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# *A Wyoming Christmas to Remember*

*Melissa Senate*

Two tests to save a marriage...

SPECIAL EDITION



## *Chapter One*

“You’re my *husband*?” Maddie Wolfe asked.

She tried to latch on to the word, for something, anything, to associate *husband* with the total stranger sitting at her bedside. The stranger holding her hand in both of his and looking at her with worried green eyes.

“My name is Sawyer Wolfe,” he said. “We’ve been married for seven years.”

“Sawyer Wolfe. Seven years,” she repeated. “And I’m Maddie Wolfe?” She hadn’t even known that until he’d told her when she’d woken up just a couple minutes ago with no idea who she was, where she was or who *he* was. Her mind, where her identity and memories should be, was a big blank nothing.

She glanced from him to what was beside her bed—quietly beeping hospital machines, an IV pole. A television mounted on the beige-yellow wall. A long, wide

window. A miniature Christmas tree decorated with garland and ornaments on the windowsill and so many poinsettia plants—pink, red, white—she couldn't even count them. There were even more bouquets of flowers.

*I'm in a hospital*, she realized, reaching up to the goose egg on her forehead and the deep scratch beside it. That would explain why her head felt so woozy and achy. And maybe why her mind was so blank. *I'm...* she thought, trying to come up with her name on her own. *Maddie Wolfe*? Didn't ring a bell. She tried for her age. Nothing. Where she lived. But there was just that nothingness again.

Sawyer Wolfe nodded, his eyes shimmering with tears, relief, concern. When her own eyes had fluttered open, the first thing she saw was him. He'd jumped up, shouted, "Maddie's awake! My wife is awake!" and then grabbed a white call button attached to her bed and pressed it three times before sitting back down and taking her hand, kissing the back of it over and over.

"Your wife?" she'd asked.

He'd glanced up from the kissing of her hand, clearly confused. "Maddie?"

"Maddie?" she'd repeated, more confused.

He'd sat up very straight. "Maddie, do you know who you are? Who I am?"

She'd looked at him long and hard, and believe you me, he was something to behold. But nothing about this man was familiar.

She'd shaken her head, which had her reaching up to the goose egg, the deep scratch beside it.

"Your name is Maddie Wolfe," he'd told her. "I'm

Sawyer Wolfe, your husband. You were in a car crash—it was snowing hard and you hit a guardrail.”

Now, before she could ask him anything else, two women came rushing in, one in blue scrubs, the other in a white lab coat with a name tag: Dr. Louisa Addison.

The nurse began taking her vitals: temperature, blood pressure.

“Maddie doesn’t seem to know her name or who I am,” Sawyer said to the doctor.

Dr. Addison asked her a bunch of questions she didn’t know the answers to. *What is your name? What year is it? Who is the president of the United States?*

As the doctor jotted things down on her chart, Maddie wondered how she knew what a chart was if she didn’t know what year it was. She glanced at the four pink poinsettias on the windowsill, clearly knowing what those were. Her gaze moved to the little Christmas tree. There were two Woodstock ornaments—the little yellow bird from *Peanuts*, Snoopy’s buddy. Why would she know that but not even know it was Christmastime if the tree hadn’t clued her in?

*Ow, my head*, she thought, letting the questions, the confusing buzz go. The blankness came back, and she instantly felt better.

She glanced at the man—six-two, maybe six-three, dark hair, a scar above his left eyebrow. If she thought he looked worried before, it didn’t come close to the concern on his face now.

“My mind is blank,” she said to both of them. “Why is my mind blank?” She tried to think what day it was, but as she ran through the days of the week, none reg-

istered as the right one. She bolted upright. “Why don’t I know my name? Sawyer said I was in a car crash?”

Dr. Addison nodded. “You’ve sustained a head injury that seems to have affected your memory. But rest assured, you’re in good hands. You are Maddie Wolfe, thirty-two years old. Your husband, Sawyer Wolfe, is right here—he’s the chief of police in Wedlock Creek. You’re in Brewer County Hospital in Wyoming, transferred here from the Wedlock Creek Clinic.”

No memory: amnesia. She knew what that was. It explained why her mind was full of holes. She grasped on to what she was told. *My name is Maddie Wolfe. My husband is Sawyer Wolfe. Police chief. Wedlock Creek.*

Nothing. Her own name was unfamiliar. Her husband was a stranger.

She swallowed, glancing over at the Woodstock ornament. She kept her focus on the little yellow bird, and for some reason, it comforted her.

“Maddie,” Dr. Addison said, “Sawyer hasn’t left your side in the two days since you were brought in.” The doctor offered an encouraging smile to both Maddie and the man. “Your parents and sister were here this morning and said they’d be back this afternoon.”

Parents and a sister! She couldn’t even remember her own family.

“I’ll go text them that you’re awake,” Sawyer said, leaping up and heading near the door, where he pulled out his phone.

As the doctor typed instructions into a computer monitor against the wall and the nurse checked her IV, Maddie stared at Sawyer. Surely if he were her husband, she would remember something. A familiarity.

A flash of their wedding day. The two of them at home. Something, anything.

“Will my memory return?” Maddie asked the doctor.

Dr. Addison turned to her. “Amnesia is a tricky thing. There are a few different kinds, and yours is likely caused by trauma. We’ll have to wait and see. I did have a patient a few years ago who’d suffered temporary amnesia from a bad fall. His memory returned to full function within three weeks.”

“Three weeks?” she repeated. “I might not remember anything about myself for three weeks?”

Dr. Addison gave her a reassuring smile. “Could be sooner. But we’ll run some tests, and based on how well you’re doing now, I don’t see any reason why you can’t be discharged later today.”

Discharged where? Where did she live?

*With your husband*, she reminded herself.

She bolted upright again, her gaze moving to Sawyer, who pocketed his phone and came back over, sitting down and taking her hand in both of his. “Do I—do we—have children?” she asked him. She couldn’t forget her own children. She couldn’t.

“No,” he said, glancing away for a moment. “Your parents and Jenna will be here in fifteen minutes,” he said. “They’re ecstatic you’re awake. I let them know you might not remember them straightaway.”

“Jenna?” she asked.

“Your twin sister. You’re very close. To your parents too. Your family is incredible—very warm and loving.”

That was good.

She took a deep breath and looked at her hand in his.

Her left hand. She wasn't wearing a wedding ring. He wore one, though—a gold band. So where was hers?

“Why aren't I wearing a wedding ring?” she asked.

His expression changed on a dime. He looked at her, then down at his feet. Dark brown cowboy boots.

*Uh oh, she thought. He doesn't want to tell me. What is that about?*

Two orderlies came in just then, and Dr. Addison let Maddie know it was time for her CT scan, and that by the time she was done, her family would probably be here.

“I'll be waiting right here,” Sawyer said, gently cupping his hand to her cheek.

As the orderlies wheeled her toward the door, she realized she missed Sawyer—looking at him, talking to him, her hand in his, his hand on her face. That had to be a good sign, right?

Even if she wasn't wearing her ring.

Almost exactly the same time that the orderlies wheeled Maddie back into her hospital room, her family arrived. Sawyer had been hoping for some time alone with Maddie, but he'd get that later at home. Right now, her family needed to see her.

The MacLeods—pronounced *MacLoud*—all hovered around her bed. They lived up to their name and then some.

“Maddie!” April MacLeod shouted, throwing her arms around her daughter. “Oh goodness, I'm not squeezing any sore spots, am I? Let me look at you. Oh my, that's some goose egg. But that'll go down, lickety-split. We brought you chicken noodle soup from

that fancy gourmet place you like in Brewer. You love chicken noodle.” She stared at Maddie, then waved her hand in the air. “Did I even tell you who I am? I’m your beloved mother, that’s who. You and your sister here are my world. And this guy—” she slung an arm around her tall, gray-haired husband’s shoulder “—married thirty-four years next Saturday.”

“Glad you’re awake, Maddie-girl,” Ace MacLeod said, giving his daughter a gentle hug. Tears shone in his blue eyes and he blinked them back. “You scared us half to death.”

Jenna MacLeod Spinner leaned down to hug her twin as best she could—her sixth-months-pregnant belly didn’t let her get as close as she clearly wanted. “So word is that you don’t remember anything. Trust me, we’re unforgettable. It’ll come back to you.”

Maddie gave a shy smile. “I hope so. You definitely seem like people I’d like to know.”

April laughed her huge, throaty, I-used-to-smoke laugh. “You adore us. Can’t get enough of us. But you take it easy until the doctor says otherwise. I know you’ll try to come back to work, and I won’t hear of it. Not until you’re cleared.”

Maddie tilted her head. “Work? What do I do?”

“You manage the family business—MacLeod’s Multiples Emporium.”

“A multiples emporium?” Maddie repeated. She couldn’t even guess what that was.

“Wedlock Creek, our hometown, is famous for its multiples,” April explained. “The Wedlock Creek Wedding Chapel has a legend attached to it—for a hundred years now. Those who marry there will have multiples

in some way, whether through luck, a little help from science or through marriage.”

“Which one are Jenna and me?” Maddie asked with a grin.

“Pure luck,” her mom said. “Multiples run on both sides of the family. And since there are so many multiples in town, we started a business devoted to twins and triplets and quads and quints twenty-five years ago. Gift baskets, layettes, baby shower accoutrements, personalized gifts, anything anyone could want to celebrate all things multiples.” She glanced at Sawyer, then smiled down at Maddie. “Well, Maddie-girl, we’re going to let you get out of here. Sawyer will take you home, and we’ll call later to see how you are.”

Maddie gave a quick smile and nod, and it was strange how Sawyer couldn’t read her expressions anymore. He knew her so well. But now that she didn’t even know how she felt about anything or anyone, all her reactions were new to him.

An hour later, after eating a light lunch and having her vitals checked again, Dr. Addison ran through some instructions, handed over the discharge papers and Maddie was free to leave.

“Earlier I asked your mom to stop by the house and bring you clothes to change into,” Sawyer said. “And your favorite boots.” He handed her an overnight bag.

“Ah, thank you. I’ll just be a bit.” She headed into the bathroom with the bag.

*Why aren’t I wearing my wedding ring?*

He hadn’t answered that question, and he was sure she was going to ask again. But he didn’t want to tell her. He didn’t want to talk about any of that.

He shouldn't be almost glad that she'd forgotten what had made her drive away from him the morning she'd crashed her car. He couldn't take back what he'd said, even if he hadn't meant it, even if he'd said it in anger and frustration. He *had* said it—and Maddie couldn't remember.

He was going to have to tell her the truth.

His phone pinged with a text. His rookie, Justin Moble.

Hey, Chief. Annie Potterowski's beagle swiped a hot pretzel out of a kid's hand by the chapel earlier, and the parents want to file a formal complaint. Apparently, it's the second time in a month. I'll handle it.

Sawyer texted back.

Just what I like to hear.

Welcome to Wedlock Creek, where food-snatching beagles accounted for half the crime. The other half was the usual—expired car registration, vandalism, the odd burglary, car accidents, teenagers up to old tricks, fights and occasionally more serious issues. Sawyer had lived in Wedlock Creek his entire life, and very little surprised him. Except what had come out of his mouth the morning of Maddie's crash. And the crash itself. And the memory loss.

His wife didn't remember any of it. The past few months and how hard things had been. Maddie grabbing her cool-gel pillow and stomping from their bedroom to the living room to sleep on the sofa. The conversations

that always ended in arguments and then stalemates. She didn't remember any of that.

*It's like we can have a fresh start*, he thought. Unfairly. Because Maddie was who she was and wanted what she wanted. And she would regain her memory—within a few weeks, if that long. And then what? They would be in exactly the place they were before she'd driven off—and hit the guardrail.

She came out of the bathroom looking more like herself—her beautiful long light brown hair was out of its ponytail, and she'd exchanged the hospital gown for an off-white sweater and jeans. And her favorite footwear, red cowboy boots.

"I stared at myself in the mirror for quite a while," she said with a smile. "I look a lot like my twin. Except for the pregnant belly."

For a moment, a hot surge of panic hit him. He thought she'd regained her memory—and that she'd tell him she wasn't going *anywhere* with him. But he could tell by her warm, open expression that she had no memory of how she and Jenna had always talked of being pregnant at the same time, new mothers together, new aunts to each other's babies together.

She didn't remember any of that.

He slung her bag over his shoulder. "Ready to go?"

"Ready," she said.

This had to be so strange for her. Following him blindly, not recognizing a thing about him or her past or anyone.

He put the bag down and looked directly at her. "Maddie, I want you to know that I love you very much. I've loved you since we were both five years old, and

I'll love you when I'm ninety-two. Anything I can do to make you more comfortable, you just say the word, okay?"

He'd caught them both by surprise with that. She stared at him for a moment, then her expression softened. "I appreciate that. And did you say since we were *five* years old?"

"That's how long we've known each other. My family moved next door to yours."

"That's some history we have," she said. "I wish I could remember it, Sawyer."

"In due time, you will."

Inside his SUV, they buckled up, and he headed for Wedlock Creek, a half hour from Brewer. Maddie asked some questions on the way—if they went to Brewer, a bigger town, often (no); did they have favorite restaurants (yes—Mexican in Brewer and several in Wedlock Creek); what kind of music they liked (Maddie liked her top-forty hits and '70s music, and Sawyer had long been all about the Beatles and had a fondness for country).

Finally, they pulled into town, Maddie staring out the window.

"Wow, this town is so pretty," she said. "All the shops and restaurants decked out for Christmas. Wedlock Creek looks like a postcard. Ooh, look at that," she said, pointing.

Sawyer glanced up at the Wedlock Creek Wedding Chapel, built a hundred years ago. Even on a weekday at 5:17 p.m., there were tourists walking around the grounds, several brides in white gowns, the food trucks and carts at this end of Main Street doing brisk business even on a cold December day. Annie Potterowski, the

elderly officiant and caretaker of the chapel along with her husband, was walking the pretzel-stealing beagle, who had a rap sheet for that kind of behavior. Wedlock Creek residents loved the chapel's mascot dog, but his habit of jumping up and swiping food out of people's hands was cute only the first time it happened to someone, then they were less inclined to laugh about it. The beagle was wearing a red-and-green Christmas sweater, and Sawyer had to admit it added to his mischievous charm.

"That's the chapel your mom was telling you about," he said, "with the legend of the multiples." A big green wreath with a red bow was on the arched door, which was dotted with white Christmas lights.

"Did we marry there?"

He nodded. *Please don't ask what I know you're going to ask next*, he thought.

"But no little multiples of our own?"

There it was. "No. Ah, this is us," he rushed to add, turning onto Woods Road. He pulled into the driveway of the last house on the dead-end street, an antique-white arts-and-crafts-style bungalow—or at least that was what she'd called it. To him it was just home.

She stepped out of the car, stopping to stare up at the house. "Wow, we live here? It's gorgeous. And the sparkling Christmas lights around the front trees make it look like an enchanted cottage."

They day he'd hung the lights, they hadn't been speaking. He'd needed something to do, something for her, something for *them*, so he'd spent an hour wrapping the strands around the trees and the porch. Maddie had broken their mutual silent treatment by thanking him.

*It's Christmastime*, she'd said. *We've got to get through this so we can have a good Christmas.* But they'd done exactly that for a few Christmases now, and Maddie had sounded so unsure of herself.

"You fell in love with this house when you were a kid," he said now, handing Maddie her set of keys. "It was built in the early 1900s. You saw it on your paper route and said, 'Sawyer, one day, I'm gonna live in this dream house.' And you do."

She smiled, seeming lost in thought for a moment. "How long have we lived here?"

"I bought it for us as a surprise the day I proposed to you," he said. "My offer was accepted on the house, and I raced over to your condo to ask you to marry me. That offer was accepted too." He smiled, remembering how she'd flung herself into his arms, kissing him all over his face, completely forgetting to say yes. In fact, it wasn't until he'd told her he had another surprise for her and driven her over to the house with the Sale Pending sign in front that he reminded her she hadn't. She'd been sobbing happily over the house and unable to speak for ten minutes and finally took his face in her hands and said, "Sawyer, yes. Always yes."

