth was as crystal clear as if he had said them moments earlier.

How funny that she still had many gaps in her memory but that one was so distinct. She could see the pain in his eyes, hear the frustration in his voice as he said them.

She had goaded him into it during one of her terrible days, had begged him over and over again to admit it.

He hadn't wanted to but she had finally worn him down. Fine. You want me to say it? Right now it's true. We would all be better off without you.

She hadn't been able to be the wife he needed during those four years or a mother for their children.

There had been good days during that time; she was certain of it. Before she got pregnant with Bridger, she had tried so hard to be a good mother to Cassie, but she knew the bad times had far outnumbered the good.

"Our room is ready," he said gruffly.

She didn't want to go with him. She wanted to stay here in this lobby, surrounded by noise and chaos and children.

"Goodbye, Lindsey. It was...nice to meet you. Safe travels to you and...good luck with your little one."

"Thank you. Goodbye, Sonia."

Luke's mouth tightened at the name. He looked at the woman and the bags surrounding her. "Do you need help carrying your things to your room?"

"No. We didn't bring much and my husband can carry what we have. Thank you, though."

Elizabeth rose and followed Luke across the lobby to an elevator in an alcove next to the fireplace.

"You're back to Sonia again?" he asked after pushing the button for their floor.

She didn't like feeling defensive. She hadn't chosen to use

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a different name. Circumstances had been thrust upon her without her knowledge or consent. "It's been my name for seven years. Elizabeth... She seems like a different person."

He didn't say anything more as he led the way to the third floor and down the hall to their room.

He unlocked the door and held it open for her. It was a comfortable space, far more so than she had feared they would end up sharing. The furniture looked new, two queen beds made out of honey-colored pine and covered in lodge-look comforters. There was even space for a small sitting area with a sofa and easy chair.

As far as hotel rooms went, this one was fairly large. Still, unless it was the size of a ballroom, any place would still be too small for her to be comfortable spending several hours alone with Luke in it.

He set their luggage down. "Do you need something to eat or will the sandwiches we bought earlier do? The front desk clerk said they have vending machines and there's a restaurant still open next door."

"I'm not hungry," she answered. "But if I need something, a sandwich is fine."

He stood for a moment, big and rangy and obviously as unenthusiastic as she was about being trapped in this hotel room together.

"I left my phone in the truck. I'm going to grab it and maybe make a few calls down in the lobby. I'll try to stay out of your way."

Before she could answer, he turned around and headed out of the hotel room, leaving her alone once more.

Want to know what happens next?

Order <u>Coming Home for Christmas</u> by RaeAnne Thayne, available now, wherever books are sold!

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"A warmhearted story filled with holiday cheer and charm, readers will love this romantic twist on a Christmas classic."

—Debbie Mason, USA TODAY bestselling author of The Corner of Holly and Ivy

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHEILA ROBERTS

Christmas from the HEART



1

From: Olivia Berg, Director, Christmas from the Heart

Date: 2-14-19

To: Ms. Marla Thompson, CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

Subject: Holiday Joy

Dear Ms. Thompson,

Happy Valentine's Day to you! I'm following up our January newsletter with a special greeting as this is, of course, the month for love. Love for our sweethearts, our family and friends, and for those in need. As you could see from the newsletter, we put the money our loyal supporters donated to us to good use. So many families benefited from your generous donation to Christmas from the Heart last year and I just wanted to remind you that, even though the holidays seem far away they will be here before we know it. I hope we can count on Hightower Enterprises again this year. We have such a history together. Let's keep up the good work! Warmly,

Olivia Berg

Christmas from the Heart Giving from the heart makes all the difference

From: Marla Thompson, CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

Date: 2-14-19

To: Ms. Olivia Berg, Director, Christmas from the Heart

Subject: Holiday Joy

Dear Ms. Berg,

Thanks for reaching out. Our fiscal year is just ending and I haven't yet received word as to how our charitable donations will be dispersed this year. I will keep you apprised.

Best,

Marla Thompson

CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

From: Olivia Berg, Director, Christmas from the Heart

Date: 2-14-19

To: Ms. Marla Thompson, CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

Subject: Holiday Joy

Thank you so much. Looking forward to hearing from you!

Olivia Berg

Christmas from the Heart

Giving from the heart makes all the difference

From: Olivia Berg, Director, Christmas from the Heart

Date: 5-1-19

To: Ms. Marla Thompson, CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

Subject: Happy May Day!

Dear Ms. Thompson, just wanted to wish you a happy May Day. The flowers here in Pine River are now in full bloom, and our organization has been busy helping people make their dreams bloom, as well. As you know, while our focus is primarily the holidays, Christmas from the Heart tries to help people all year round when needs arise. Of course, Christmas is our big thrust, and as there is no other organization working in this area, we are much needed. As are your kind contributions. I still haven't heard and I do hope we can count on you.

Warmly,
Olivia Berg
Christmas from the Heart
Giving from the heart makes all the difference

From: Olivia Berg, Director, Christmas from the Heart

Date: 5-5-19

To: Ms. Marla Thompson Subject: Just checking

Reaching out again in case my last email went astray. I'm wondering if you have any news for me regarding Hightower's involvement with our cause for this coming year.

Thanks!

Olivia Berg

Christmas from the Heart

Giving from the heart makes all the difference

From: Marla Thompson, CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

Date: 5-5-19

To: Ms. Olivia Berg Subject: Just checking

Ms. Berg, sorry I haven't been able to get back to you sooner. I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. It appears that the company

is going to be scaling back on their charitable giving this year and funds have already been budgeted for other causes. I'm aware of the fact that in the past we've donated to your organization and I'm sorry I don't have better news for you. I do wish you all the best in your search for other funding.

Best,

Marla Thompson

CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

From: Olivia Berg, Director, Christmas from the Heart

Date: 5-5-19

To: Ms. Marla Thompson Subject: Just checking

There must be some sort of misunderstanding! Hightower has always donated to Christmas from the Heart. The company's founder, Elias Hightower, was my great-grandmother's first contributor, and he promised her that Hightower would always be there for this organization. This is a company tradition! Please speak to your director.

Hopefully,
Olivia Berg
Christmas from the Heart
Giving from the heart makes all the difference

From: Marla Thompson, CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

Date: 5-5-19

To: Ms. Olivia Berg Subject: Just checking

I'm sorry. The decision is out of my hands.

Marla Thompson

CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

From: Olivia Berg, Director, Christmas from the Heart

Date: 5-5-19

To: Ms. Marla Thompson Subject: Just checking

Then please tell me who I need to talk to. Who's your CFO?

Olivia Berg

Christmas from the Heart

Giving from the heart makes all the difference

From: Marla Thompson, CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

Date: 5-5-19

To: Ms. Olivia Berg Subject: Just checking

Our CFO is Guy Hightower, and his email is ghightower@hight-

owerenterprises.com

Good luck!

Marla Thompson

CSR Director, Hightower Enterprises

From: Olivia Berg, Director, Christmas from the Heart

Date: 5-5-19

To: Guy Hightower, CFO, Hightower Enterprises

Subject: Please reconsider

Dear Mr. Hightower, I understand from your corporate social resources director that Hightower isn't planning on making any donation to Christmas from the Heart this year. There must be some mistake! Surely you're aware of the long-standing relationship between your company and our organization. I'm sure I can count on you for some small amount.

Best,

Olivia Berg

Christmas from the Heart Giving from the heart makes all the difference

Guy Hightower frowned when he saw the email from Olivia Berg in his in-box. Marla Thompson had been forwarding her emails to him, keeping him abreast of Olivia Berg's varied begging tactics, and had finally even come into his office, trying to dump the load of guilt the woman had laid on her from her shoulders to his.

"Don't open it," he told himself. He opened it anyway. Then he read it and swore.

Actually, he'd been swearing ever since meeting with his brothers to discuss the budget back in December. If either of them had listened to him three years ago, they wouldn't be having to pull the company belt so tight now. This was the problem with being the youngest. It didn't matter how many degrees you had, how smart you were or what your job title was. Big brothers never listened.

Hard to listen when you were going through your third divorce.

That was Mike's excuse. What was Bryan's? Oh yeah. He was a wuss. He always agreed with Mike, no matter what. And Mike hadn't wanted to change directions. Never mind that the company was struggling, keep on doing the same thing. The definition of insanity.

Sorry, Little Miss Christmas. Times were tough all over. Hightower had kept its commitment to the more visible causes and turned the little fish loose. And that was how it worked in the corporate world.

He typed his reply.

Dear Ms. Berg, I regret that Hightower can't help you this year. We've had to reassess our commitments to various causes. I'm sure you'll understand.

Then he signed off with the time-honored adios: Respectfully, Guy Hightower.

And if she didn't understand, well, not his problem. He had his hands full trying to keep the family company afloat. Maybe now Mike would be ready to take his advice and diversify.

Olivia Berg—Livi to her family and friends—read the email from Guy Hightower a second time. Yes, the message was the same. Really? *Really?* Who was this man, Ebenezer Scrooge the Second?

She plowed her fingers through her hair, the birthstone ring Morris had given her for her birthday catching in the curls. She was so angry she barely noticed.

With a snarl, she began to type.

You should be ashamed. Your great-grandfather is probably turning in his grave right now. What's the matter with you, anyway, you selfish bastard?

She pulled her fingers off the keyboard with a gasp. What was she thinking? Was this any way to get someone to contribute to her cause? And what kind of language was this? Her great-grandmother would be turning in her grave right now, along with Elias. Adelaide Brimwell had been a lady through and through. So had Livi's grandmother, Olivia, as well as Livi's mom.

The thought of her mother made her tear up. How she wished Mom was still around to advise her. They'd always planned that Livi would take over running the organization one day, but neither had dreamed that day would come so soon. Her mother's heart attack had struck like lightning. Livi's brother had left town, moving to Seattle, which was just far enough south to keep the memories at bay. Livi had stayed put, holding on to

every single one, weaving them together into a lifeline to cling to as she kept Christmas from the Heart afloat.

Oh, Mom. What should I do?

Try again came the answer.

Yes, her mother never gave up. She'd chased one potential donor for two years before he finally came through. Livi still remembered the day her mom left the house, clad in a Mrs. Santa costume she'd created—requisite white wig along with a frilly white blouse and a red skirt topped with a red-striped apron. She'd taken with her a batch of home-baked cookies nestled in a red basket and returned home with a check for five hundred dollars. The man had been a loyal contributor ever since. Livi still took him cookies every year.

"Persistence pays," she told herself as she deleted what she'd typed.

She started over.

I'm asking you to reconsider. Your company is our major donor, and without you so many people will have little joy this Christmas. Any amount you can give will be greatly appreciated.

There. He'd have to be a heartless monster not to respond to that.

Guy trashed the guilt-inflicting email. What was he, Santa Claus? He had his hands full keeping his company solvent.

But then, people like Olivia Berg never considered the fact that a company might have needs of its own. What made them feel so entitled to sit at the edge of the salt mine while a man slaved away and then greet him with their hands out when he emerged broken and bruised? Maybe some of those people always begging for money should get out there and actually *earn*

a living. Let them work their tails off, putting in seventy-hour weeks. *Sheesh*.

Anyway, the company had already met their good deed quota for the year. The only cause Guy was interested in now was Hightower Enterprises.

By the end of the workday, Guy Hightower still hadn't responded to Livi's last email. "You are a heartless monster," she grumbled, glaring at her empty email in-box.

"No word yet?" her part-time assistant, Bettina Thomas, asked as she shut down her computer.

Livi sighed and shook her head.

"That is so wrong," Bettina said in disgust.

It sure was. "They've been our major donor ever since my great-grandmother founded Christmas from the Heart. Without their contribution how will we put on the Christmas dinner at the community center? How many families won't have presents under the tree or Christmas stockings or a Christmas turkey?" There was no Salvation Army in Pine River, no Toys for Tots—none of the usual organizations serviced this area. There had been no need. Christmas from the Heart had it under control.

Until now.

"We've had to reassess our commitments," Livi quoted. The words left a bad taste in her mouth and she frowned. "It sounds like something your boyfriend says when he's dumping you."

"They are dumping us," Bettina pointed out. "But don't worry. We have time. We'll find someone else to come through."