*Always yes.* Except recently, when there had been so much *no* between them that their history together hadn't been able to protect them.

She took all that in, then glanced at the key chain. "I'm seeing a pattern here. There's a little ceramic Woodstock on here, and there were two ornaments on the little Christmas tree in my hospital room."

"You like birds. And you love Woodstock. Always have. For your birthday every year when we were kids, I

would get you something Woodstock. Woodstock erasers, Woodstock socks, Woodstock key chain. In fact, the one in your hand I gave you on your fourteenth birthday.”

She smiled. “Really?”

He nodded. “It’s freezing out here. Let’s head in.” He gestured for her to lead the way because he wanted her to feel that this was her house, even if she didn’t remember it.

She used her key and opened the door, slowly stepping inside. “I like it!” she exclaimed, nodding at the colorful round area rug in the entryway and vintage Le Chat Noir poster with the black cat on the wall.

“Oh my, who’s this?” she asked as a German shepherd hurried up to her with mournful whines. The dog sat at her feet.

“That’s Moose, retired K-9. We worked together for years when I was a detective, but for the last three years he’s been enjoying a life of leisure. He’s eleven years old and adores you.”

“Aw,” she said, kneeling down to pet him. “Hi, Moose.”

“He missed you the past couple of days.” *And so did I. Praying you’d wake up. That’d you’d be okay. Bargaining.*

“I’ll take your coat,” he said, removing his and hanging it up in the hall closet. She unzipped her down jacket and handed it to him, and he hung it up with her red-and-pink scarf, a gift from her knitting-crazy twin.

He watched her walk around the living room, looking at objects and peering at photos. She picked up their wedding photo off the mantel, one of her favorites be-

cause that devilish chapel beagle had photobombed him dipping Maddie in a kiss near the steps.

Her shoulders slumped, and she put the photo back. “I can’t remember my life.” She shook her head. “And it’s clearly a wonderful one. Loving family. Handsome, devoted husband. Lovely home all decked out for Christmas. A sweet dog named Moose.” Tears shone in her eyes, and she dropped down onto the sofa, Moose padding over and putting his head on her lap. She leaned over and buried her face in, hugging the dog.

*Well, if it makes you feel any better, things weren’t all sunshine and roses.*

*Badump. Not.*

He sat down beside her, hands on his knees. And before he could even think about it, he blurted out, “It’s my fault you got into the accident, Maddie. I said something that upset you, and you got in your car and peeled out fast to get away from me.”

She turned to him. “What did you say?”

“That maybe we *should* separate.” He closed his eyes for a second and let out a breath. He’d hated saying that. The first time and now.

“The emphasis on *should* makes me think someone else suggested it first. Me?”

He shook his head. “Right before the accident, we’d had our weekly appointment with a mediator slash marriage counselor. We’d been going to her to help us deal with a stalemate. She said it seemed to her that neither of us was willing to budge and that maybe we should think about separating. I got so upset, I stalked out. You followed and we argued outside. And then I said it—maybe we *should* separate.”

“What could have possibly come between us to that degree?” she asked.

He took a breath. “Starting a family.”

“Ah,” she said, looking at her left hand. Her *bare* left hand. “Now things are making sense. Before I got in my car and huffed away, did I yank off my wedding ring because I was angry about that and about you saying maybe we should separate?”

“That’s exactly right. You took it off and handed it to me. I have it in my wallet.” He’d never forget how that had made him feel, like his entire world was crumbling and he couldn’t catch the pieces.

“So I assume it’s me who wants kids?” she asked.

He nodded.

“And you’re content with things as they are. Wife, dog, job.”

He nodded again.

“Married seven years, thirty-two years old, seems like a reasonable time—past reasonable time—to start a family,” she said, a prompting lilt in her voice.

Acid churned in his gut. “I never wanted kids. You always did. And you counted on me changing my mind. You had no doubt I would, even though I cautioned you about that. You never really believed deep down that I wouldn’t want a ‘little Wolfe, a little us’—as you used to say.”

She tilted her head. “And you still don’t?”

He got up and walked over to the windows, looking out at the snow still clinging to the bare tree limbs. “The past two days, while you were lying in that hospital bed...and I had no idea if you’d wake up...I made

so many bargains. If only you'd wake up, I'd agree to ten kids. As many as you wanted."

"So we're going to have ten kids?"

He turned around to face her. "If that's what you want."

"Because you bargained?"

He nodded. "The most important thing to me was having you back. I have that. So yes. Ten kids." He'd almost lost her. He'd said, *prayed*, that he'd give anything to have her back. And he'd meant it.

She stared at him, lifting her chin, and he had no idea what she was thinking. Her expressions, the way her mind worked now—all that was new to him. "Well, the only thing I want right now is my memory back. Maybe just being here, in my home, with you, will jog something, trigger something."

He hoped so. Until then, they had this rare chance to be together without the past stomping on their marriage. He had the unfair advantage of knowing everything about them while she knew nothing, and there was no way he'd take it. He'd always be honest with Maddie. And what was most true this minute was that he loved her more than anything, would do anything for her. Ten children. Twenty.

All that mattered was that she'd survived, that she'd be all right, that she was home.

## *Chapter Two*

Maddie needed to take a big step back, let everything she'd learned settle in her mind, her bones, so she suggested a tour of the house. Sawyer seemed relieved. She followed him upstairs, admiring the photos lining the wall. Pictures of the two of them—together—at so many different ages, from early childhood to what looked like recently. She and Sawyer, age five or six, holding kiddie fishing rods at a riverbank, a bucket between them. She and Sawyer, middle school years, arms linked for a semiformal, Maddie liking her pale pink dress. She and Sawyer, early twenties, Sawyer in a Wedlock Creek Police Department T-shirt, giving Maddie a piggyback ride. A couple with a long history together.

Upstairs was a wide landing with a sitting area. Off it were four rooms. Sawyer opened doors. The first was

a guest room. Next to it a large bathroom. And the next room was completely empty.

“Couldn’t figure out what to do with the space?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You earmarked it as the nursery,” he said, glancing away.

“Ah.” She peered into the room—pale gray walls, wood floor, closet, four big windows. It would make a nice nursery—with furnishings in it. She imagined herself walking past this room every day, well aware it was empty. *That must have burned*, she thought. For both of them. A constant reminder of their stalemate.

“And this is our bedroom,” he said, opening the door to a big, cozy room, a four-poster bed with a fluffy white down comforter between two windows. There were plump pillows and a table on either side, matching lamps and a book on each—a history of Wyoming and a mystery. She wondered which was her side, her book. *And* what it would be like to slip under that soft, warm comforter beside a man she knew was her husband—and yet didn’t know at all. As if he could read her mind, he added, “I can sleep in the guest room or take the couch until your memory returns. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

“Well, we don’t know what will make my memory return, and since routine might help, I say we do what we always do. You’re my husband, and intellectually, I know that, so I’m going with it.”

He nodded and, if she wasn’t mistaken, looked kind of relieved.

So she would be sleeping beside him tonight. The thought had her taking him in on a purely physical level,

and he was so attractive to her that a little burst of excitement and some butterflies let loose in her belly. She liked the way he looked at her with his serious green eyes—as if she were someone very special to him, and despite the issues in their marriage, that did seem clear to her. Plus, her family obviously liked him. And he was tall and strong and the top cop here in Wedlock Creek. Good looks aside, there was something very trustworthy about Sawyer Wolfe.

Of course, Maddie had little to go on in that department. Amnesiac Maddie had known him all of a few hours.

She walked over to a huge closet and opened it. His and hers. Hers on the left. She was very organized. Two piles of sweaters sat next to a row of hung jeans. She had lots of those. She also had a lot of shoes. She moved over to the dresser and opened the top drawer. *Ooh*. Many lacy bras and underwear. Some sexy nighties. A flutter swept her belly again, and she found herself very aware of him sitting on the edge of the bed, watching her.

On top of the dresser was a round mirrored tray holding perfume and a red velvet box. Inside she found jewelry. Earrings, bangle bracelets. A diamond tennis bracelet. Necklaces. A stunning diamond ring, square and surrounded by little baguettes in a gold setting. She thought about her wedding ring inside his wallet. Interesting that he kept it there instead of having put it in here.

She bit her lip and turned around to face him. “I assume asking you why you don’t want children, never wanted children, isn’t a simple one.”

“It is and isn’t,” he said.

“But after seven years of marriage? A strong marriage?”

“I’ve always had a lot on my plate,” he said, standing up and moving over to the window. He shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’ve been chief at the WCPD for only almost a year now, and since I got that promotion on the young side, I felt I had to really prove myself. And before that, I *wanted* to be chief and worked double time to earn the job, so the timing just never seemed right to even think about starting a family. I have so much responsibility at work—for the town, for my staff—that I guess I couldn’t see having that kind of responsibility at home too. A baby needing more than I could give.”

A lot on his plate. A baby needing more than he could give. Both of those sounded like excuses, and she had a feeling the Maddie she’d been before the *thunk* on the head knew the real reasons he didn’t want children. The reasons he wasn’t mentioning.

“Hungry?” he asked with a tight smile. “I could heat up your mom’s chili and corn bread—she brought over a ton of food for me the day of the accident. I could barely choke down coffee, though.”

Quite a change of subject. He clearly didn’t want to talk about the state of their marriage anymore. “I had the hospital’s cream of something soup,” she said. “And some stale crackers. So I’m good for a few hours.” She glanced outside. “It’s a pretty nice day—I wouldn’t mind walking into town and visiting my family’s store.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You feel up to it? Dr. Addison said you shouldn’t go overboard trying to get back up to speed or even acclimated.”

“I don’t feel woozy at all. And my curiosity has the better of me right now.” Plus, she wanted to pepper him with questions—about everything—and despite not knowing him at all, she knew from his expression that *he* wasn’t up to *that*. “MacLeod’s Multiples Emporium isn’t far from here, is it?” Their house was just two blocks off the main street with all its charming-looking shops and restaurants.

He shook his head. “Walking distance—it’s right on Main Street, a couple minutes’ walk from the wedding chapel. You can’t miss MacLeod’s—there’s a painted wood sign with baby stuff on it—crib, baby shoes, baby bottles. And the windows are decorated to the nines for Christmas.”

*I love Christmas.* The thought startled her until she realized it was new knowledge from her response to that adorable miniature tree on her hospital windowsill and the shops decked out and the way their house was decorated for the holidays. She had no doubt she’d always loved Christmas. “I’d like to go check it out. Since I worked there, maybe it’ll ring a bell.”

“You’ll call me or text me if you feel overwhelmed or want to go home?” he asked. “I’ll come get you right away.”

She nodded, scrolling through her contacts on her phone. “Yup, there you are. Sawyer—cell and work.” Her family was in there too. And a bunch of other people whose names she didn’t recognize.

“I’ll drop you there, then go check in at the station for a bit,” he said. “We can meet up when you’re ready to go home.”

“Sounds good,” she said.

They headed back downstairs, and he handed Maddie her down jacket and scarf and put on a heavy brown leather jacket. He stood in front of the door, and Maddie had the feeling he almost didn't want to let her go, that he liked having her in the house, their house. She wondered if he was worried about their marriage, if their impasse had gotten even bigger than their shared history, their love.

And *she* wondered if, when her memory did return, they'd be right back in that snowy moment outside the mediator's office.

According to Sawyer, thirty-eight degrees in Wyoming in December was practically springlike, so they decided to walk the couple of blocks into town. He'd mentioned that the police station was just another half mile down. Wedlock Creek was bustling, people going in and out of stores, carrying bright bags with wrapped gifts poking out. The moment they arrived on the corner of Main Street, they were mobbed by well-wishers.

"It's so wonderful to see you out and about!" one woman said, reaching for Maddie's mittened hand. "We were all so worried. No one more than Sawyer, of course. And maybe your mom and dad."

Sawyer smiled. "You're right, Brenna," he said, making a point of her name.

Maddie caught on quickly that, after the third such back-and-forth, Sawyer was covering for her lack of memory, and luckily, acquaintances were giving something of a wide berth since she'd gotten out of the hospital only that afternoon. "Do I know *everyone*?" she

asked as they finally headed across the street toward MacLeod's Multiples Emporium.

"Yup. Both of us do. Wedlock Creek is a small town, and we've lived here our entire lives. And I'm the chief of police, so everyone knows me. We knew everyone without that added to the mix."

Maddie looked up at the pastel painted sign atop the length of her family's business. A family walked past—with two red-haired identical twin girls. A woman wheeling a triple stroller was across the street. Multiples everywhere. Including right here—*me*, she thought.

"Your dad made the sign and painted it," Sawyer said. "He's quite a craftsman. He hand makes all the furniture MacLeod's sells, cribs and bassinets and other wood items. He has a big following."

"How wonderful," she said, admiring the sign and the easel out front listing a colorful array of items in someone's excellent handwriting. Everything from personalization to layettes to baby paraphernalia to children's clothing. She watched two women wheeling twin strollers go inside the shop; two more came out carrying big yellow shopping bags with the MacLeod's logo.

"I'll probably be thirty minutes or so," she said to Sawyer. "I'll just visit the store and say hi to my family if they're there. I don't think I'll walk around town just yet on my own in case I run into someone who knows me and I have no idea who they are. Seems so complicated to explain about my memory."

He nodded. "I'll pick you up here in thirty minutes."

She smiled, and he leaned over awkwardly and kissed her on the cheek. He hesitated before pulling back, and she had the feeling he'd wanted to embrace

her. More than embrace—hold her, tightly. Frankly, she could use a hug.

“See you in a bit,” she said, those flutters in her belly again, and darted into the shop. She turned back to see Sawyer watching her as if to make sure she was okay. She gave a wave and walked in farther. When she looked back, he was finally heading up the street.

The shop was both elegant and folksy at the same time and separated into sections for clothing and furniture and baby paraphernalia. The place was pretty crowded too; Maddie could see two saleswomen with MacLeod’s name tags helping shoppers.

“Maddie!”

She turned to find her twin, Jenna, smiling and rushing up to her. She and Jenna really did look a lot alike. They both had the same blue eyes and slightly long nose, wavy light brown hair past their shoulders. Jenna wore a dark purple maternity wrap dress and gray suede knee-high boots, lots of gold bangles on her arm. And a gold wedding band and solitaire diamond ring.

“I’m surprised to see you,” Jenna said, straightening a huge stuffed giraffe. “Feeling all right?”

“I feel pretty good. A little weird not knowing anything about myself—okay, a lot weird. I figured I’d come check out the family business. Do you work here too?”

Jenna nodded. “I’m a saleswoman, and let me tell you, the huge belly helps. Five minutes ago, I sold three personalized cribs—the ones our dad famously hand makes—and then the mom and her mom came back a minute later and added the triple bassinets they were waffling on. And then the mom bought three of these,”

she said, pointing to three big stuffed bear chairs with pink or blue bow ties around their necks.

“Ooh, you are good. Did I work on the floor too?”

“Nah, you’re more a back-office type. You’re not a pushy schmoozer like me.”

Maddie laughed. “Speaking of pushy, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

She leaned a bit closer to whisper. “Was I pushing Sawyer to have a baby?”

Jenna’s smile faltered. “Maddie, I love you. You’re my sister, my twin. But you don’t remember anything about your life, and I’m not sure I should fill in details that are personal between you and your husband.”

Maddie thought about that. “I get it. How about details *about* my husband. He said we grew up next door to each other.”

“More like Sawyer grew up in our house. He’s been an honorary MacLeod since he was five, when he and his dad moved into the in-law apartment of our neighbors’ house. The Wolfe door opened very close to our side porch, so that’s how you and Sawyer became such good friends. Apparently I was anti boy, but you adored Sawyer from the get-go.”

“He and his dad lived in an in-law apartment? With his dad’s in-laws?”