"Not like Hightower. There must be something I can do," Livi mused.

"There is. Go home and eat chocolate."

And try not to think bad thoughts about Guy Hightower.

In all fairness, he probably didn't grasp the situation. She'd call him the next day and invite him to come to Pine River for a visit so she could let him see the need, show him a little

of what Christmas from the Heart did for the community. She could take him to lunch, introduce him to some of the people in town, put a face—or better yet, several—to Christmas from the Heart. She'd top it all off by following in her mother's footsteps and baking him cookies. Then how could he help but catch the vision his great-grandfather and her great-grandmother had shared?

Yes, that would do it. Sometimes you had to be a little patient, give people a second chance.

Trying a more personal touch with Guy Hightower was the way to go, Olivia was sure of that, but getting past his secretary was proving to be a challenge. Maybe giving her name hadn't been such a good idea. The first time she called, Mr. Hightower was in a meeting. The second time she called, he was out. He was in another meeting on her third call, then unavailable on her fourth.

Finally, she asked, "Is there a good time to reach him?"

"I'm afraid Mr. Hightower is very busy," his secretary said evasively.

Livi suspected that Mr. Hightower was very busy avoiding her. "Tell him I'll only take a minute of his time," she pleaded.

"Can you hold please?"

"For as long as it takes," Olivia said sweetly.

Olivia Berg was never going to go away. She was going to keep on calling and calling, driving his secretary nuts, and Guy

was beginning to suspect if he didn't talk to her she'd come to Seattle and camp out in the lobby of the Hightower Building until he would.

"Fine," he said irritably. "Put her through." Get it over with.

"Mr. Hightower, thank you so much for taking a moment to talk to me," she gushed as soon as he'd taken the call.

"I'm not sure we have much to talk about at this point, Ms. Berg," he said. "As I told you in my email—"

She cut him off, rushing on like a vacation time-share salesman. "I'm realizing that email isn't always the most effective way to communicate. I'd love to meet with you in person. I think if you could visit Pine River and see what Christmas from the Heart does—"

Like he had time to go charging up to her little town and get hassled in person. Now it was his turn to snip her off midsentence. "I'm sure you do a lot of good, but we can't help you this year."

"Mr. Hightower, we have such a history together."

He knew all about their history, probably more than she did.

"Surely you can manage something."

One thing Guy couldn't manage at this point was his temper. He'd just come from a very unpleasant meeting with his idiot brothers and he wanted to punch a wall. "Look—"

"Any amount would be helpful. People have so many needs during the holidays."

"I know they do but I can't help you."

"A big corporation like yours," she began.

Oh yeah. Play that card. You're a big company so we'll hit you up and you should be proud that we are. "I don't know how many ways to say this politely but the answer is no."

"You can't mean that," she coaxed. "Your company's been so good to us all these years."

And here came the guilt card. Wrong card to play. "I'm afraid I can."

"Again, please consider the history we have together," she pleaded.

"I'm sorry, but things change."

"Change isn't always good," she snapped. "You have no idea how many people depend on Christmas from the Heart."

"I've got people depending on me, too. Okay?"

"Well, of course. But surely..."

"I can't give you anything." His voice was rising, right along with his blood pressure.

"There's no need to yell," she said stiffly. "I'd just hoped you'd reconsider. We're not asking a lot."

"It's a lot if you don't have it."

"Hightower Enterprises is a big company. Really, Mr. Hightower—"

Now she was going to lecture him on what his company could and couldn't afford to give? Okay, that was it. "What don't you understand about the word no? Look, lady, I've been as polite as I can, but I'm not getting through, so we're done here. We can't give to every leech that latches onto us and that's that."

"Leech!" she repeated, her voice vibrating with shock. "Well, of all the rude..."

"Hey, if you want to talk about rude, I'm not the one bugging people so they can't get their work done. I'm not the one who can't take no for an answer. But believe it or not, that's what it is. So cut it out with the high-pressure crap 'cause I'm not giving you squat. Got that?" He didn't give her time to say whether she got it or not. He ended the call.

And then he suffered a major guilt attack. That had been cold. Ebenezer Scrooge couldn't have said it better.

He rubbed his aching forehead. What was the matter with him, anyway? People had needs. They lost jobs and not always because they'd done anything wrong. Sometimes you worked your butt off and things didn't work out.

For all he knew, things might not work out for his company

in spite of his long hours. But that was no excuse for being a jerk. Bad PR for the company, too.

He heaved a sigh and pulled his checkbook out of his desk drawer, then wrote a check for a couple hundred. There. Maybe that would make Olivia Christmas from the Heart happy.

Livi's heart soared when she went to the post office to collect the mail and saw the official Hightower Enterprises envelope. Yes! Guy Hightower had a heart after all. Or maybe he simply felt bad for the way he'd behaved over the phone. Either way, she'd happily take his company's contribution.

Of course, she thought as she slit open the envelope, it probably would be less this year. But, okay, they could make do with...

Two hundred dollars? She stared at the check. It wasn't a company check. It was a personal one, and this was it.

If any other person had donated a couple hundred bucks, she'd have been delighted. Many of their donors gave small amounts of twenty-five or fifty dollars. But those were people on modest incomes, struggling to make ends meet, not well-heeled CFOs.

"You...cheapskate," she growled. "I hope you get what's coming to you this Christmas—poison in your eggnog and a lump of coal where the sun don't shine."

She stormed down the street back to her office, which was nothing more than a small suite in the second story of an old Victorian that housed Tillie's Teapot, a tearoom that was a draw for both locals and people from neighboring towns. Tillie Henderson owned both the tearoom and the house. She was pushing ninety, and her two daughters, Jean and Annette, did most of the work now—cooking and managing the place, serving high tea, offering elegant lunches and Sunday brunches you had to make a reservation for a month in advance. Tillie herself still acted as hostess on the weekdays, though, and had the final say in the business decisions. She'd not only contributed to Christmas from the Heart over the years but had offered them office

space at a bargain price. They shared the upper floor with an interior decorator and a writer who preferred to get out of the house to work. The interior decorator was rarely around, usually out staging houses for the local real estate companies, but the writer, Jillian George, was always in her office, and Livi could usually hear her in there toward the end of the day, reading aloud what she'd written earlier. Jillian wrote gory murder mysteries. If she was looking for someone to bump off, Livi had just the man.

She marched upstairs to Christmas from the Heart headquarters, sat down at her little desk and glared at her computer screen. Of course, she needed to acknowledge Guy Hightower's contribution. And she should be grateful. People gave to charities out of the goodness of their hearts and every gift helped the cause. But, in light of how much his company normally gave, this sure came off as stingy.

She opened her trusty refurbished laptop and began to type.

Dear Mr. Hightower. Thank you for your contribution.

No way was she going to call it generous.

We cheerfully accept all contributions, even small ones.

Heehee.

I do hope this Christmas you are blessed as generously as you've given.

Double heehee.

She hit Send with a smile.

"What are you looking so happy about?"

Livi looked up to see Kate Greer, her best friend and righthand woman, leaning against the doorjamb. Kate was a genius with money, and when she wasn't doing accounting for local businesses like Tillie's, she could be found giving her time to Christmas from the Heart, watching over their finances.

Like Livi, she had hit the big 3–0, but she had more to show for it—a fat diamond on her left hand and a wedding planned for the next spring. She even had money in savings. Built like a Barbie doll, she did Pilates three times a week and had recently splurged for a Botox touch-up.

Livi didn't make enough to have extra money for savings, much less face fix-ups. New shoes were a splurge. Anyway, even if she had the money, she wasn't sure she could bring herself to spend it on such luxuries when Christmas from the Heart needed life support.

"I'm not happy," Livi informed her friend. "I'm just indulging in a moment of petty, evil glee." She went on to explain about the latest development with Guy Hightower and her tonguein-cheek response to his token contribution.

Kate frowned disapprovingly and shook her head. "Was that one of your smarter moves?"

The evil glee disappeared faster than cookies for Santa. "Well."

"You don't want to burn bridges. I get that you're frustrated, but it's not like you to be so undiplomatic. That's my job," she added with a smile, softening the scold.

"I know. It's just that this jerk has got me so mad. And talk about undiplomatic. Leeches? Really?"

"He might feel like that. Maybe they get hit up a lot. They don't have to give you anything," Kate reminded her.

"But they gave to other nonprofits," Livi protested. "After supporting us for generations. It's like...breaking a treaty. And a lot of people are going to suffer because of it. And to put us off for so long and then unceremoniously dump us." She shook her head. "That was sick and wrong."

"Corporate finances are complicated. The company may be struggling to meet their payroll."

"We're all struggling," Livi said irritably. She held up the check. "A personal check. He's probably trying to ease his conscience."

"So, let him. What do you care?"

Of course, her friend was right. A donation was a donation. But Guy Hightower's words still stung. "A leech," she muttered.

"Yeah, that's you. Some leech. That pittance you take can hardly be called a salary."

"I don't need much," Olivia said. "I get by." To supplement her income, she cleaned house for one of the town's more welloff women and picked up an occasional pet-sitting job when someone got the itch to travel. So what if she didn't have a lot of money in savings? So what if she was still living at home? That was helping her make ends meet and helping her father, as well.

"You're running around in consignment clothes and at some point you're going to have to replace that beater of yours. Plus you've put nothing into your retirement fund in the last six months, Miss Live-on-fumes-so-you-can-help-the-whole-world." This was the downside of having her friend for her accountant.

"I'm not going to be helping very many people this year," Livi said miserably.

"Things will work out somehow," Kate assured her.

"Yeah, well, it's finding the somehow that I'm worried about."

"Come on. Let's go downstairs and have lunch. We can drown your sorrows in some Earl Grey and we'll brainstorm ways to make up the difference."

Livi currently had a whopping thirty-two dollars in her checking account and three dollars and some change in her wallet. Much as she liked Tillie and her daughters and loved to support their business, she'd as soon go home and make herself a PB&J sandwich and save the money.

"I'm paying," Kate added, "so don't give me any excuses."

"I hate when you pay for lunch," Livi said.

"I know. How many times have we had this conversation—about a million? I can afford lunch at Tillie's and every time I buy lunch it saves you money, which means you have more to pour back into Christmas from the Heart. So, really, when I buy lunch I'm doing a good deed."

"You already do enough good deeds around here."

"So do you. Come on, let's go. I'm starving."

Lunch at Tillie's Teapot always made Livi feel better when she was having a bad day. So what was different about today? The smells were as wonderful, the herbed scones were delicious, the homemade quiche to die for and Tillie's lemon pound cake was always incredible. But nothing tasted as good as it should have. Guilt made a poor seasoning. Kate was right. Livi shouldn't have sent that email. Instead she should have sent a gushy, suck-up thank-you note. What was wrong with her, anyway?

That could be summed up in two words: Guy Hightower. The man was not bringing out the best in her. The sun was shining, the flowers were in bloom, people were coming and going, all smiling, and she wanted to jump in the river. She'd blown it. And when you were dealing with big money and big egos you couldn't afford to blow it. Who knew what damage her lack of graciousness had done?

Probably none, she finally decided. Guy Hightower was a jerk.

Guy put in an extra two miles on the treadmill at the gym, but it didn't help him run off his anger. Olivia Berg was a snotty ingrate. Christmas from the Heart. Yeah, right. She was all heart until you didn't come through, then look out. They were well rid of her and her tacky little charity. It would be a cold day in the Caribbean before she ever saw another penny of Hightower money.

Of course, he'd matched her sarcastic tone, firing back an email of his own:

And I hope you'll get just what you deserve. With your great people skills, you'll have no problem finding more sponsors for your cause.

As if he'd shown any great people skills in their encounter. He should have called her back and apologized, explained that he was under a lot of pressure. But then she'd have started in on him all over again.

He finished up at the gym, then went to his condo, where he showered, pulled a microbrew from the fridge and plopped onto his couch to glare at the killer view from his tenth-floor window. He supposed Olivia Berg would be scandalized if she saw where he lived. So he had a nice place? So, sue him. He'd waited ten years to buy this place, living with slob roommates and hoarding his money. He worked his butt off, had rarely taken a vacation since he'd stepped in as CFO. This place and his Maserati GranTurismo were his only extravagances, and he refused to feel guilty about either of them. Well, okay, so he and his brothers still had the place in Vail. But that was family owned so it didn't count. Not that anyone had any business to be counting.