Jenna shook her head. “No. That’s just what one- or two-bedroom apartments attached to private homes are called. They were usually meant for parents or in-laws as they aged. The neighbors back then were friendly with Sawyer’s mom, so they felt terrible about the situation and gave his dad a big break on rent.”

“What situation?” Maddie asked.

A shopper walked up to them. “Excuse me, is it possible to get those adorable little cowboy hats personalized for my impending triplet nephews?”

Jenna nodded at the woman. “Personalization is MacLeod’s specialty. I set aside two of those hats for my little babies-to-be—a girl and boy. My husband and I still can’t agree on names, so the personalization will have to wait.”

The woman laughed. “Names are the one thing my husband and I *do* agree on.” She put three impossibly tiny leather cowboy hats in her basket and continued on in the stuffed animal area.

Jenna led Maddie over near the checkout desk away from the shoppers. “Sawyer’s mom died from complications after his birth. His dad raised him alone. Well, he tried, I guess. But he really wasn’t cut out for fatherhood. I think the landlords let him stay to make sure Sawyer would have a safe place to live next to caring neighbors. They were traveling a lot, but between them and us looking out for Sawyer, he had what he needed.”

Maddie frowned. “Sounds rough.”

“I’m sure it was. No mom. A father who wasn’t really present—and lots of girlfriends in and out. To be honest, if he hadn’t lived next door to us and slept over so often, there’s a good chance he would have been taken away and put in the foster-care system. His father was that neglectful. But no one wanted to see that happen.”

Maddie thought about how Sawyer had said he’d always known he hadn’t wanted kids. That made a little more sense to her now.

She imagined a little Sawyer, three, five, eight, ten.

No mother. A father with issues. Alone, hungry, no guidance. Slipping next door to the warm, welcoming MacLeods. She was glad her family had been there for him. That *she'd* been there for him. They'd been best friends their whole lives.

She could *also* imagine wanting to start a family. Being thirty-two and the ole biological clock ticking away. "I must have figured he'd change his mind about wanting kids," Maddie said. "But he never did, huh?"

Jenna bit her lip and seemed unsure if she should say anything. "No. This is all secondhand from you, so I guess it's okay for me to tell you." She shook her head. "How crazy is this situation? Anyway, yes. In fact, he put off proposing because of it. Because he knew you wanted a houseful of kids, and he just wanted you and a good dog."

"But he did propose. He told me he bought my dream house and then proposed."

Jenna smiled. "He asked Mom and Dad what to do. He told them he loved you more than anything, but he didn't want kids and you did, and how could he propose when he couldn't promise the one thing you really wanted. They said he'd change his mind. *I* said he'd change his mind. *You* said he'd change his mind. And finally, Sawyer got to a place where he could *imagine* changing his mind—one day. Maybe. I think because he loved you so much he could imagine it, you know, even if he didn't want it for himself. You told me he made it very clear he couldn't promise he'd ever want kids and that there was a very good chance he wouldn't."

*Yikes.* "I feel awful," Maddie said, tears stinging

the backs of her eyes. “He was so honest about it. It’s not fair to him.”

“And it’s not fair to you either, Maddie,” Jenna said gently. “You were both always honest with each other. But suddenly time stopped being on your side. And let me tell you, having a pregnant twin sister didn’t help.”

Maddie eyed her twin’s big, lovely belly. “I bet.” She sucked in a breath. “All I want now is my memory back. My life back. I don’t even remember wanting a baby. I don’t really know what that would even *feel* like.”

“Well, maybe you and Sawyer can use this time to get to know each other all over again without that stalemate pressing on you. It’s always been there the past few years, worse this past year. But now the two of you can just be Maddie and Sawyer again. For a time anyway.”

Maddie nodded. “Because my memory will come back. Dr. Addison said it could be a week, three weeks, possibly longer, but she thinks just a few weeks.”

“It’ll all come back. With these new memories you’re making every moment now.”

“Do you think we were headed for a separation?” Maddie asked.

Jenna frowned. “I can’t even imagine it. You were class BFFs every year since first grade. You were MadSaw—your own celebrity nickname. You guys love each other.”

“He said he made all kinds of bargains while I was unconscious. That if I woke up, he’d give me ten kids.”

“He told you that?” Jenna asked, touching a hand to her heart.

Maddie nodded. “That’s not how I want to start my family off. I’d want to have a baby with a man who

wanted that baby. Not because of a harrowing bargain he made skyward.”

“Oh, Maddie. It’s complicated, right? Just get to know your husband during this time. You’ll be getting to know yourself too. You’re still you.”

“Excuse me?” a very pregnant woman said. “Do you make programmable lullaby players? My husband is a budding country singer, and we want a player that has those stars-and-moons lights for the ceiling while playing my husband singing.”

“Absolutely,” Jenna said. “I just ordered my version of that. Little cows jumping over the moon to the tune of lullabies sung by one of my favorite singers. Let me show you our catalog.”

The woman’s face lit up. Suddenly Maddie realized that she may have been more a back-office type because all the moms-to-be buying such fun stuff must have made Maddie feel very left out.

The door jangled and there was Sawyer. Maddie wrapped her sister in a hug. “Thank you,” she whispered. “You helped a lot.”

Jenna hugged her back and waved at Sawyer. “I’m always here for you.”

Maddie smiled and left Jenna to her customer. Suddenly she felt a lot better and a little heavyhearted about what was to come.

But as she walked over to Sawyer, the handsome, green-eyed man in the brown leather jacket, she wanted to wrap her arms around him—tight. That much she knew for sure.

### *Chapter Three*

They walked home from town, Maddie linking her arm through his, which buoyed him like nothing else. There was affection in that gesture, a degree of trust, and that meant a great deal to him since he'd lost that over the past several months. Once, for a very long time, she'd believed he'd never hurt her. Then he'd started outwardly denying her what she wanted most. And the bond began fraying.

Now, in the simplest way, he felt her saying yes to him, to *them*.

"How about lasagna for dinner?" he asked. "Your mother really did stock the freezer after your accident. She said all that cooking gave her something to do with her mind and hands or she'd have gone nuts. There are five containers of lasagna alone."

Then again, Sawyer thought he should be doing more

for Maddie than just heating up her very kind mother's bounty of food. But April MacLeod was a great cook and he a mediocre one, and she'd made their favorites. Lasagna. Shepherd's pie. Fettuccini carbonara. Her amazing chili and three pans of corn bread, which Sawyer could polish off in one sitting. He felt like he should be cooking for her, figuring out how to make some of her favorite dishes, such as blackened salmon, without burning it, and risotto.

"Do I love lasagna?" she asked.

"It's only your very favorite food on earth. Mine too. We used to make it as teenagers. I did a layer, you did a layer and then we'd stuff our faces."

She smiled. "What else do I love?"

"Blackened everything. Also, fish tacos. Caesar salad. Cheeseburgers. The Pie Diner's chili potpie. Your mother's brisket. Coffee chip ice cream."

"What don't I like?" she asked. "In general, I mean."

"That you can't figure out yoga. You don't like corn. You don't like horror movies."

She smiled. "What did I do when I wasn't working?"

"Well, the past few months you started volunteering for the town's Holiday Happymakers program. You devoted quite a few hours a day to it."

"Holiday Happymakers? What's that?"

"A group that plans ways the town can help those who can't afford Christmas or can't do much in the way of celebrating because of illness or other issues. You started an adopt-a-family program to provide holiday decorations and gifts for each family member. Anyone can leave a letter on the Christmas tree in the community center with a wish list for the family or a relative."

“I sound kind!” she said. “Glad to hear it.”

“You are. Very.”

“What was Christmas like when you were growing up?” she asked.

He frowned at the thought. “I spent every Christmas at your house. My dad didn’t always have his act together, or he disappeared to a girlfriend’s. Your parents always hung a stocking for me—stuffed it too. And there were always presents for me under the tree. I got them gifts, too, and always wished I could have afforded better than a scented candle for your parents. But that’s what I got them every year.”

“Aw,” she said. “I’ll bet they loved it.”

“Your mom always made a show of sniffing it and lighting it and setting it right on the mantel.” He’d never forget her mother’s kindness. Ever.

“My sister told me the basics of your childhood,” she said. “I hope that’s all right. She figured because it was something we all knew, it wasn’t telling tales or talking about your personal business, which she refused to do.”

“I don’t mind your family filling in holes,” he said. “The truth is the truth. And I’m not interested in hiding anything from you. Our marriage was rocky two days ago when you got into the accident and months before that. Very rocky.”

“I’m glad I don’t remember,” she said, tears poking again. “I guess that’s wrong. But all I know is that I’m not unhappy or sad or anxious or wanting anything. I don’t know who I am, but I feel safe because of you and the MacLeods. So if I’m in limbo, at least it’s a nice limbo. A Christmas limbo, at that.”

He smiled. “That’s a nice way to look at it.”

She tightened her hold on his arm, and again he felt like they had a chance. Even if it was just this limbo chance. This Christmas limbo chance. Right now, she was his again.

At the house, Sawyer let out Moose, who raced around the yard, which still held a good covering of snow. Maddie threw his favorite squeaky ball at least twenty times, and he chased it over and over, dropping it by her foot.

“Sorry, Moose, I think my arm is going to give out,” she said, kneeling down to give the German shepherd a rub and a pat.

The phone was ringing, so they headed inside, Moose going over to his big red fluffy dog bed by the fireplace in the living room. They missed the call, and about twenty others, from Maddie’s parents and sister, checking in, and friends and fellow volunteers on the Holiday Happymakers committee.

“That’s really nice,” Maddie said after she listened to all the messages.

Sawyer nodded. “Everyone likes you. Well, I’m gonna go get dinner ready. Want a glass of wine?”

“I have a craving for a little eggnog. Do we have any?”

“Of course. You love eggnog.” He was back in half a minute with two glasses of eggnog. He handed her one, then clinked hers.

“Yum,” she said. “You don’t want help with dinner?”

“My job is reheating,” he said. “So no. You relax. It’ll be ready in fifteen minutes, per your mother’s very specific instructions.”

She flashed him a smile and sank onto the couch,

Moose coming over and sitting in front of her, his head on her knee. Sawyer watched her give the dog a warm hug, wanting more than anything to pull her into his arms and hold her. But he was afraid to overwhelm her, and he had a feeling he should let her make any physical moves.

Over dinner they talked more about what they liked and didn't, laughing more in twenty minutes than they had in the past three months. After dinner and cleaning up the kitchen together, they bundled up and took Moose on a long walk around the neighborhood, enjoying the holiday lights. Back home they watched a singing competition on TV, Maddie sitting very close beside him on the couch as she drank a little more eggnog. Then she yawned—twice—and they realized she'd better get to bed. It had been a long day for her, busier than either expected it'd be once she was discharged, and she could probably use the rest.

He followed her up the stairs, Moose trailing them. In their bedroom, she poked around her dresser drawers and pulled out blue flannel pj bottoms with little Woodstocks all over and a long-sleeved pink T-shirt.

"So...I'll just change in the bathroom," she said. "Is that weird?"

"Not at all. We just met this morning."

She laughed. "It really does feel that way."

It did feel that way. And not—at the same time. All their history was front and center in his head and heart, weighing heavily. He was taking a T-shirt and pair of sweats from the dresser when she came out of the bathroom. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail so

her goose egg was even more prominent, the scratch beside it too.

“Which side of the bed is mine?” she asked.

“Window side. I’m the door side.”

“Ah,” she said, “so the robbers get you first.”

He smiled. “Exactly. And so I can roll out of bed and rush out if an emergency call comes in.”

She picked up the mystery on her bedside table and looked at the cover. “Am I reading this?”

“I think you just plucked it off the bookcase to pick up whenever I’d come in the bedroom—to avoid talking,” he said. “When you weren’t pretending to be sleeping.”

“Yeesh. That bad, huh?”

He looked at his wife, his beautiful Maddie, wishing he could say otherwise. “Yeah. There were recent moments, though, that even our stalemate couldn’t ruin. When I plugged in the Christmas tree for the first time. When Moose ate a stick that required a trip to the vet, and we were both so worried about him that we actually held hands in the vet’s office for the first time in forever.”

“Was Moose okay?” she asked, sitting on the edge of the bed and turning toward him.

“Yeah.”

“But we weren’t. We’re not,” she amended. “I’m not sure I want to remember that, Sawyer.”

“Well, like I said, I’m prepared to give you ten kids. So, once your memory is back, we’re all set. We’ll start a family.”

She frowned. “But, Sawyer, you don’t want a baby.

You're only agreeing because you made a spiritual pact."

"But I meant it. I'm prepared to have a baby."

"Well, that's not what Maddie-who-I-don't-remember would want. That Maddie would want you to *want* to have a baby, a family of your own."

He let out a breath, exhausted. "I don't know that there should be conditions. A yes is a yes, right?"

"No. The yes was about something else. Having your wife back. Giving her what she wanted so badly because you made a bargain with the heavens. It's not actually about what you want, Sawyer."

"So what you're saying is that I can't win?" That came out sharper than he intended. They weren't supposed to be arguing. Maddie needed her head to settle; she needed rest. Not this. He turned away, barely able to take it—that they were back in this place, arguing.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't really know anything, do I?"

*Dammit.* He walked over to her side of the bed where she was sitting, and he held out his arms. She bit her lip and looked up at him, then stood and walked right into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around her, resting his head atop hers, and hell if he didn't feel tears stinging his eyes. "I'm just so grateful you're alive, Maddie. That we have a second chance. That's the truest thing I know."

She raised her head and looked at him, then kissed him on the lips, just a peck, but a kiss nonetheless. Then she got into bed and drew the down comforter up to her neck.

He slipped in beside her knowing there was no way he'd get a wink of sleep tonight.

Maddie's eyes fluttered open as she felt Sawyer suddenly bolt up beside her. She heard the doorbell ring—twice. Then a third time.

She sat up and glanced at her phone on her bedside table. It was 12:19 a.m.

"Someone's at the door?" she asked.

His phone pinged, and he grabbed it, reading the screen. "Oh man."

"What?"

"It's my brother. He's the one ringing the bell." He texted something back, then got out of bed. "I'll handle this. Try to go back to bed, Maddie. You need your sleep."

Sawyer had a brother? No one mentioned a brother.

There was no way she was going back to bed. Sawyer's brother was at the door after midnight, pounding on the ringer and texting? Something was definitely up.

She found a terry bathrobe on a hook in the bathroom and put it on, then tiptoed out of the bedroom and down the stairs to the bottom step as Sawyer reached the door. Unless she was mistaken, he took a breath before pulling open the door.

Standing there, hands jammed into the pockets of his jeans, was a younger version of Sawyer, with shaggier and lighter hair. He wore a black leather bomber jacket and a thick black ski hat. He had an overnight bag slung over his shoulder.

Before he could say a word, Sawyer barked, "Cole, it's really late. And Maddie's not feeling well."

“Yeah, hello to you,” Cole said.

Sawyer didn’t invite him in. “The last time you needed a place to crash and I let you stay a couple days, you robbed us blind and disappeared. If you need a place to stay, I’ll front you some money I know I’ll never see again, but you can’t stay here.”

“I’m not looking to stay here,” Cole said, his body language all fidgety and nervous. “Um, look, it’s not good for the twins to be out in the cold so long, okay?”

“What?” Sawyer asked. “What twins?”

Cole leaned down and picked something up out of view. Sawyer stepped onto the porch and Maddie heard his gasp. She rushed toward the door as Cole came inside carrying two infant car seats, a baby asleep in each one.

Sawyer stared at the babies, shutting the door behind him. “What the hell is going on? Whose babies are these?”

Cole put the car seats down on the foyer rug, then dropped the bag off his shoulder, rubbing his face with both hands. He looked absolutely miserable. And nervous.

Maddie stepped out of the shadows. “Hi.”

“Hey, Maddie.” Cole nodded at her, his expression warmer, and she had the feeling they’d gotten along at some point or that she’d been kind to him. “Whoa, what happened to you? That’s some bump on your forehead.”