A text came in from one of his old college buddies wanting to shoot some pool at their favorite sports bar.

"Oh yeah, now I remember. That's what you look like," teased Jackson when Guy walked up to him at the bar. "I was starting to forget."

Guy held up a hand. "I know, I know. Life's been crazy."

"Your life's been crazy ever since you put on the Hightower harness. Hale's Red Menace for my man," he said to the bartender, ordering Guy's favorite local amber ale. "On me." He gave Guy an assessing once-over. "You're already starting to look old."

"And you're starting to look like a loser," Guy shot back. "Forty hours a week. What's that gonna get you?"

"A life."

The bartender gave Guy his beer, and he and his friend clinked bottles. "Here's to having a life," Guy said. "Which I've got."

"Yeah, that's probably what Scrooge said," his friend scoffed.

Scrooge. Who'd invited him to this party? "He's my hero," Guy quipped, and then thought of Olivia Berg. She was convinced he was a Scrooge.

She was also a judgmental little pest. "Come on. I see a pool table calling our name," he said.

"Fifty bucks for a race to seven?" suggested Jackson.

"That all you can afford?" Guy taunted.

"Okay, a hundred. It'll be the easiest hundred I ever made. You're probably out of practice."

Jackson broke and Guy went next and a little voice at the back of his mind hissed, You just wasted a hundred dollars betting on a pool game.

I didn't waste it 'cause I'm not gonna have to pay it, Guy hissed back, and missed his first shot.

"Yep, out of practice," teased Jackson.

No, just distracted.

And Guy remained distracted for the rest of the evening, missing shots he could normally make with his eyes closed. In the end he wound up forking over a hundred bucks to his pal.

You just wasted...the voice began.

Shut up!

Guy paid for one last round of beers, then scrammed. He'd had enough of pool for one night and he'd definitely had enough of the voice.

On Saturday, he had a date with a woman he'd been seeing off and on. Partway through dinner she began hinting about a vacation cruise. Like he had time to take a cruise? Like they were that serious? His lack of enthusiasm disappointed her and

her disappointment irked him, and before the night was over they were done. "This relationship is going nowhere," she'd said.

That had been fine with him. The last serious relationship he'd had was in college and that had definitely gone somewhere. Somewhere bad. Oh yeah, Miss Perfect had loved him until she found someone with more money, then she'd dumped him like so much junk stock.

When Guy had demanded to know what was so special about the loser she was leaving him for—the guy she'd been sneaking into her life—she'd pretended her choice had nothing to do with greedy, grasping finger syndrome. "He's sweet."

He sure wasn't good-looking or very well liked. So, sweet? Really? Yeah, she'd been looking beneath the surface. Of his bank account.

"What? And I'm not?" Guy had demanded. He'd been sweet. Obviously, not sweet enough. Guy had only offered skiing at Vail while Mr. Sweet had offered a visit to Paris with his family.

"Come on, Jordan," Guy had argued. "The guy's a tool."

"And he's already a millionaire thanks to the app he created," she'd shot back, showing her true colors.

"I guess you have to think about the future," he'd said. His jaw had been clenched so tightly he'd barely been able to get the words out.

At least she'd had the grace to blush. But that was as far as her conscience was prepared to go. She left him in the coffee shop, bleeding internally.

Heart operation without anesthetic. Guy hadn't known which was worse, the pain of rejection or the humiliation. Just when he'd thought things were getting serious between them.

He should have seen the signs—the texts that went unanswered, the canceled dates. He'd been the world's smartest business major and the world's dumbest boyfriend.

"Lesson learned," his mother had said when she'd pried the whole ugly tale out of him. "There are givers in this world and there are takers. Spend enough time with someone and you'll eventually learn which one she is."

"I don't know why I didn't see it," he'd said miserably. He should have. A third of Jordan's sentences had seemed to start with "Buy me," or "Let's," which usually also amounted to "Buy me," only he got to be included.

"Don't be in a hurry. Take your time," his mom had advised. "The right woman will come along when she's supposed to."

Or not.

Ever since, he'd preferred to keep things light. He was in no hurry to get serious, and seeing the love mess his older brother's life was confirmed the wisdom of that. Women dated Hightower men for one thing only: their money. It was all they really wanted. Even the so-called altruistic ones like Olivia Berg. When it came to money, in the end, nobody was altruistic.

Summer skipped by, bringing a parade of sunny days to Pine River, filled with picnics, coffee dates with girlfriends and hikes along the river with Morris. What it didn't bring was very many new contributors for Christmas from the Heart.

Livi had beaten every bush and climbed every money tree she could think of, with very little success. It seemed that many smaller companies were struggling, and this far into the year, large companies had already set their budgets.

In September she hosted a Saturday afternoon tea at Tillie's, inviting forty businesses from nearby towns and had a whopping attendance of twelve. After plying them with cookies and scones and giving a strong PowerPoint presentation, five wrote out checks for a small amount that would barely cover the cost of the tea. The others wished her well and told her to contact them next year.

She would. "If Christmas from the Heart is still around," she'd

grumbled as she and Bettina and Kate sat at a table, drowning their disappointment in tea.

"You will be," Kate said, and helped herself to a leftover scone. There were plenty of leftovers. "You've just hit a bump in the road."

It felt more like a roadblock.

But not the end of the road. Livi was not going to let that happen.

And come Thanksgiving she was determined to be grateful for the people who did support the nonprofit. They wouldn't be able to do as much this year with a big chunk of their funding missing—there would be less food distributed and no gifts other than Christmas stockings—but they'd still do what they could.

"Thanksgiving already," Tillie said to her and Kate as she stopped by their table to see how they were enjoying their butternut bisque.

What was not to enjoy about butternut bisque? Or anything else to be found at Tillie's Teapot. As usual, the place was bursting with the aroma of freshly baked breads and cakes and cookies and filled with friends taking a break between shopping and errands to meet for lunch.

Tillie was a little bent over and her hands were gnarled with arthritis, but she still put on lipstick and lined her eyebrows brown every day—the deep brown an interesting contrast to her white hair—and wore dangly earrings. When the season called for it she wore festive sweaters a younger woman might have worn to an ugly sweater party. Today she was in a black one with pockets shaped like turkeys. This was paired with slacks so orange she should have been passing out sunglasses to her customers. It was a mystery to Livi how Tillie could have such a beautifully decorated tearoom and then dress so...interestingly. Maybe her daughters had taken control of decorating the place. Livi had never had the nerve to ask.

Tillie shook her head. "I don't know where the year has gone." "It is going fast," Livi agreed.

Too fast. After the weekend, things would kick into high gear at the Christmas from the Heart office, with more to do and less to do it with. At least they still had supporters like Tillie.

"I imagine you're going to want to pick up our tea packets next week," Tillie said to Livi. In addition to donating money every year, Tillie and her daughters put together small net bags filled with a half a dozen tea bags and a few small chocolates that could be stuffed in stockings or put into gift baskets. There would be less food to give out and no gift baskets this year thanks to he who would not be named—only stockings, and Livi was hoping they finally had enough goodies coming in to fill them at least two-thirds full. The stockings were given out, one per household, and contents varied, depending on the family. She included candy canes, of course, and always a couple of mandarin oranges, which the local grocery stores donated, along with candy, much of which she purchased in grocery and drugstores at Halloween at 50 percent off and then saved for Christmas stockings. Families with small children always got a jar of bubbles in the stocking along with other small toys. She also made sure there were stockings for widows and widowers, and people with pets.

Stuffing five hundred stockings was a big undertaking, but Livi always set up an assembly line around her conference room table, and her crew of volunteers would work, chat and eat pizza donated to them from Little Italy, the best place in town for pizza. Actually, the only place in town for pizza.

First, though, there was Thanksgiving to prepare for, and after lunch Livi went home to bake pies—pumpkin and wild huck-leberry made from the berries she had stored in the freezer. She and Kate had gone on a berry-picking binge in early September and she had enough berries stored for three pies. The little

buggers were a pain to pick, so pies only got made for special occasions: Dad's birthday, the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving.

This year Livi's brother, David, was actually coming home for Thanksgiving. It would be their first one together since their mother died. Livi supposed the fact that he had a new wife made it easier for him to return for the holiday now. Terryl had filled much of the void.

Sometimes Livi wished there was someone who could fill that void for her. But really, who could take her mother's place? Mom had been her best friend. And her guide.

Without her mother, she often felt like she was going through life with a broken GPS, trying to take Christmas from the Heart in the right direction, trying to put her own life on track. She was almost through her thirties and she was still single, living in the same house where she grew up.

Of course, she didn't have to be single. Morris Bentley would marry her in a heartbeat. Morris had been in love with her since middle school. They'd attended their junior prom together in high school and had been on and off as a couple ever since. He was a sweet man, and she loved him, but she didn't LOVE him and he deserved more than friendship.

She wanted more for herself, too, even though she wasn't sure what more looked like. All she knew was that sometimes, in spite of her satisfying work and her good friends, her life seemed small. Like she was waiting for something big, someone big. Someone who would make her pulse race when she looked at him.

It was silly, really. "There's nothing wrong with your life," she scolded herself as she walked the few blocks from her office to her family home. "You have plenty to be thankful for."

How true it was. Compared to the struggling families she helped, to the lonely single moms trying to make ends meet and still spend time with their kids, she was downright wealthy and her life was great.

She got the pies done as well as the stuffing. Early in the morning, she'd stuff the bird and stick it in the oven. Then she'd put together a broccoli casserole, peel the potatoes and set the dining room table with Mom's Wedgwood dishes. Terryl and David would be bringing fruit salad and candied yams. The requisite sparkling cider was in the fridge, ready to be pulled out and poured into the good crystal that had been passed down from daughter to daughter for four generations. Everything would be festive.

She hoped her father would be able to drum up some small amount of enthusiasm for cutting the turkey. Ever since her mother's death he'd greeted Thanksgiving as an unwanted guest, one you had to be polite to while counting the hours until the intruder left.

He came home and found her putting the finishing touches on the dining table centerpiece, the same paper foldout turkey Mom had used for as long as Livi could remember. "Oh yes, Thanksgiving tomorrow," he said as if he'd forgotten all about it.

Livi was sure he was trying to. Her father had stayed in the same house where he and her mom had built a life together, but emotionally he'd been as gone as David, leaving for work at his insurance company every day and coming home every night to mindlessly eat whatever Livi fixed for him, then sit staring at the TV. Once upon a time, the whole family had sat around the table and shared their day's adventures. The kitchen table hadn't been used for anything but collecting junk mail since Mom died.

He nodded and managed a weak smile. "It'll be good to see David and Terryl."

"Leftover spaghetti for dinner," Livi said. "I didn't have time to make anything." They needed to eat it up anyway and make room in the fridge for new leftovers. Heaven knew, they'd have enough turkey left over to last them for a week.

"That's fine," Dad said. Then he kissed her on the cheek and vanished into the living room to turn on the news. If she wanted

to see any more of him, she'd have to join him there. Which she probably would do. They didn't laugh like they used to, but it was companionable.

Later that night, when she went to bed with her laptop to stream some free episodes of *House Hunters International*, she reminded herself yet again that she had much for which to be thankful. And much to look forward to the next month. Christmas was her favorite holiday, and she'd fill the house with all her favorite decorations from her childhood—the well-worn, half-burned lantern-shaped candle from the fifties that had been her grandma's, the ceramic church and the nativity set Mom had made when she went through her ceramics phase, the nutcrackers her great-grandma had brought back from her visit to Germany. She'd even hang the mistletoe. Why not? May as well think positive.

Thanksgiving Day was almost perfect. The turkey turned out well, Terryl kept everyone laughing as she told about the year before when she'd decided to host her entire family for David's and her first Thanksgiving as husband and wife. The day's adventures included an underdone turkey and overdone pumpkin pie, and a grease fire on the stove that set off the smoke alarm and almost gave her grandma a heart attack.

"But I did master candied yams," she said.

"You sure did," Livi agreed. "These are great."

"They should be. She put a ton of Kahlua in them," David said.

"I know the way to my man's heart," she joked, and he grinned.