“Car accident,” she said. “I’m okay, though.”

He nodded and reached out to squeeze her hand. Yup, she’d been right. They had definitely gotten along—or just better than Cole and his brother did.

“What the hell, Cole?” Sawyer barked. “Whose babies are these?”

“I got an ex pregnant,” he answered, his voice shaky. “We got back together, but then I was fired from my job, and she told me forget it and hooked up with someone else, but he said no way is he gonna be a father. So she went into labor yesterday and called me and I rushed over. I witnessed the birth—wow, that was something.” He shook his head. “And I thought maybe my ex would say she wanted us to have a second chance, but she told me she wasn’t ready for motherhood and didn’t want the twins. She even signed away her parental rights. Unless I accepted responsibility for them, the state would have put them up for adoption.”

This time Maddie gasped. She looked down at the two infants—newborns—asleep in the carriers.

“Good Lord,” Sawyer said, shaking his head.

Cole closed his eyes for a second, his expression pained. “I stood outside the hospital nursery, staring through the glass at their bassinets and holding the forms to give up my rights so they could be placed for adoption. A nurse saw me struggling, I guess. She came over and told me that allowing them to be placed for adoption could be the best thing I could do for them if I couldn’t take care of them. She said it was up to me, that I was their father. Damn that word, Sawyer. Father. Father. Father.” His eyes brimmed with tears, and he slashed a hand underneath and sucked in a breath.

Sawyer put a hand on his brother’s shoulder, his expression full of so many emotions Maddie couldn’t begin to pick them out.

“But I couldn’t sign, Sawyer,” Cole continued. “I

couldn't just abandon them completely like that. I know what it's like to be tossed aside."

Maddie's chest constricted. She had no idea what Cole's story was—and from what she knew, he wasn't raised with Sawyer next door to the MacLeods, or his name would have come up. But whatever his story was, it certainly didn't sound good.

Cole dropped down on the bottom step of the staircase, covering his face with his hands, then stood up and paced. "My name is on the application for the birth certificate that Gigi started filling out—and they look like me, I can see that, even though I thought all babies just looked like babies. They're mine. But I can't take care of them. I can't take care of myself."

"Jesus, Cole," Sawyer said, his gaze moving from his brother to the infants.

"The twins were cleared to leave, and the nurses told me what to buy before I could leave with them—two infant car seats. She also told me to buy some newborn-sized pajamas. When I returned with all that, they gave me a starter pack of diapers and formula and other stuff I'd need. I sat in my car in the hospital parking lot for a half hour with the twins in the back seat and completely panicked, no clue what to do, what to think, how I was gonna do this. Then I drove here."

"Did you name them?" Maddie asked gently.

Cole didn't respond; he just ran a hand through his hair. He looked so frantic. "I'm gonna get their other bag from my car. Be right back."

He dashed out, closing the door behind him. Sawyer stared at Maddie, then looked at the two sleeping infants in the carriers again. They looked so peaceful, blissfully

unaware of all that had happened since they came into the world just a day ago. All that was going on now.

Maddie heard a car start and peel away, tires screeching.

Sawyer raced to the door and flung it open, rushing out to the porch. Maddie followed, pulling her bathrobe tighter around her in the cold December night air.

She saw the car's red taillights barely pause at the stop sign up on Main Street before turning right. Maddie recalled the sign for the freeway in that direction. "He's not coming back tonight, is he?" she said. More a statement than a question.

Sawyer took her hand and led her inside, closing and locking the door behind them. He stared at the babies, then at her. "I'm not sure he's *ever* coming back."

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CHRISTMAS SISTERS*

SARAH MORGAN

*A*  
WEDDING  
*in*  
DECEMBER



A NOVEL

# Maggie

When her phone rang at three in the morning, ripping her from a desperately needed sleep, Maggie's first thought was *bad news*.

Her mind raced through the possibilities, starting with the worst-case scenario. Death, or at least life-changing injury. Police. Ambulances.

Heart pounding, brain foggy, she grabbed her phone from the summit of her teetering pile of books. The name on the screen offered no reassurance.

Trouble stalked her youngest daughter.

"Rosie?" She fumbled for the light and sat up. The book she'd fallen asleep reading thudded to the floor, scattering the pile of Christmas cards she'd started to write the night before. She'd chosen a winter scene of snow-laden trees. They hadn't had a flake of snow in the village on Christmas Day for close to a decade. They often joked that it was a good thing their last name was White because it was the only way they were ever going to have a White Christmas.

She snuggled under the blanket with the phone. "Has some-

thing happened?” The physical distance between her and Rosie made her feel frustrated and helpless.

Everyone said global travel made the world smaller, but it didn't seem smaller to Maggie. Why couldn't her daughter have continued her studies closer to home? Oxford, with its famous spires and ancient colleges, was only a few miles away. Rosie had done her undergraduate degree there, followed by a master's. Maggie had loved having her close by. They'd taken sunlit strolls along cobbled streets, past ancient honey-colored buildings and through Christchurch Meadows, golden with daffodils. They'd followed the slow meander of the river and cheered on the rowing crews. Maggie had hoped, privately, that her daughter might stay close by, but after Rosie had graduated she'd been offered a place in a US doctoral program, complete with full funding.

*Can you believe it, Mum?* The day she'd had the news she'd danced across the living room, hair flying around her face, twirling until she was dizzy and Maggie was dizzy watching her. *Are you proud of me?*

Maggie had been proud and dismayed in equal measure, although she'd hidden the dismayed part of course. That was what you did when you were a parent.

Even she could see it was too good an opportunity to turn down, but still a small part of her had wished Rosie *had* turned it down. That transatlantic flight from the nest left Maggie with email, Skype and social media, none of which felt entirely satisfactory. Even less so in the middle of the night. Had Rosie only been gone for four months? It felt like a lifetime since they'd delivered her to the airport on that sweltering summer's day.

“Is it your asthma? Are you in hospital?” What could she do if Rosie *was* in the hospital? Nothing. Anxiety was a constant companion, never more so than now.

If it had been her eldest daughter, Katie, who had moved to a different country she might have felt more relaxed. Katie was

reliable and sensible, but Rosie? Rosie had always been impulsive and adventurous.

“I’m not in hospital. Don’t fuss!”

Only now did Maggie hear the noise in the background. Cheering, whooping.

“Do you have your inhaler with you? You sound breathless.” The sound woke the memories. Rosie, eyes bulging, lips stained blue. The whistling sound as air struggled to squeeze through narrowed airways. Maggie making emergency calls with hands that shook almost too hard to hold the phone, the terror raw and brutal although she kept that hidden from her child. Calm, she’d learned, was important even if it was faked.

Even when Rosie had moved from child to adult there had been no reprieve.

Some children grew out of asthma. Not Rosie.

There had been a couple of occasions when Rosie was in college when she’d gone to parties without her inhaler. A few hours of dancing later and she’d been rushed to the emergency department. That had been a 3:00 a.m. phone call, too, and Maggie had raced through the night to be by her side. Those were the episodes Maggie knew about. She was sure there were plenty more that Rosie had kept to herself.

“I’m breathless because I’m excited. I’m twenty-two, Mum. When are you going to stop worrying?”

“That would be never. Your child is always your child, no matter how many candles are on the birthday cake. Where are you?”

“I’m with Dan’s family in Aspen for Thanksgiving, and I have news.” She broke off and Maggie heard the clink of glasses and Rosie’s infectious laugh. It was impossible to hear that laugh and not want to smile, too. The sound contrasted with the silence of Maggie’s bedroom.

A waft of cold air chilled her skin and she stood up and grabbed her robe from the back of the chair. Honeysuckle Cot-

tage looked idyllic from the outside, but it was impossibly drafty. The ventilation was a relief in August but froze you to the bone in November. She really needed to do something about the insulation before she even thought about selling the place. Historic charm, climbing roses and a view of the village green couldn't compensate for frostbite.

Or maybe it wasn't the house that was cold. Maybe it was her.

Knocked flat by a wave of sadness and she struggled to right herself.

"What's happening? What news? It sounds like you're having a party."

"Dan proposed. *Literally* out of the blue. We were taking it in turns to say what we're thankful for and when it was his turn he gave me a funny look and then he got down on one knee and—Mum, we're getting married."

Maggie sat down hard on the edge of the bed, the freezing air forgotten. "Married? But you and Dan have only been together for a few weeks—"

"Eleven weeks, four days, six hours and fifteen minutes—oh wait, now it's sixteen, I mean seventeen—" She was laughing, and Maggie tried to laugh with her.

How should she handle this? "That's not very long, sweetheart." But completely in character for Rosie, who bounced from one impulse to another, powered by enthusiasm.

"It feels so right, I can't even tell you. And you'll understand because it was like that for you and Dad."

Maggie stared at the damp patch on the wall.

*Tell her the truth.*

Her mouth moved but she couldn't push the words out. This was the wrong time. She should have done it months ago, but she'd been too much of a coward.

And now it was too late. She didn't want to be the slayer of happy moments.

She couldn't even say *you're too young*, because she'd been the

same age when she'd had Katie. Which basically made her a hypocrite. Or did it make her someone with experience?

"You just started your postgrad—"

"I'm not giving it up. I can be married and study. Plenty do it."

Maggie couldn't argue with that. "I'm happy for you." Did she sound happy? She tried harder. "Woo-hoo!"

She'd thought she'd white-knuckled her way through all the toughest parts of parenting, but it turned out there were still some surprises waiting for her. Rosie wasn't a child anymore. She had to be allowed to make her own decisions. And her own mistakes.

Rosie was talking again. "I know it's all a bit fast, but you're going to love Dan as much as I do. You said you thought he was great when you spoke to him."

But speaking to someone on a video call wasn't the same as meeting them in person, was it?

Maggie swallowed down all the words of warning that rose up inside her. She was *not* going to turn into her own mother and send clouds to darken every bright moment. "He seemed charming, and I'm thrilled for you. If I don't sound it, it's because it's the middle of the night here, and you know what I'm like when I've just woken up. When I saw your name pop up on the screen, I was worried it was your asthma."

"Haven't had an attack in ages. I'm sorry I woke you, but I wanted to share my news."

"I'm glad you woke me. Tell me everything." She closed her eyes and tried to pretend her daughter was in the room with her, and not thousands of miles away.

There was no reason to panic. It was an engagement, that was all. There was plenty of time for them to decide if this was the right thing for them. "We'll have a big celebration when you and your sister are here for Christmas. Would Dan like to join us? I can't wait to meet him. Maybe we'll throw a party. In-

vite the Baxters, and all your friends from college and school.” Planning lifted Maggie’s mood. Christmas was her favorite time of year, the one occasion the whole family gathered together. Even Katie, with her busy life as a doctor, usually managed to beg and barter a few days at Christmas in exchange for covering the busy New Year shift. Maggie was looking forward to spending time with her. She had a niggling suspicion her eldest daughter was avoiding her. Every time Maggie suggested meeting up, Katie made an excuse, which was unlike her because she rarely refused a free lunch.

Christmas would give her a chance to dig a little deeper.

In her opinion, Oxford was the perfect place to spend the festive season. True, there was unlikely to be snow, but what was better than a postlunch walk listening to the peal of bells on a crisp, cold winter’s day?

It promised to be perfect, apart from one complication.

Nick.

Maggie still hadn’t figured out how she was going to handle that side of things.

Maybe an engagement was exactly what they needed to shift the focus of attention.

“Christmas is one of the things I need to talk to you about.” Rosie sounded hesitant. “I planned to come home, but since Dan proposed—well, we don’t see the point in waiting. We’ve chosen the day. We’re getting married on Christmas Eve.”

Maggie frowned. “You mean next year?”

“No, this year.”

She counted the days and her brain almost exploded. “You want to get married in less than four weeks? To a man you barely know?” Rosie had always been impulsive, but this wasn’t a soft toy that would be abandoned after a few days, or a dress that would turn out to be not quite the right color. Marriage wasn’t something that could be rectified with a refund. There was no reason for haste, unless—“Sweetie—”

“I know what you’re thinking, and it isn’t that. I’m not pregnant! We’re getting married because we’re in love. I adore him. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

*You barely know him.*

Maggie shifted, uncomfortably aware that knowing someone well didn’t inoculate you against problems.

“I’m excited for you!” Turned out she could fake excitement as convincingly as she could fake calm. “But I could never arrange anything that quickly. Even a small wedding takes months of planning. When Jennifer Hill was married in the summer her mother told me they had to book the photographer more than a year in advance. And would everyone stay? It’s Christmas. Everywhere will already be booked, and even if we managed to find something it would cost a fortune at this time of year.”

How many could she accommodate in Honeysuckle Cottage? And what would Dan’s family think of Rosie’s home, with its slightly crooked walls and its antiquated heating system? Could English country charm compensate for frozen toes? In the summer the place was picture-perfect, with its walled garden and profusion of climbing roses, but living here in winter felt more like an exercise in survival. Still, Aspen was in the Rocky Mountains, and that had to be a pretty cold place in winter, too, surely?

Maybe she and Dan’s mother would bond over the challenges of heating a property in cold weather.

“You wouldn’t have to arrange anything,” Rosie said. “We’re getting married here, in Aspen. I feel terrible about not having our usual family gathering in the cottage but spending the holidays here will be magical. Remember all those years Katie and I used to stare out of the window hoping for snow? There’s more snow here than you could ever imagine. Christmas in Colorado is going to be heaven. The scenery is incredible, and it will be a White Christmas in every way possible.”

Christmas in Colorado.

Maggie stared at the dusky pink curtains that pooled on the

dark oak floor. She'd made them during the long nights she'd spent watching over Rosie.

"You're not coming home for Christmas?" Why had she said that? She was not going to turn into one of those mothers who buried their children in guilt. "You must get married where and when you want, but I don't suppose Aspen will be any different from here in terms of arrangements. To arrange a wedding in under a month would take a miracle."

"We have a miracle. Catherine, Dan's mother, is a wedding planner. She's amazing. This only happened an hour ago and she's already made some calls and arranged the flowers and the cake. Usually she handles celebrities, so she has tons of contacts."

"Oh, well—super." Maggie felt as if she'd fallen in a river and was being swept along, helpless and flailing. "She doesn't mind helping you?"

"She's excited. And she has flawless taste. Everything will be perfect."

Maggie thought of her own imperfect life and felt a rush of something she recognized as jealousy. How could she be jealous of someone she'd never met?

Maybe she was having a midlife crisis, but surely if that was the case then it should have happened years ago when Rosie had first left home? Why now? She was having delayed empty nest syndrome.

She blinked to clear her misty vision and wondered why she'd ever thought it would be easy to be a parent.

Focusing on the practical, she made a mental list of all the things she'd have to do to cancel Christmas. The cake would keep, as would the cranberry sauce, waiting in the freezer. She'd ordered a turkey from a local farmer, but maybe she could still cancel that.

The one thing not so easily canceled were her expectations.

The White family always gathered together at Christmas. They had their traditions, which probably would have seemed

crazy to some, but Maggie cherished them. Decorating the tree, singing carols, doing a massive jigsaw, playing silly games. Being together. It didn't happen often now that her daughters were grown, and she'd been looking forward to it.

"Have you told your sister yet?"

"She is my next call. Not that she's likely to answer her phone. She's always working. I want her to be my maid of honor."

What would Katie's reaction be? "Your sister doesn't consider herself a romantic."

Maggie sometimes wondered if working in the emergency department for so long had distorted her elder daughter's view of humanity.

"I know," Rosie said, "but this isn't any old wedding. It's *my* wedding, and I know she'll do it for me."

"You're right, she will." Katie had always been a protective and loving older sister.

Maggie glanced at the photograph she kept on the table next to her bed. The two girls standing side by side, arms wrapped around each other, their cheeks pressed together as they faced the camera, smiles merging. It was one of her favorite photos.

"I know you hate flying, Mum, but you will come, won't you? I badly want you all to be there."

Flying. Rosie was right that she hated it.

In company when conversation turned to travel, she pretended she was protecting the planet by avoiding flying, but in reality she was protecting herself. The idea of being propelled through the air in a tin can horrified her. It all seemed out of her control. What if the pilot had drunk too much the night before? What if they collided with another plane? Everyone knew that airspace was ridiculously overcrowded. What about drones? Bird strikes?

When the children were young she and Nick had bundled them into the car and taken them to the beach. Once, they'd taken the ferry across to France and driven as far as Italy (*never*

again, Nick had said, as they'd been bombarded with a chorus of *are we nearly there* all the way from Paris to Pisa).

And now she was expected to fly to the Rocky Mountains for Christmas.

And she would. Of course she would.

"We'll be there. Nothing would keep us away." Maggie waved goodbye to her dreams of a family Christmas at the cottage. "But what about a venue? Will you be able to find something at such short notice?"

"We're going to have the wedding right here, at his home. Dan's family own Snowfall Lodge. It's this *amazing* boutique hotel just outside Aspen. I can't wait for you to see it. There are views of the forest and the mountains, and outdoor hot tubs—it's going to be the perfect place to spend Christmas. The perfect place to get married. I'm so excited!"

Honeysuckle Cottage was the perfect place to spend Christmas.

Maggie couldn't imagine spending it in a place she didn't know, with people she didn't know. Not only that, but *perfect* people she didn't know. Even the prospect of snow didn't make her feel better.

"It sounds as if you have it all covered. All we need to do is think about what to wear."

"Mm, I was going to mention that. It's pretty cold at this time of year. You're going to need to wear some serious layers."

"I was talking about *your* clothes. Your wedding dress."

"Catherine is taking me to her favorite boutique bridal store tomorrow. She's booked an appointment and they're closing the store for us and everything."

On the few occasions Maggie had thought about Rosie getting married, she'd imagined planning it together, poring over photographs in magazines, trying on dresses.

Never once had she pictured the whole thing happening without her.

Now she thought about it, very little of her life had turned out the way she'd planned.

She stared at the empty expanse of bed next to her.

"That's—kind of her."

"She *is* kind. She says I'm the daughter she never had. She's really spoiling me."

But Rosie was *her* daughter, Maggie thought. She should be the one doing the spoiling.

No matter how hard she tried, it was impossible not to be hurt and a little resentful.

Already she felt more like a guest than the mother of the bride.

*No!* She wasn't going to turn into that sort of mother. This was Rosie's special day, not hers. Her feelings didn't matter.

"What can I do to help?"

"Nothing. Get yourselves here. Catherine can't wait to meet you. I know you'll love her."

Maggie wondered what Rosie had said about her. *My mother works in academic publishing. She loves baking and gardening.* To a high-flying celebrity wedding planner, she probably sounded as exciting as yesterday's laundry.

"I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"Can I speak to Dad? I want to hear his voice."

Maggie gripped the phone. She hadn't anticipated this. "I—um—he's not here right now."

"It's the middle of the night. How can he not be there?"

Maggie searched frantically for a plausible explanation. She could hear Nick's voice, *for goodness' sake, Mags, this is absurd. It's time to tell the truth.*

But the truth was the last thing Rosie needed to hear on the day of her engagement.

She would not spoil her daughter's big moment.

"He's gone for a walk."

"A *walk*? At three in the morning? Have you guys finally bought a dog or something?"

“No. Your dad was working on a paper until late and couldn’t sleep. But he should be back any minute.” She was slightly shocked by her own creativity under pressure. She’d always raised the girls to tell the truth, and here she was lying like a pro.

“Get him to call me the moment he walks through the door.”

“Won’t you be asleep by then?”

There was a sound of glasses clinking together and Rosie giggled. “It’s only eight o’clock in the evening here. Will you get him to call me back?”

Unable to think of an excuse, Maggie promised that Nick would call as soon as he came in, and after a few more excited words she ended the call.

She sat for a moment, then walked to the window. It was dark outside, but the moon sent a ghostly glow across the village green.

In the summer it was the venue for cricket, and in the winter the trees were decked with tiny fairy lights paid for by the village council. There had been an outcry at proposals to divert traffic through the center of the village.

Maggie guessed they didn’t have those problems in Aspen. Nobody was likely to have to fight the demise of the local bus service, or the plan to only open the library two days a week.

Unable to see an alternative, she picked up the phone and dialed Nick’s number.

It rang and rang, but Maggie persevered. Nick’s ability to sleep through anything was something that she’d both resented and envied when the children were young. It had been Maggie who had dragged herself from the bed every half an hour when Rosie was tiny, and Maggie who had borne the brunt of the asthma attacks even when Nick was home between trips.

Eventually he picked up the phone with a grunt. “lo.”

“Nick?”

“Maggie?” His voice was rough with sleep and she could

imagine him shaking himself awake like a bear waking from hibernation.

“You need to call Rosie.”

“Now? In the middle of the night? What’s wrong?” To give him his due, he was instantly concerned. “Is she in the hospital?”

“No. She has news.” Should she tell him or leave Rosie to tell him herself? In the end she decided to tell him. Nick tended to be blunt in his responses and she didn’t want him spoiling Rosie’s moment. “She and Dan are getting married.” She heard the tinkling of glass and Nick cursing fluently. “Are you all right?”

“Knocked a glass of water over.”

Nick was a professor of Egyptology, ridiculously intelligent and endearingly clumsy with everyday items. At least, Maggie had found it endearing in the beginning. It had become less endearing as the years had passed and he’d broken half her favorite china. She used to joke that he was so used to dealing with pottery fragments he didn’t know how to handle an entire piece.

“She and Dan are getting married in Colorado at Christmas.”

“This Christmas? The one happening next month?”

“That’s the one. Dan’s family own a luxury resort. I’ve forgotten what it’s called.”

“Snowfall Lodge.”

“How do you know that?”

“Rosie mentioned it when she told me about her plans for Thanksgiving. Goodness. Married. I didn’t see that one coming. Our little Rosie. Always doing the unexpected.” There was a pause and she heard rustling in the background and the click of a light switch. “How do you feel?”

Sad. Lost. Confused. Anxious.

She wasn’t sure how many of those feelings could be attributed to Rosie’s news.

“I feel fine.” That was as much of a lie as letting Rosie think Nick was in bed with her. “It’s Rosie’s life, and she should do what she wants to do.”

“What about Christmas? I know how important it is to you.”

“We’ll still be having Christmas, just not at Honeysuckle Cottage. The wedding is planned for Christmas Eve.” She didn’t quite manage to keep the wobble from her voice.

“Are you going to go?”

“What sort of a question is that? You seriously think I wouldn’t attend my daughter’s wedding?”

“I hadn’t given it any thought at all until two minutes ago when you first mentioned it. I know how you love Christmas at the cottage, and how much you hate flying. I know pretty much everything about you.”

She thought about the file she’d left open on the kitchen table.

*He didn’t know everything.*

“If my daughter is getting married in Aspen, then that’s where I’ll be, too.”

“How? I’ve never managed to get you on a plane. Not even for our honeymoon.”

“I’ll find a way.” She could do a fear of flying course, but that felt like a ridiculous waste of money. Alcohol would be cheaper. She didn’t often drink, so a couple of gin and tonics should do it. “We can sort out details later. She wants you to call her back so that she can tell you in person.”

There was a pause. “Where does she think I am? What did you tell her?”

“That you were out walking because you couldn’t sleep.”

His sigh echoed down the phone like an accusation. “This has gone on long enough. We should tell them, Mags.” He sounded tired. “They’re not children anymore. They deserve to know the truth.”

“We’ll tell them when the time is right, and that time isn’t when your youngest daughter calls all excited to tell you she’s getting married.”

“All right, but we tell her before we arrive in Colorado. We’ll

call her together next week. We've been living apart for months now. It's time to tell both girls that it's over."

*Over.*

Maggie felt her throat thicken and her chest hurt.

It was because it was the middle of the night. Things always seemed worse at three in the morning.

"I'd rather tell Katie in person, but she's elusive at the moment. Have you heard from her lately?"

"No, but that isn't unusual. You two have this mother-daughter thing going on. You're the one she always calls."

But Katie hadn't called. She hadn't called in a while.

Did that mean she was busy, or that something was wrong?

"I'll try calling her again. She usually does nothing but sleep and eat over Christmas. Traveling to Aspen might be difficult for her."

Difficult for all of them.

A sister who didn't believe in marriage, and parents who were divorcing.

What sort of a wedding was this going to be?

## *Katie*

“That’s it, Sally. All done.” Katie removed her surgical gloves and stood up. The stitches were neat and she was satisfied she’d done the best possible job. There would be a scar, but Katie knew that with or without a scar Sally would never forget tonight. “Is there someone we can call for you?”

The woman shook her head. There was bruising and swelling on her left cheek and disillusionment in her eyes. “I never thought this would happen to me.”

Katie sat down again. Her shoulder ached from sitting in one position for too long and she rolled it discreetly to try to ease the discomfort. “It can happen to anyone. It’s not about you. It’s about him. It’s not your fault.” It was important to say the words, even though she knew she probably wouldn’t be believed.

“I feel stupid. I keep thinking I must have missed something. We’ve been together for two years. Married for four months. He’s never done anything like this before. I love him. I thought he loved me. We met when I started a new job and he swept me off my feet. He seemed perfect.”

Katie shivered. “Perfect” wasn’t normal. What human being was perfect? “I’m sorry.”

“There were no signs. No clues.”

“Perfect” might have been a sign. Or maybe she was jaded.

Over the years she'd worked in the emergency department, she'd seen it all. Children who were abused. Women who were abused and, yes, men who were abused. She'd seen people who knifed each other, people who drove too fast and paid the price, people who drank and then climbed behind the wheel and took a life. There were plenty of regular accidents, too, of course, along with heart attacks, brain hemorrhages and any number of acute emergencies that required immediate attention. And then there were the hordes who decided the emergency department was the easiest place to access medical care of the most trivial kind. Each day she waded through a mixed soup of humanity, some good, some not so good.

“When we met, he was sweet and kind. Loving. Attentive.” Sally wiped her cheek with the heel of her hand. “I'm trying not to cry, because crying hurts. The physical injuries are awful, but the worst thing is that it shakes your confidence in your own judgment. You must have seen it before. I can't believe I'm the first.”

Katie handed her a tissue. “You're not the first.”

“How do you handle it? Working here, you must see the worst of human behavior.”

Katie's shoulder chose that moment to give an agonizing twinge. Yes, she saw the worst of human behavior. She had to remind herself that she also saw the best. She wondered what would happen to this woman. To this marriage. Would she forgive him? Would the cycle continue? “What will you do? Do you have a plan?”

“No. Until he threw me down the stairs I didn't realize I needed one.” Sally blew her nose. “The house is mine, but I don't feel safe in it right now so I'll probably stay with my parents for a while. He wants to talk to me, and I suppose I should at least listen.”

Katie wanted to tell her not to go back, but it wasn't her place to give advice. Her job was to fix the physical damage. Helping Sally deal with the emotional carnage and find some degree of empowerment was someone else's responsibility. "The police want to talk to you. Are you feeling up to it?"

"Not really, but it's important so I'll do it. This was going to be our first Christmas together." Sally tucked the tissue into her sleeve. "I had it all planned."

The time of year seemed to amplify her distress, but Katie knew from experience that tragedy didn't take a break for Christmas.

Someone opened the door. "Dr. White! We need you."

Saturday nights in the emergency department were not for the fainthearted, although these days it wasn't only Saturdays. Every night was insane.

"I'll be right there." She glanced at the nurse who had assisted. "Can you make sure Sally has all the information she needs?" She turned back to her patient. "When you're ready, there are people you can speak to. People who can help."

"But no one who can turn the clock back. No one who can turn him into the man I thought he was."

Katie wondered if Sally's worst injury was the damage to her belief system. How did you ever trust a man again? "I hope everything works out for you."

Katie was unlikely to find out, of course. The place was like a conveyor belt of trauma. She dealt with what came through the doors, and then she moved on. There was no long-term management here.

"You've been very kind. Your parents must be proud."

*"Dr. White!"*

Katie ground her teeth. The reality was that compassion had to be squashed into the shortest time possible. They were two doctors down and she had a queue of patients waiting for her attention, so she smiled at Sally again and left the room.

Would her parents be proud if they'd witnessed her life over the last few weeks? She didn't think so.

She was probably letting them down. She knew she was letting herself down.

She looked at the nurse who was hovering in the corridor. "Problem?"

"The guy coughing up blood—"

"Mr. Harris."

"Yes. Harris. How do you do that? How do you know everyone's name even though you only spoke to him for less than a minute?"

"I like to make an inhuman experience as human as possible. What about him?"

"His tests are back. Dr. Mitford saw him and says he needs to be admitted, but there is a bed crisis."

When wasn't there a bed crisis? You stood more chance of finding a unicorn in your Christmas stocking than you did a hospital bed. Demand exceeded supply. A patient she'd seen at the beginning of her shift was still waiting for a bed six hours later. Because there was always a risk of hospital-acquired infection, Katie sent people home whenever she was able to do so. "Did you manage to contact his daughter? Is she on her way?"

"Yes, and yes."

"Call me when she arrives. I'll talk to her. He might be better off at home if there is someone there to take care of him." And better for his dignity. She'd seen on the notes that he was a retired CEO. Once, he'd probably commanded a room. Now he was the victim of human frailty. No matter how busy she was, she tried to remember that landing in the emergency department was one of the most stressful moments of a person's life. What was routine to her was often terrifying for the patient.

She never forgot what it had been like for her mother being in the hospital with Rosie.

Katie saw three more patients in quick succession and was then hit by a wave of dizziness.

It had happened a few times over the past few weeks and she was starting to panic. She needed to bring her A game to work, and lately that wasn't happening.

"I'm going to grab a quick coffee before I keel over." She turned and bumped straight into her colleague.

"Hey, Katie." Mike Bannister had been in her year at med school and they'd remained friends.

"How was the honeymoon?"

"Let's put it this way, two weeks in the Caribbean wasn't enough. What are you doing at work? After what happened I thought—are you sure you should be here?"

"I'm fine."

"Did you take any time off?"

"I don't need time off." She forced herself to breathe slowly, hoping Mike would move on.

He glanced over his shoulder to check no one was listening. "You're stressed out and on the edge. I'm worried about you."

"You're imagining things." She was totally stressed out. "I probably have low blood sugar. I'm cranky when I'm hungry and I haven't had a break since I walked into this place seven hours ago. I'm about to fix that."

"You're allowed to be human, Katie." Mike's gaze settled on her face. "What happened was nasty. Scary. No one would blame you if—"

"Worry about the patients, not me. There are more than enough of them." Katie tried to ignore the pain in her shoulder and the rapid beating of her heart. She didn't want to think about it and she certainly didn't want to talk about it.

She'd once overheard her mother saying to someone, *Katie is solid as a rock.*

Up until a month ago she wouldn't have disagreed.

Now she felt anything but solid. She was falling apart, and it

was becoming harder and harder to hide it from her colleagues. Even the thought of going to work brought her to the edge of a panic attack, and she'd never suffered from panic attacks.

Her mother kept calling suggesting lunch and she kept stalling because she was afraid she might break down.

"Sorry." A nurse bumped into her as he sprinted from one end of the department to another and the wail of an ambulance siren told her the workload wasn't going to ease any time soon.

"The paramedics are bringing in a nasty head injury. And that film crew are driving me insane," Mike said.

Katie had forgotten the film crew. They were filming a "fly on the wall" documentary. She suspected they were beginning to wish they'd chosen a different wall.

The cameraman had passed out on day one after witnessing the aftermath of a particularly nasty road accident. He'd hit his head on a trolley and she'd had to put eight stitches in his head. His colleagues had thought it hilarious that he'd ended up on the other side of the camera, but she could have done without the extra business.

"It's like a war zone," one of the journalists had observed earlier in the evening and given that he'd worked in an actual war zone at one point, no one was about to argue with him. "No wonder you're short-staffed. Aren't you ever tempted to ditch the whole thing and retrain in dermatology?"