"Food will do it," Dad agreed, and, amazingly, he was also smiling.

And that made Livi happy. Maybe their family was finally starting to heal just a little. David certainly was. And he and Terryl were full of plans for the future. She'd just gotten a new job

and they were looking at houses south of Seattle where prices were still high but not out of reach for a double-income couple.

"We're trying to get pregnant," Terryl confided to Livi as they put away leftovers. "It would make a great Christmas present for David."

"It would make a great Christmas present for all of us," Livi said. At the rate she was going maybe she'd never be a mother. At least she could enjoy being an aunt. She was suddenly aware of Terryl studying her. "What?" she said with a half smile.

"Just wondering if there's anyone special in your life yet, Livi." *Uh-oh.* Had she sounded wistful? She shrugged. No big deal if her love life was about as exciting as a documentary on the history of mold. "Not really. I don't have time," she added, not wanting to sound like a love loser.

Except, in a way, she was. That was what happened when you held out for bells, whistles and fireworks. She'd felt all that for Morris when they were kids, when she thought she was into monster trucks and going to the Monroe County Fair to watch the demolition derby, but the fireworks had fizzled once she went away to college and stepped into the bigger world of learning.

Leaving home to attend the University of Washington had been her biggest adventure—lectures, classes, a huge library, the University Bookstore. All that hustle and bustle in the U District and a coffee shop on every corner. When she didn't have her nose in a textbook, she was getting high on dancing, flirting, then falling in love with the man of her dreams. Then falling out of love when she realized she didn't have enough in common with whoever that latest man of her dreams was. Livi wanted to do great things. It seemed like all the boys she met were just that—boys. They were cute all right, but their interests seemed limited to getting her into bed and playing video games.

She sighed. No one had really been right and in the end she'd come home alone. Maybe she was meant to be alone.

"Define special," she hedged.

"Someone other than Morris?" guessed Terryl.

Livi cringed. Terryl made her sound like a romantic snob. There was nothing wrong with Morris. So what if he wasn't a bookworm? That didn't make him stupid. And so what if he didn't want to see the world? The center of both their worlds was in Pine River.

Still. "I guess I just want more." Okay, she was a romantic snob.

"Hold out for it, then. I know we're all told there's no Prince Charming out there, but I don't buy it. I found mine."

"My brother, who is the world's biggest slob? Oh, you are besotted," Livi teased.

"Love overlooks the other person's flaws. Even though he farts in his sleep, I do love him," Terryl joked. "He's the best thing that ever happened to me," she added, suddenly serious.

"He is a good man," Livi agreed. "He worked on my first car and taught me how to change the oil, and before Morris came along, scared off every boy who came near me, even though I was two years older and could take care of myself. It made me crazy then, but looking back, I think it was sweet of him to want to protect me. And let me tell you, he succeeded. Nobody wanted to mess with the star of the Pine River wrestling team."

"What a good brother," cooed Terryl.

"He was." He'd also been a good son, helping out at Christmas from the Heart right along with Livi, mowing the lawn without being asked, helping their dad clean the garage. "And he still is."

"He's a great husband, too," Terryl said. "I'd almost given up on finding anyone worth putting up with until the day he came along. There I was at Starbucks and there he was, helping some old lady mop up her spilled coffee, and I knew he was a keeper."

It was such a sweet story. Terryl had hurried over to help, then teasingly asked if he'd stick around in case she, too, spilled her coffee. He'd stuck around and they'd been married within six months.

"Wait for your Prince Charming," Terryl said. "He'll show up. You're too amazing a woman to settle for anything less." Amazing. Right.

Morris stopped by Friday night for leftovers and to play Pandemic, a board game that involved all the players working together to save the world from disease and death. He was a good team player, always willing to go along with whatever strategy David proposed.

"Sounds good to me," he'd say.

Anything anyone in her family ever suggested sounded good to Morris. He'd been one of her biggest supporters when she'd had to step up and take over running Christmas from the Heart. He'd donated twice as much money to the nonprofit as a certain stingy CEO, and he probably earned only a quarter as much.

Livi should have been crazy in love with Morris. He was cute in a big, burly Teddy Bear sort of way. He certainly had a big heart. And it beat only for her.

What was her problem, anyway? Oh yeah, that wanting-more thing.

They played two games, trying to save the world and failing both times, so they gave up and watched an action-packed Tom Cruise movie.

"I love those movies," Terryl said as the ending credits rolled. "You know, he does all his own stunts."

"Big deal. I could do that stuff," David joked.

"I know, right?" Terryl said, elbowing him in the ribs.

"Well, maybe some of 'em."

"It's okay, babe. You're my Tom Cruise," Terryl said, and gave him a kiss.

He gave her one right back.

"Gettin' kind of steamy in here," Morris said. "Do you two need to go upstairs?"

"Yeah, I think we do," David said. He pulled his wife up from the couch. "We got better things to do than sit around and talk."

Better things. Livi would have liked to have better things to do, too.

So, from the way he looked at her, would Morris.

"I should turn in," she said.

"I guess that means I'm leaving."

"I guess so," she said. "Anyway, you have to work tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah. Wanna get pizza after I get off?"

Lately it seemed she and Morris were drifting into the habit of spending more time together, and that was problematic. The more time they spent together the more it could feel like they were edging toward becoming a couple. At least to Morris. Of course, she enjoyed his company, but she couldn't let them wander too far down the road toward couplehood.

"Thanks for the offer," she said, "but I've got too much going on tomorrow." She had to make turkey soup and do laundry. And decorate. That could take... Okay she'd be done by evening. But she did have a mystery novel to finish.

She hoped Morris didn't ask her what all she had to do.

He didn't, and he hid his disappointment quickly, but she'd still seen it in his eyes, had seen that quick frown. Poor Morris. He wanted his princess as much as she wanted her prince.

"That was fun tonight, though," she said in an effort to make them both feel better.

"Yeah, it was," he said, resigned to his fate of being dateless on a Saturday night.

Well, so was she.

She walked him to the door, said a platonic good-night and then went back into the living room, picked up her phone and plopped on the couch to scroll through her Facebook feeds. The last thing she was in a hurry to do was go upstairs, pass her brother's old bedroom, and hear him and Terryl in there doing "other things."