Katie hadn't answered. She was tempted by a whole lot of things, and it was starting to unsettle her.

Medicine was her life. She'd decided to be a doctor the night Rosie had her first asthma attack. Their father had been away. Katie had been too young to be left alone, so she'd gone to the hospital, too.

She'd been fascinated by the beeping machines, the soft hiss of the oxygen and the skilled hands of the doctor whose ministrations had helped her little sister breathe again.

At eighteen she'd gone to medical school. More than a de-

cade later, she was still working her way up the ladder as a doctor. She liked her colleagues, she loved the feeling that she was doing good, but lately that feeling didn't come as often as it once had. She wanted to do more for her patients, but time and resources were in short supply. She was becoming increasingly frustrated by the limitations of the job, and starting to question whether it was right for her.

The time to ask herself that question would have been twelve years ago, not now.

She turned away from Mike.

A junior doctor was hovering, waiting to discuss a case with her but before she could open her mouth the drunken head injury arrived. The man was covered in blood and bellowing like a wounded animal.

It was another hour before she was finally able to visit the break room, and she grabbed a protein bar and a cup of coffee while she checked her phone.

She had three missed calls from her sister. In the middle of the night?

She gulped down the last of the bar and dialed, calming herself with the knowledge that her sister was perfectly capable of calling in the middle of the night to say she'd taken up ballet or decided to run a marathon.

*Please let that be all it is.*

If something had happened to her sister, that would be the end of her.

"Rosie?" She tossed the wrapper in the bin. "Are you in hospital?"

"For crying out loud, can't a girl call her family without everyone assuming I'm in hospital? What is *wrong* with you people?"

Relief flooded through her. "If you're going to call your family at four in the morning then you can expect that kind of reaction." Katie decided to give her feet five minutes' rest and kicked

off her shoes. “So is this a catch-up call?” She eyed the chair but decided that if she sat down in it she might never get up again.

“Not exactly. I called because I have big news, and something special to ask you.”

“Big news?” Why, when her sister said those words, did they sound so terrifying? “You’re throwing in your studies and you’re going to travel in Peru?”

Rosie laughed, because there had been a time when she’d considered exactly that. “Guess again.”

With Rosie it could be anything.

“You’ve taken up Irish dancing and you’re moving in with a colony of leprechauns.”

“Wrong again. I’m getting married!”

Katie spilled her coffee, and it splashed across her skirt and her legs. “Shit.”

“I know you’re not the world’s biggest romantic, but I can’t believe you actually said that.”

“It was a reaction to the severe burn I just gave myself, not a reaction to your news.” She never used to swear, but years working in the emergency department had changed that. “You were saying?” She grabbed paper towels and mopped the mess. “Married? Who to?”

“What do you mean ‘who to’? To Dan, of course.”

“Do I know about Dan?” Katie lost track of her sister’s relationships. “Oh wait, I do remember you mentioning him. He’s your latest.”

“Not only my latest, but my last. He’s The One.”

Katie rolled her eyes, relieved it wasn’t a video call. “You thought Callum Parish was ‘The One,’ too.”

“He was my first. You always love your first.”

Katie hadn’t loved her first. Katie had never been in love. She was pretty sure that part of her was faulty.

“What’s his problem?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You always pick men who are going through a hard time. You like to save people.”

“That is not true. And Dan doesn’t have a problem, except perhaps that his future sister-in-law is insane.”

Future sister-in-law? Katie struggled to get her head around it. “If he doesn’t have a problem, why are you marrying him?”

“Because I’m in love!”

Love. A disease with an uncertain prognosis that often struck without warning.

“I’m checking you’re not being pressured into something, that’s all. It’s important that you’re doing it for the right reasons.” Katie couldn’t think of a single reason that made sense, but she was willing to accept her own limitations in that area. Rosie was right. She wasn’t romantic. She didn’t watch romantic movies. She didn’t read romance. She didn’t dream of weddings. She lived a life drenched in reality. She saw plenty of endings, few of them happy.

“Can’t you be pleased for me?”

“I’m your big sister. My job is to protect you.”

“From what?”

“From anything and everything that might harm you. In this case, from yourself. You’re impulsive and very free with your affections. You’re gentle, and frankly adorable, and you’re a target for every lame duck.”

“Dan is not a lame duck.”

“Maybe not, but then you don’t see bad in anyone. And—how can I say this without offending you? You’re not a great judge of men.”

“You’ve offended me. And, by the way, ‘adorable’ makes me sound like a puppy that fell in a puddle. It’s not a compliment for someone on track for an academic career. You *never* take me seriously. Maybe I’m not a high-flying doctor like you, but I’m at Harvard doing a PhD. Some people are impressed by that.”

“I do take you seriously.” Didn’t she? “And it’s possible to be

cute and academic. I know some people are impressed, which is why it's my job to keep you grounded so that the whole Ivy League thing doesn't go to your head. And to that end we do need to remember here that you're studying fairy tales, which basically sums up your entire view of life." It was a long running family joke, but Katie felt a twinge of guilt as she said it. Maybe she'd made that joke a little too often.

"I'm studying Celtic languages, folklore and myth. *Not* fairy tales."

"I know, and I'm proud of you." Katie softened her tone. She *was* proud of her sister. "I also love you and want to protect you."

"I don't need protecting. I love him, Katie. Dan is—he's—incredible. He's funny, he's kind, he's so laid-back it's unbelievable frankly and he kisses like a god. I never thought I could feel this way."

"You can't marry a guy because he's good in bed." It had been so long since she'd been to bed with anyone, good or otherwise, that she probably wasn't the best judge of that either.

"That's all you heard from what I said? It's so much more than that. He's perfect for me."

After dealing with Sally, the alarm bells in Katie's head were deafening. "No one is perfect. If he seems perfect, it's either because he's working hard to hide something, or that you haven't been with him long enough to see his flaws. Remember Sam."

"I just told you I'm getting married, and you have to mention Sam? Do you really think it's good timing?"

"You adored Sam. And, by the way, you thought he was The One, right up until the point you discovered he'd slept with two of your friends."

"People sometimes behave badly. It's a fact of life."

"You're excusing him?"

"No, but we were at college. People go a little crazy at college."

"He hurt you, Rosie. You cried so hard it triggered the worst

asthma attack you'd ever had. I will never forget that crazy drive to Oxford. And lying to Mum, because you begged me not to tell her." Her mother knew less than fifty percent of the things that had happened to Rosie since she'd left home. Sometimes Katie felt the burden of that. She saw the unfiltered version of Rosie's life.

"I didn't want to worry her. I've done more than enough of that in my lifetime."

"And then there was—what was his name? James. He insisted you paid whenever you were together."

"He didn't have much money."

"He was a leech." She'd had to lend Rosie money, but she didn't mention that. It wasn't about money. It was about judgment.

"Dan is different." Rosie was stubborn. "You'll see it the moment you meet him."

"Great. When can I meet him?" The sooner the better as far as she was concerned. Engagements could be broken, couldn't they? Relationships ended all the time, particularly Rosie's.

"That's why I'm phoning. We're getting married at Christmas, right here in Aspen. Can you think of anything more romantic? Blue skies and snow."

"*This* Christmas? The Christmas that is happening in less than a month? Are you kidding me?"

"Why is everyone so surprised?"

"Because generally you're given more than a few weeks notice for a wedding and you've only known him for a couple of months." An image of Sally's bruised, tear-drenched face slid into her brain. *There were no signs. No clues.* "Does Mum know?"

"I called her first. She was thrilled. So was Dad."

Katie was fairly sure her mother would have had an anxiety attack. "What's the hurry? Why not wait a while?"

"Because we don't want to wait! We want to do this as soon

as possible. And I really want you to be there. But don't bring the doom and gloom."

"Sorry." Katie swallowed. The last thing she wanted was to hurt her sister. "It's been a tough few weeks at work, that's all. Ignore me. Of course I'll be at your wedding. You're not only my sister, you're my best friend. I wouldn't miss it for anything. Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive. I know you're looking out for me." Rosie's voice was soft and warm and her generous response made Katie feel worse.

Her sister's capacity to forgive human frailty was both her strength and her weakness. It made her vulnerable to every loser and user that crossed her path.

Was Dan one of those?

"What's the plan? Do I have to book somewhere to stay?" The thought of making travel plans drained the last of her energy. "What about Mum and Dad?"

"They're coming, too, of course. And everything is arranged apart from your flight. Dan's family own this amazing place in the mountains. It will be the best vacation you've ever had."

Katie had been dreading Christmas. She'd been wondering how she was going to hold it together during all that family time. Usually she loved it. She loved sleeping late and eating her mother's amazing food. She loved catching up with her dad and hearing about his work. But everything was different now. Her life had changed forever on a dark, rainy night a few weeks before.

And now she felt exhausted. Could she honestly fly to Aspen and put on a happy face?

"When would you want us to fly out?"

"The wedding will be on Christmas Eve, so we thought you should all come a week before so you have time to get to know Dan and his family. Then you can stay over Christmas and fly back before the New Year, or whenever you like. Oh, Katie,

I'm so excited! I can't decide between a horse-drawn sleigh and a husky ride for the guests."

"Well, don't ache your brain on my account. I'm perfectly happy walking."

"They have feet of snow here already. It's a winter wonderland. You might not find it so easy to walk."

"Walking is one of the few things I excel at. I've had years of practice."

"I want you to be my bridesmaid. Maid of honor. Call it whatever you like."

Katie didn't want to call it anything. Why couldn't her sister see that this wedding was a massive mistake?

"Are you sure? I'll probably leave a muddy footprint on your dress. I don't know much about weddings." She knew even less about the duties of a maid of honor, but presumably they didn't include being a killjoy.

"All you have to do is smile and help me out. You'll be able to resuscitate Mum if she has a panic attack on the plane. I feel bad that I'm ruining her family Christmas. You know how important it is to her to have everyone together. I miss you. We haven't spoken in ages. I was even starting to wonder if you were avoiding me."

"That's ridiculous. Busy, that's all."

*Tell her what happened to you. Tell her that you feel as if the world is crumbling round you.*

Rosie, she knew, would be horrified. Knowing her kind-hearted sister, she'd probably jump on the first plane and fly over.

Katie blinked. She was the one who looked out for Rosie, not the other way around.

She was Rosie's rock and her support. And never had Rosie needed her support and counsel as much as now.

Right there and then she made a decision.

Forget Christmas. Forget relaxation. Forget figuring out her own issues.

Her first priority was to stop her little sister making a massive mistake that would end in misery.

“I wouldn’t miss the wedding for anything.” She needed to meet Dan in person and figure out a way to save her sister from herself. And if she managed it early on in the week, then they might still all be home in time to spend Christmas in Honey-suckle Cottage.

With luck, her mother would be too focused on Rosie to notice that anything was wrong with Katie. “I can’t wait to be Bridesmaid of Honor, or whatever the correct title is. Don’t dress me in purple polyester, that’s all I ask. I don’t want static shock. And don’t spend too much money.” *Because this wedding isn’t happening.* She turned as the door opened and Mike walked into the room. “I need to go. I’m at work.”

“I’m proud of you. Katie. I tell everyone my big sister is a doctor.”

*Big sister is falling apart.*

She was a fraud. “Go. Have fun, but not so much fun you forget your inhalers.”

“Katie—”

“I know. I’m the inhaler police. Party. Live life. I’ll call you tomorrow.” She ended the call and slid her feet back into her shoes.

Mike raised an eyebrow. “Nothing like giving out advice you don’t take yourself. When did you last party and live life?”

“I’m partying in my mind. I’m at a virtual party right now.”

“Does that come with a virtual hangover? Who is getting married?”

“My sister. In less than four weeks.”

“This is the sister who is studying fairy tales?”

Katie winced. “I might have overdone that joke. She’s studying Celtic languages, myth and folklore at a certain Ivy League college. She would claim it contributes to the understanding of the culture and beliefs of society. It has been the subject of

many lively arguments round the dinner table. She really is super smart, but I still think of her as my little sister and I overdo the teasing.” She rubbed her forehead with her fingers. “It feels like yesterday I was reading her board books.”

“Big age difference?”

“Ten years. I think my parents had given up on having another child, and then Rosie arrived.”

“And you were hit by a massive dose of sibling jealousy?”

“What?” Katie stared at him. “No. I adored her. Right from the first moment I saw her funny little hairless head.” She thought about Rosie, an adorable toddler, following her everywhere. Rosie in her favorite dinosaur pajamas. *Rosie turning blue with an asthma attack*. “I confess I might be a tad overprotective, which is why I’m flying to Colorado to meet this guy.”

“You haven’t met him?”

“No. And don’t look at me that way. I’m already freaked out. They’ve known each other a couple of months. What can you know about someone in a few months? What if he’s a gambler, or a narcissist? He could be a psychopath. Maybe a serial killer.”

He leaned against the door and folded his arms. “Dr. Doom. Always the optimist.”

“I am not Dr. Doom. I am Dr. Reality, thanks to the years I’ve spent working here. Having the realities of life under your nose tends to cure optimism. There are no certainties in this life, we both know that.”

“All the more reason to grab the happy moments that come your way.”

“Did you honestly say that? If you get thrown out of medicine, you could write greeting cards.” She finished her coffee and walked to the door.

“Katie—”

“What?” She turned and saw the concerned look on his face.

“Does your family know what happened to you?”

“No, and there’s no reason to tell them.”

“They could give you support.”

“I don’t need support. I’m my own support.” Her parents had done enough supporting in their lives. It was time for them to enjoy their time together.

“Maybe a couple of weeks enjoying outdoor living and breathing in mountain air will be good for you.”

“Maybe.” Blocking out his concerned look, she let the door swing closed behind her.

She didn’t care about outdoor living. She didn’t care about mountain air. She didn’t even care about a white Christmas.

She was flying to Colorado for one reason, and one reason only.

She was going to stop her sister’s wedding.

# Maggie

Armed with a strong cup of coffee, Maggie typed Catherine's name into a search engine.

There were pictures of Dan's mother at a benefit in Manhattan, slender as a reed, blond hair swept up in a style befitting a red-carpet appearance.

Feeling gloomy, Maggie scrolled through a dozen more images.

Catherine, skiing a near-vertical slope in Aspen.

Catherine, fist in the air in a gesture of triumph as she stood on top of Mount Kilimanjaro, raising money for a charity researching heart disease.

Catherine, rushing to a meeting in a form-fitting black dress with a planner tucked under one arm.

Rosie had told her in an earlier conversation that Catherine's husband had died suddenly of a heart attack when Dan was in college. The family had been devastated by the loss, but Catherine had forced herself forward.

Maggie enlarged the photo. This woman didn't look broken. There were no signs of grief or anxiety. Not a frown line. Not a silver hair. How could someone survive such a life blow and

look so together? A leading American magazine had run an article on her, entitled “From Tragedy to Triumph.” Maggie read it from beginning to end, learning that Catherine Reynolds had set up the wedding business after she was widowed, turning her skills as a hostess into a commercial venture.

Dan was twenty-eight, which meant that unless she was a medical freak, Catherine had to be at least late forties.

The woman smiling back at her from the screen didn’t look forty.

Maggie fiddled with the ends of her hair. She’d had it cut at the same place for the past thirty years and had kept the style the same. In fact there was very little of her life that she’d changed.

While Catherine had been reinventing herself and starting over, filling her life with new challenges, Maggie’s life had slowly emptied. First Katie had left home, and then Rosie. Her daily calendar, once filled with a whirl of school and sporting commitments, had big gaps. She’d carried on doing what she’d always done, working at her job and tending her garden. She’d been used to cooking for four, but that had turned to three, then two and then, after the life had drained from her marriage, one. Instead of building a new life as Catherine had obviously done, Maggie had carried on living a diluted version of the life she’d always had.

She pushed her laptop to one side and looked at the file that lay open on the table next to her. It was almost full. Soon she wouldn’t be able to close it.