The next day, after her brother and sister-in-law had left, after the laundry was done and the soup was made, Livi pulled out the decorations, happy to have some time to reminisce. She set up the nativity set that came out every year, setting it out on the fireplace mantel along with red ribbon and fir boughs and then hung the stockings her mother had made for her and Dad and David. They were starting to look a little worn but Livi didn't care. It showed they'd been well used and enjoyed.

As she dug the ceramic church from the box of decorations, she could almost see her mother setting it on the dining room table, nestling it in a bed of cotton snow and surrounding it with vintage candles shaped like choirboys that Livi's grandmother had collected in the fifties.

"The light of the world," Mom would murmur. "Don't ever forget that, darling. And you be sure to keep your light shining." "I'm trying, Mom," she whispered.

She hung the framed movie poster for *It's a Wonderful Life* that she and David had given their mother one Christmas. It had been Mom's favorite movie. Then she set out candles, Santas and angels, and hung the ornaments on the tree her father had set up, each one evoking a special memory. There was her "Baby's First Christmas" ornament. And the angel someone gave her mother after Grandma died. There were the last two of the Italian blown glass ornaments Grandma had given her mother and father for their first Christmas.

By now Terryl and David had probably bought their tree. She'd mentioned planning to get one on the way home Friday and then decorate it Saturday afternoon. Of course, David would help her trim it. He'd been well trained. Their family had always trimmed the tree together.

Now it was something Livi did alone. She longed for that

someone special to help her decorate, someone she could create Christmas memories with.

Finally, the house was all dressed up for Christmas. Almost. The only thing left was the mistletoe, a glitter-dusted silk sprig atop an acrylic jewel. She held it up and looked at it, debating. It seemed pointless to hang it.

In the end she did, simply because she couldn't bring herself not to. And as she did she made a wish. *Bring me a Prince Charming this Christmas*, *Santa*.

Guy drove home from the slopes, tired but rested. A day of snowboarding had been exactly what he needed to recharge his batteries.

Normally after spending Turkey Day with the bros he'd have gone to see his mother. But this year Mom had been on a cruise with her second husband.

He didn't begrudge her that. She deserved to enjoy herself and he was glad to see her happy.

Widowhood hadn't agreed with her. When Dad died she'd lost her sparkle and her smile had shrunk right along with her dress size. She remained interested in what her boys were doing but had little enough to say about herself when any of them called to check on her. She sold the house and downsized not only her living quarters but her life.

"Mom, you should get out and do something," Guy had told her once.

"Do what?"

"I don't know. Something."

"I have plenty to do, dear. I see the grandchildren. I have my friends."

But you don't have a life. "How often do you do things with them?" Guy had persisted.

"Often enough."

Whatever that meant.

"She's fine," Mike had said, waving away Guy's concerns. "She's got all of us to keep her busy."

Babysitting. Big whoop.

"Let her live her life the way she wants."

So Guy had, even when she finally found Del.

That had been two years ago. His brothers had been suspicious, certain the man was a fortune hunter out to get Mom's money. But it turned out Del had plenty of his own. Which was a good thing because Mom liked to live in style. These days she drove a new Range Rover, went to New York to shop and take in a musical, and took a cruise at least once a year with her new husband.

"I'm planning on you coming for Christmas, though," she'd said to Guy when he'd learned of her plans. "I promise not to make fruitcake."

And so it had been decided.

"I gotta do Christmas with the in-laws," Bryan had said. "I'll go down for New Year's."

"You can represent all of us," Mike had said. Mike still looked on Del as an interloper—who knew what Freud would say about that?—and refused to go down, saying, "I'll take her to Cabo in January."

That was just as well. Mike wouldn't exactly be good company. It wasn't happy holidays with him lately. It had been hard listening to him trash his soon-to-be ex while he drank himself into a stupor at Bryan's, where they'd gathered for Thanksgiving.

"Don't ever get married, bro," he'd slurred as Guy drove him home. "Women'll break your heart and decimate your bank account." He waved a finger back and forth. "And don't think that you'll find the one exception. There is no such thing."

As if he needed his brother to tell him? He'd already learned that.

He was pulling into his garage when a text came through from Hudson, whom he'd met earlier in the month at a fundraising event for the Seattle Art Museum, one of the few charities Hightower still supported. She was divorced, in her late thirties and claimed to be an avid skier. They hadn't hit the slopes together yet, but had met for coffee a couple of times. It had been all he could squeeze in. Still, he kind of liked her, so some time on the slopes in the future was a definite possibility.

Come save me. I have leftover pumpkin cheesecake tempting me, she texted.

Couldn't have a girl falling into temptation. At least not cheesecake temptation. Be there in an hour, he texted back.

He hadn't been to her place yet, so she gave him her address to put in his GPS.

He stored his snowboard, cleaned up, grabbed a bottle of wine and then made his way to her house in West Seattle.

"Nice place," he said as she let him in. Nice-looking woman, too. Her hair was dark and long. Tight jeans and a sweater showed off a great body. The woman had a rack on her.

"It'll do for now. I'm going to do some serious renovation in the new year."

"A fixer-upper, huh?"

"Yeah, right now it's a bit of a dog, but the bones are good. I never really liked it—Sean inherited it from his grandmother when she died and we'd been renting it out—but when he offered it as part of the divorce settlement I figured why not. I think I can turn a nice profit once I've renovated it."

Sean's grandma's old house and now it was Hudson's little moneymaker. Mike's bitter warning popped up in Guy's mind like a road sign. *Warning. Dangerous Curves Ahead.*

Suddenly Guy wasn't so interested in cheesecake. He stayed awhile, listened while she went into detail about how she was going to replace the old brick mantel with something new and sleek—what would old Sean's grandma have thought of that?—and redo the entire kitchen, then he suddenly remembered some

work that had to get done before he went into the office the next morning.

"No. Really?" A full lower lip went out in a sexy pout. "I was thinking we could spend a little more time getting to know each other better." They'd been sitting on the couch, and now she set her glass of wine on the coffee table and leaned in toward him. He caught a whiff of perfume.

Too late. Hearing about the spoils she'd gotten in the divorce had been a buzzkill. Mike was right. Women were all alike.

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