Reading about Catherine’s determined fight to reinvent herself made her feel pathetic and useless. Catherine had lost her husband in a tragic way. Maggie had lost hers through carelessness. Or was it apathy? She didn’t even know.

Maggie couldn’t shake off the feeling that she’d somehow wasted her marriage.

Part of the reason she hadn’t yet shared the news with the girls was that she hadn’t managed to absorb it herself.

Should she and Nick have tried harder?

Conscious that she'd wasted an hour depressing herself, Maggie closed the file and tucked it into a drawer out of sight. She didn't want Nick to see it, or it would trigger a conversation she didn't want to have.

Next she closed her favorite Christmas recipe book that had been open on the table for the past week and slid it back into its slot on the shelf. She wasn't going to be needing it after all.

It was embarrassing to admit it, but she'd been planning Christmas in her mind since September and making lists since October. The first hint of winter in the air had her thinking of slow-cooked casseroles, hearty soups and roasted root vegetables. She'd been looking forward to the festive season for the comfort of its culinary rituals; stirring, simmering, baking in a warm cinnamon-scented fog. Most of all she'd been looking forward to the time she'd get to spend with her family.

She curled her hands around her mug and stared through the window into the garden while she sipped her coffee. Frost sparkled and shimmered on the lawn and a layer of mist added an ethereal touch. At this time of year the only splash of color in her garden came from the holly bush, its berries bloodred and plump. Maggie had been hoping the birds would leave enough for her to use as decoration around the house, but it no longer mattered.

She wasn't going to need berries. Nor was she going to need the mistletoe that grew in clusters on the ancient apple tree. She wasn't going to be here for Christmas.

She'd already had her last Christmas in Honeysuckle Cottage and hadn't even known.

She'd never been away for the holidays before. Never had a Christmas that she hadn't owned. She had friends who delighted in "escaping" at Christmas so that they could avoid the craziness, but Maggie loved the craziness. What would Christmas look like without that?

And why was she worrying about Christmas, when the real issue here was Rosie's wedding? What was *wrong* with her?

She checked the time.

Nick had said he'd be with her at eleven and it was now half past. Since he was invariably late for things, including their wedding, that wasn't a surprise. In the past it had infuriated her that he was fluent in Classical Greek but couldn't seem to communicate what time he would arrive home. He could read hieroglyphic but not, apparently, a watch or a simple text message.

To begin with it hadn't mattered. She'd loved his passion, and the fact that he was so focused on the things he loved. What he lacked in reliability, he made up for in spontaneity. One day he'd be brandishing two tickets to a concert at the Sheldonian Theatre, the next a picnic which they'd devoured by the river watching sunlight dance over the surface of the water. Nick had uncovered the fun side of Maggie. For her that was as much of a discovery as Tutankhamen's tomb. She was the child of older parents who took their responsibilities seriously and invested everything in her development and education. Earning their love had been exhausting, and it was an uncomfortable, stressful relationship. Having fun hadn't been part of her life until she'd met Nick in her first few weeks at Oxford.

He'd been studying Egyptology, and she English. His reputation and academic career had bloomed. They'd stayed in Oxford, and she'd taken a job with an academic publisher and spent her days editing textbooks. If it had ever crossed her mind that she didn't love her job the way Nick loved his, she ignored the thought.

And then Katie was born and the strength of her emotion and the power of the bond she'd felt had shocked her. Maggie had loved fiercely, and discovered that her passion was for her children, her husband, her family. For creating a home like the one she'd dreamed of living in herself.

Katie's arrival gave her the perfect excuse to reduce her work-

ing hours. She'd ended up taking responsibility for the childcare simply because she enjoyed it more than she enjoyed working.

When Katie had started school, Maggie returned to work for the same publisher but once Rosie arrived she'd taken a second career break. Her youngest daughter had been born premature, a tiny fragile being weighing less than a bag of sugar. As a baby Rosie had suffered endless coughs and colds, and then came her first asthma attack.

Maggie had never forgotten it. After that, they'd happened regularly, and life became a series of sleepless nights and panicked journeys to the hospital.

For the first decade of Rosie's life, Maggie had walked around in a fog of exhaustion.

They'd moved out of the center of Oxford and into Honey-suckle Cottage, hoping that the air pollution would be less than it was in the middle of the city. Tests showed dog hair to be a trigger which meant that they'd been unable to have the family dog that Nick had badly wanted.

Rosie's childhood had been a roundabout of canceled plans and terrifying sprints to the hospital. Then she hit the teenage years and it became harder to control. It wasn't "cool" to carry an inhaler, and denying her condition landed her in the hospital on far too many occasions. The tension of it affected all of them, as did the general ignorance from their friends and acquaintances who had always thought of asthma as being something mild and benign.

Maggie remembered the day Katie had stomped into the kitchen and slammed her books down on the table.

*I'm going to be a doctor, because then I can cure Rosie.*

Maggie had often felt guilty that most of her time and attention was focused on her youngest daughter, but Katie hadn't seemed to be affected. She was a bright, fiercely determined child who had grown into a bright, fiercely determined adult. She'd set herself goals, and lists of things to do to achieve those

goals. Unlike Nick and Rosie who made decisions based on impulse and emotion, Katie never did anything she hadn't thought through.

She'd gone from being a hardworking child to a hardworking adult. Now she was a dedicated and talented doctor and Maggie was proud of her.

Unlike Rosie, who veered from one thing to the next, Katie always knew exactly what she wanted and never wavered.

The sound of the doorbell cut through her thoughts and she walked to the door and opened it.

Nick stood there. His long wool coat was one he'd had for years. He wore it with the collar turned up and his favorite scarf wrapped round his neck. He gave her that same crooked smile that had snagged her attention all those years before and she felt a rush of sadness. Where had their love gone? There had been no great falling-out. No clandestine affairs or flirtations. She'd tried repeatedly to identify when her marriage had malfunctioned, but had been unable to pinpoint a specific event. She and Nick had lived parallel lives and then drifted apart so gradually neither of them had noticed, until one day they'd simply been unable to connect the way they once had.

Even their decision to part had been mutual and amicable.

Sometimes she wondered if they'd simply lost each other under the pressure of being a family.

Despite everything, she felt relief that he was here. She needed to talk to someone. Anyone. She opened the door wider. "You've lost your key again?"

"For once, no, but I didn't feel comfortable using it. This isn't my house anymore." He hesitated and then stepped over the threshold.

"It's still your house, Nick. We bought it together and when we sell it we'll share the proceeds. You have a right to walk in whenever you like." No part of her was screeching *change the locks*. Why would she?

“I don’t want to intrude.” He glanced at the stairs and she gave a half laugh as she realized he was respecting her privacy.

“You think there’s a Christmas elf hiding under my bed? Santa? Some muscular young guy?”

Another serious relationship wasn’t on her wish list. As for anything more superficial, well, the thought of an affair was ludicrous.

“It’s cold in here.” Nick touched the radiator closest to him. “Broken again?”

“It waits for the first hint of frost to malfunction.” As usual she was wearing two sweaters, which made her look heavier than she was.

“Do you want me to call someone?” He didn’t offer to look at it himself. Nick could hold a lecture hall spellbound, but he couldn’t fix a dripping tap and was bemused by flat pack furniture.

“I’ve already done it. They’re coming next Monday.”

“You look tired.”

“That generally happens when someone calls you at three in the morning.” She knew Nick probably would have gone straight back to sleep. His ability to sleep, no matter what the crisis, had been a source of envy and frustration over the years. She would have given anything to be able to switch off and let someone else take responsibility for five minutes. Maybe it was because he knew she couldn’t that he’d been able to switch off himself, soothed by the knowledge that she was in charge.

“Rosie shouldn’t have called you in the middle of the night.”

“She was excited. She wanted to share her news. And I’m pleased. She might be living miles away, but I still want to be part of her life.”

“But middle of the night calls always scare you. I’m sure you answered in a panic, assuming she was having an attack. Not easy to go back to sleep after that.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Sit down. I’ll make coffee and then we’ll book flights.”

“Oh.” Her stomach gave a lurch. “What’s the rush?”

“The wedding is happening in a little over three weeks. We’ll be lucky to get seats as it is.” Nick ground beans and made two cups. The machine had been their indulgence, a mutual gift that kept delivering when stress piled upon stress. Coffee had become a shared habit during those early, sleep-deprived years and it had stuck. They both drank it black, mostly because they’d been too tired to reach for the milk. “Then there’s the fact that if I give you time to think about it, you’ll find a reason not to do it.”

She took the coffee gratefully, knowing he was right.

“I have to do it. I’m not going to miss Rosie’s wedding.”

“In that case, we need to book.” He put the cup on the table and unwound his scarf.

The scarf had traveled the world with him. It had protected him from sandstorms and dust storms and he refused to be parted from it or have it replaced. It fascinated her that someone so clever could think a scarf could bring luck. She couldn’t understand how someone with his brain could think there was something magical about a wool/cotton mix.

“I can’t believe Rosie is getting married. She’s so young.” She was desperate to talk to someone about it. Nick might not have been her first choice, but as he was the only candidate for her confidences, he won.

“Twenty-two.” He spooned sugar into his coffee. “If this were ancient Egypt, she would have been married a decade ago.”

*Comments like that, Maggie thought, were why a woman needed girlfriends.*

Sometimes she wanted to lift up the nearest frying pan and clock his clever, but somehow still clueless, brain.

“This isn’t ancient Egypt.” Sometimes his head was so deep in his studies, she was convinced he’d forgotten that. “And we haven’t even met him.”

“Well, we’re not the ones marrying him. As long as she likes him, that’s all that matters.”

“*Likes him?*” Sometimes she despaired. “They’ve barely spent any time together. And it’s all been heady, romantic good times. That’s not real. That’s not what marriage is.” Marriage was holding tightly to each other as you stumbled over rough ground. Marriage was never letting go.

She and Nick had let go.

He stirred his coffee slowly. “Maybe it should be. Maybe there should be more of those romantic good times.”

What was that supposed to mean? Was it a dig at her? “Life happens, Nick. Someone has to handle it.”

“Woah—” He sent her a startled look. “What did I say?”

“You were implying that I was so busy looking after the practical side, I forgot to be romantic.”

“I wasn’t implying anything.” He put the spoon down. “You know I don’t think that way. I don’t go for hidden messages, or subtext or any of those other complex ways of communicating. I was simply saying that romantic, heady times can be real, too.”

Was she overreacting? “All I’m saying is that they’re still in the dizzy whirlwind stage. They’re not arguing about who is going to change a lightbulb or cook dinner. They haven’t had to cope with things going wrong. We both know there will be challenges. That’s life. They barely know each other. I’m worried this is the wrong decision.”

“If it’s the wrong decision, then it’s their wrong decision.” He took a sip of coffee. “And people who know everything there is to know about each other can get divorced, too.”

She felt herself flush. “I know that, obviously, but—oh, never mind.”

This was often how a discussion between them ended, with her giving up. It hadn’t always been that way. At the beginning, they’d talked about everything but somewhere along the way that had stopped. Conversations had gone from deep to shallow and practical.

*Can you pick up Rosie’s prescription on the way home?*

At some point she'd stopped sharing with him and it occurred to her now that she had so many thoughts and emotions that he knew nothing about. She'd never told him she sometimes felt inferior next to him, even though she knew deep down that she wasn't. She felt, somehow, that she'd forgotten how to be her.

She remembered attending a parents' evening where the teacher had said *oh you're Katie and Rosie's mother* as if that somehow became an identity. At the time it hadn't bothered her because she *was* their mother. And she was Nick's wife.

Who else was she? Lately that question had started to trouble her.

Nick put his mug down on the table. "You're upset."

"A little, yes. I've been looking forward to Christmas for so long. I brought the decorations down from the attic last week, and the cake is made—" She finished her coffee. "Ignore me. Christmas is just a day. We can all get together some other time."

Nick frowned. "We'll all be together in Aspen, but we both know that's not why you're upset."

She put her cup on the counter. "What do you mean?"

"You're not upset because of Christmas. You're upset because our Rosie is marrying an American. You're thinking that she might choose to live there permanently. Have kids there. Grow old there."

Maggie felt as if someone had punched the air from her lungs.

She'd been trying *not* to think about that. She hadn't allowed herself to think about that part of the equation.

She'd kept her thinking short term. Christmas. That was about all she could handle. But Nick was right. Deep down that had been her fear from the moment Rosie had made her announcement.

Maybe he knew her better than she thought he did.

She felt a surge of emotion that felt almost like grief. When Rosie had moved to the US to study it had shaken her, but she'd

told herself that it was only a short-term thing. Not for a moment had she considered the move might be permanent.

“I feel as if I’ve lost her.” She wasn’t going to cry. That would be ridiculous. All that mattered was Rosie’s health and happiness. “You probably think I’m the most selfish mother on the planet, wishing she’d come home.”

“I don’t think you’re selfish. I think you’re a great mother, you always have been. Perhaps a little too good.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You put those girls ahead of everything else.”

“You make it sound like a sacrifice, but it wasn’t. I loved being there for our girls. If I had my time again I wouldn’t change a thing.” Some people had big dreams and big goals, but Maggie enjoyed the smaller things. The first buds appearing on the apple tree, the soft scratch of pen on paper as Katie had done her homework at the kitchen table, the scent of fresh laundry, the joy of the first cup of coffee of the day, and the sheer pleasure of a book that transported her to another life and another place.

But it was true that taking two career breaks had narrowed her choices. And then there was the fact that she’d built up goodwill with the publishing house where she worked. Because they trusted her to get her work done, they were flexible when she needed time off to care for Rosie. Worried that a new employer might not offer the same latitude, she’d felt it safer to stay where she was.

She looked closely at Nick and noticed the fine lines around his eyes. He looked tired.

“Have you eaten?”

She knew he sometimes forgot, and judging from the sheepish expression on his face this was one of those occasions.

“No. I forgot to shop, so I thought I’d grab something in college.”

“I’ll make you something if you have time to eat it.”

“I always have time for anything you cook.” He stood up. “What can I do to help?”

She gaped at him. “That’s the first time you’ve ever said that.”

“That’s not true. I clean up after you. I am a champion cleaner-upper.”

“But you don’t usually help with the cooking part.”

“Because you’re so good at it. Also, you never let me near the kitchen.”

Was that true? Probably. She’d wanted and needed something that was all hers. Something she could excel at and own.

Plenty of people would have rolled their eyes at her apparent lack of work ambition, but Maggie didn’t care. She’d been there when the girls had taken their first steps. She’d taught them both to read. Never once had she felt that what she was doing was anything less than valuable.

It was only in the past couple of years that she’d started to feel dissatisfied.

She envied people whose life looked exactly the way they wanted it to look. People like Nick and Katie, who had a passion and followed it. Even Rosie seemed to know the path she wanted to take.

Maggie felt as if she’d strolled randomly through life with no map.

“If you want to help, you could fetch eggs from the fridge.” She pulled a large bowl out of the cupboard and a whisk from the drawer.

When he put the eggs next to her she selected six and broke them into the bowl while he watched.

“The last omelet I made was crunchy.”

She tried not to smile. “Generally, it’s best not to include the shell.”

“Ah, so that’s the secret. I knew there had to be one.”

She snipped fresh herbs from the pots she nurtured on her

windowsill and added them to the mixture, then she poured half into the hot pan, waiting as it sizzled.

“It isn’t only about me. I worry about her.”

“You have to stop protecting her, Mags.”

“The day I stop protecting my child is never going to come.”

“You know what I mean. She knows she will always have our love and support, but we have to let her live her life the way she chooses to live it.”

“Even if that life is a million miles away?”

“That’s an exaggeration.”

“It might as well be that far.” She lifted the edges of the omelet and when she was satisfied she folded it perfectly. “Life can be tough, we both know that. You need family around you. What if she does settle there? What if they break up? What happens if they don’t break up, and have babies? I’d want to be able to help, but I won’t be close enough.”

“Wait—you’re worrying you might not be able to help with the baby they don’t have yet? You expend a huge amount of energy worrying about things that haven’t happened.”

“I don’t expect you to understand.” She slid the omelet onto a plate, sprinkled it with a few chopped chives and handed it to him. “All I’m saying is that it will be tough to support them from here.”

He put the plate on the table and sat down. “This looks delicious, thanks.” He picked up a fork. “And as for support, maybe they’ll live close to Dan’s mother.”

Why didn’t that make her feel better? Her mind raced ahead. Catherine was already arranging her daughter’s wedding, and there was every chance she’d be the favored grandmother. Maggie would be the stranger they saw a few times a year.

*Who’s that, kids? No, it’s not a stranger, it’s your granny. Give her a hug and a kiss.*

She imagined them recoiling, screwing up their faces as they tolerated a kiss from this semistranger.

A lump formed in her throat.

She wanted to tell Nick how it had made her feel, but she couldn't find a way to say it that didn't make her seem horribly small-minded. And maybe she was being ridiculous. Worrying about things that hadn't happened. She did that a lot.

She poured the rest of the egg mixture into the pan, even though she didn't have much of an appetite.

"Talking of tough stuff," Nick said, "we need to fix a time to tell the girls the truth about us."

"We can't tell them yet, Nick."

"Why not?" He took a forkful of fluffy omelet. "Neither of us has had an affair, we don't hate each other, we don't have any issues being in the same room. We'll still be able to meet up at family gatherings and it won't be awkward. Not much will change."

Was he serious?

"Everything will change. We're their parents, Nick! They see us as a unit. And maybe family gatherings will be amicable for a while, but in time you'll meet someone. Then you'll be bringing someone else and we'll have to take turns and—"

He put his fork down. "Maybe you'll be the one who meets someone."

Where? How? She almost asked the questions aloud and then realized how sad they made her sound. She needed to build a new life. One that didn't have Nick in it. She needed to join a choir, or learn Italian, or *something*. Anything.

After the wedding, she promised herself. After the wedding, she'd pull herself together. First she'd spruce up the house, then put it on the market and find somewhere smaller.

The idea of selling Honeysuckle Cottage made her feel physically ill. All the best parts of her life had happened here. Nick. Katie. Rosie. She still remembered the day they'd moved in. Nick, ducking his head to avoid the low beams. Fixing a gate across the stairs so that Rosie didn't tumble down them. And

hours spent in the garden, shaping it into the tranquil haven it was now.

There had been tough times, but the place was full of laughter and memories. All those things would be erased when someone else moved in. They'd see a dent in the wall and think it needed fixing. They wouldn't smile, remembering that was where Rosie had ridden her bike into the wall on that Christmas morning when it had been raining too hard to go outdoors.

A new story would be written into these walls.

But that wasn't her immediate concern.

"Hear me out." She tipped her omelet onto a plate and grabbed a fork. "Whether it turns out to be a mistake or not, this is Rosie's big day. This is all about her and Dan. A celebration. What do you think it will do to the mood if we announce our divorce at the same time?"

"If we do it today, then it won't be at the same time. She'll have had time to get over it."

"This isn't flu, Nick. You don't 'get over it.' A divorce changes the landscape of our family. We all have to find a new way to be together. To fit. It's going to be a massive adjustment." Saying it aloud somehow made it all the more depressing. "And today she is going to choose her wedding dress. It wouldn't be appropriate to spoil her day."

"Divorce is part of life. Life happens. Wasn't that the point you were making earlier?"

"It doesn't have to happen before what is supposed to be one of the happiest days of our daughter's life." She forced down a mouthful of her breakfast and then put her plate down.

"So what are you suggesting?"

"That we act as if nothing has changed."

"You—" He broke off, bemused. "You want us to attend this wedding together as a couple? Pretending everything is fine?"

"Yes. We present a united front. There will be plenty of time

to share our less-than-happy news once the wedding bells have stopped ringing and the snow has melted.”

“To be clear about this, you’re suggesting we ‘act’ married?”

“Well, technically we are married, Nick, so it shouldn’t be much of a challenge to pretend for one week.”

His gaze was steady. “You want us to travel together, share a hotel room—”

“Whatever it takes.” She wasn’t going to offer to relinquish the bed. Nick could sleep anywhere, whether it was a tent in a desert or the hard floor of a hotel room. Maggie could barely doze off if she was lying on a feather-filled mattress, so she didn’t need to make things harder for herself. “It will be easy enough to keep up the pretense. It’s not as if we argue all the time or anything.”

He pushed his plate away. “It doesn’t feel right to lie to them.”

“We’re not lying. We’re withholding our news. We haven’t told them we’ve been living apart for a while. What difference does it make to wait a few more weeks?”

“We haven’t told them because we agreed it was better done face-to-face when we’re all together.”

“You seriously think the right time to announce a divorce is at our daughter’s wedding?”

He sighed. “No, I don’t think that.” There was a long pause. “All right.” The words were dragged from him. “But as soon as they’re back from their honeymoon, we’re telling them.”

“Agreed.” She felt a rush of relief which died as he reached across and dragged her laptop toward him.

“What’s this?”

Why, oh why, hadn’t she closed the browser? “I was finding out a bit about the family.”

He lifted his gaze from the laptop to her face. “You mean you’ve been torturing yourself.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re the same before every college social event. You panic

about what you're going to wear and what people will think of you."

"That's called being human."

"You're lovely, Maggie." His voice was rough. "I wish you had more confidence."

She was a soon-to-be-divorced mother of two grown children who didn't particularly like the way her life was looking. She thought about the file, safely tucked away in the drawer.

What did she have to feel confident about?

And if he thought she was so lovely, why were they getting divorced?

He tapped the keys and brought up airline details.

"How are we going to transport all the Christmas gifts?" She picked up her coffee and sat down next to him. "I won't be able to carry everything."

"Take a few key things, and they can have the rest next time they're here."

"I always make them a stocking. And I can't imagine a tree without all the decorations the girls made over the years. It's tradition."

"So pack them up and bring them." He glanced up from the screen, seemed about to say something and then changed his mind. "We'll pay for excess baggage if necessary."

*Excess baggage.* He could have been describing her.

"I can't pack our decorations. That would be ridiculous." She watched, anxious, as he keyed in dates and checked prices. "Is the flight overbooked?"

"I'm sure you'd like it to be but no, there are two seats left on the early flight. Business class." He dug into his pocket for his wallet.

"Nick, we can't fly business class."

"Why not? We deserve a treat."

Flying? A treat? The reality of strapping herself into a seat on

an airplane and waiting for takeoff loomed in her brain. Her heart started to pound. "It's an extravagance."

"I know you're scared of flying, but if I don't book this now you won't be going to your daughter's wedding."

Maggie moaned and put her head on the table. "How did Christmas turn into this?"

"They give you free champagne in business. I'll pour a bottle of that into you before we take off. You won't feel a thing."

Maggie lifted her head. "What did you say to Rosie?"

"Last night? I can't recall. You know me. I'm not as good at bouncing awake as you are. It takes me a while to surface. I hope I said the right things."

What were the right things? She wasn't sure. Should she have issued a warning or said congratulations? "She's so young."

"We were young."

She was tempted to say *and look at how that turned out*, but she stopped herself.

Even though it had ended, their marriage hadn't been a disaster. Believing that would mean the entire previous thirty-five years had been a mistake, and it hadn't been. They'd had many happy years which was, perhaps, why she felt so sad about everything. It was messy, but life was messy wasn't it? Full of good and bad, ups and downs, triumph and disappointment.

Part of her felt that somehow, they should have been able to make this work.

"Your mother tried to stop us getting married. She was very disapproving. She thought I was too serious."

"She'd never seen you after a bottle of sloe gin, and I've told you before that she never approved of any of the women I dated. She was afraid they'd take her little boy away." He stretched out his legs. "Yours wasn't much better."

"They wanted me to marry someone with a regular job. They were suspicious of your trips to Egypt, and the fact that your

hair fell over your collar. It all seems so long ago, I can barely remember it although it was stressful at the time.”

“We did what felt right for us. We didn’t listen to our parents and Rosie and Dan won’t listen to us either, so there’s no point in wondering whether we should say something. We made our own decision, and now we should leave our daughter to make hers.”

“That’s very mature and rational.” She topped up their mugs and sat down next to him. “Talking of mature and rational, I spoke to someone about selling the cottage last week. I was thinking we should put it on the market after Christmas, but their advice was to wait until spring. That would give us time to do some of the repairs, and make sure it’s looking its best. The garden is always gorgeous in May.” It should be. She’d spent hours on it. It was something that was all hers. Somewhere she felt calm. Whenever she was stressed, she went outdoors and tended the garden. The upside of her anxiety was that her garden looked fantastic.

Nick spooned sugar into his coffee and gave her a long look. “You’re sure you want to sell the place?”

No, she didn’t want to sell it. Selling it would break her heart. “It’s too big for one person. I’m rattling around here. And not only me. The windows rattle. There’s so much maintenance needed in an old place like this.”

“Remember the first time we saw it? You said *this is it. This is the one.* We hadn’t even taken a look inside.”

“I knew. I knew right away.” She glanced around the kitchen that had been the set for so many family dramas. “You thought a new build would be less work.”

“It would have been less work, but also would have lacked character.”

“I’m starting to think ‘character’ is a euphemism for ‘old and in need of repair.’ So you’re happy for me to put it on the market whenever they feel the time is right?”

His gaze was veiled. “Whatever works for you.”

They were so polite. Civilized. There was no awkwardness or animosity. They were simply two friends who had lost the chemistry. She stared hard at his jaw, at the curve between his neck and shoulder where she'd so often rested her head. When he'd come back from a long trip it had been like those early days of their relationship, the passion between them intense and all-consuming.

*Where had those feelings gone?*

She stood up suddenly, her chair scraping on the stone floor. "That's what I'll do, then. It's been a lovely home for us, but it's time to move on." Time for her to move on, too. This place was so full of memories they almost suffocated her.

"On to practical matters—" he finished his coffee "—I'll book a cab to the airport. All you need to do is pack a suitcase. This could be fun, Mags."

"The flight?"

"Christmas in Colorado."

Maybe she wasn't very adventurous, because all she really wanted was Christmas at home. She'd wanted one more year of lighting a fire in the hearth and decorating a large tree.

Next year she'd be living in a small apartment, or maybe a small Victorian terrace. Would Nick even join them, or would he have the girls on a different day? Whichever way it turned out, she knew that no Christmas gathering would ever be the same again.

"You should look at the website. Aspen looks beautiful. It's surrounded by forest and snowy mountains. When did we last have a proper white Christmas?"

Maggie thought about the Christmas cards half-written in her bedroom. "Snow might be nice."

"And for the first time ever you might be able to relax and enjoy yourself. You won't have to do the cooking."

Maggie loved cooking. She loved slicing and dicing, stirring and tasting. She loved the craziness and the chaos of the kitchen

at Christmas. The sound of the fridge door opening and closing. The smell of toast as someone made a late-night snack.

It was the empty silence she hated most.

The knowledge that no one in the world really needed her anymore.

The girls loved her, she knew that, but they didn't need her. They were adults now, with their own lives.

Did she even have a purpose?

She still worked for the same publisher and she knew she was valued, so why didn't she get more satisfaction from her job?

Gloom descended on her and suddenly she wished Nick would leave. His life hadn't changed much. His days were still filled with work, lectures, students, research. The only thing that had altered for him was where he slept at night.

She became brisk and practical, as she always did when she was stressed. "We're agreed we'll delay telling them until after Christmas?"

"Yes, but I'm not much of an actor. What if they guess?"

"Then it's up to us to make sure they don't. We were married for more than three decades. I think we can manage to get through ten days."

She hoped she wasn't wrong about that. They could make it work, surely?

How hard was it to pretend to be in love?

They were both about to find out.

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# brenda novak

## *Christmas in Silver Springs*

"This is truly a holiday story  
you will want to read  
again and again."

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A SILVER SPRINGS NOVEL

# CHAPTER ONE

*Friday, December 6*

Tobias Richardson couldn't help noticing the petite blonde sitting at the old-fashioned counter of the diner—and not just because she was pretty. He was sure he'd never seen her before. With a population of seven thousand, Silver Springs wasn't small enough that he'd recognize *everybody*, especially because he'd only been living here for five months. The town seemed to have gotten a lot smaller since the weather turned, though. It didn't snow in this part of California, but it was the rainy season and the region was experiencing colder than normal temperatures. Tourists weren't interested in visiting when it was chill and damp, and the same went for the many residents of LA, ninety minutes to the southeast, who had vacation homes here. This month, and probably for the next two or three, he guessed Silver Springs would be limited to the locals.

He blew on his hands, trying to warm them while waiting for the coffee he'd ordered when he first sat down. He'd managed to squeeze in a hike after work. He didn't care that it was dark and wet by the time he was on his way back. He had a

headlight to guide him to the trailhead and was willing to put up with the rain. But he was chilled to the bone. After such an arduous hike, he was starving, too, and craving a hot shower.

Again, he glanced toward the counter. He didn't want the woman to catch him staring, but something about her—besides her looks—drew his attention.

She didn't seem happy...

"Here you go." Willow Sanhurst, the barely eighteen-year-old girl who worked evenings at the Eatery, stepped between him and the woman who intrigued him, smiled broadly and put his cup on the table with a flourish. "Warming up yet?"

"Starting to."

"I can't believe you've been out hiking. It's December!"

"Little bit of rain never hurt anybody."

He'd traded out his muddy hiking boots for a pair of clean shoes before coming into the restaurant. Other than that, he was only a little damp, so he wasn't sure why she was making such a big deal of it.

"You must *really* like the outdoors."

"I do," he said.

"So do I."

He got the impression he was supposed to follow that up with an invitation to go hiking with him sometime, but he didn't.

Even though they'd already discussed his hike when he'd sat down and she'd brought him water, and the diner was full of people waiting for a chance to order, she didn't move away as most waitresses would.

Before bringing the coffee to his lips, he looked up to see if there was something she needed.

As soon as their eyes met, she blushed a deep red, wiped her hands on her ruffled white apron and mumbled some remark about being careful not to burn himself—that the coffee was hot—before hurrying away.

Damn it. She had a crush on him. She'd clearly wanted to

say something but hadn't been able to gather the nerve, and that made him distinctly uncomfortable. After being released from prison in July he was committed to making better choices, to building a productive life. He couldn't have some high school girl staring at him with the longing he saw shining in her eyes. If she started seriously pursuing him, he was afraid he'd end up in a bad situation just because he was so damn lonely.

With a sigh, he took a tentative sip of his coffee. This was his favorite place to eat—the comfort food and Norman Rockwell vibe reminded him of the wholesome existence he'd always secretly admired. But he'd have to quit coming here. He wouldn't allow himself to be tempted. His brother, Maddox, said over and over that his first year out of prison would be the hardest, and although Tobias acted as though he was doing fine, that he had his life under control, his journey was not as sure-footed as he let on. Sometimes, especially late at night, he felt as though he'd been cast adrift on a vast ocean and might never find safe harbor. And that sense of being so small and insignificant made him crave the substances that had gotten him into trouble in the first place.

Willow kept looking over at him, obviously hoping to catch his eye. While he poured a dash of cream into his coffee, he considered canceling his meal. He could eat somewhere else—grab something to go and head home to shower. But just as he was about to slide out of the booth, his phone dinged with a text from Maddox, asking if he'd like to come over for dinner.

Already ate. Enjoy your night. See you at work tomorrow, he wrote back.

He knew his brother worried about him, was trying to help him adjust to life outside prison and didn't want him to backslide and become like their mother. But Maddox had recently married the girl he'd loved since high school. He deserved to be alone with Jada, his new wife, who was now pregnant, and Maya, their daughter. The last thing Tobias wanted to do was

get in the way of their relationship—*again*. It was because of him they hadn't gotten together the first time around, and that had cost Maddox the first twelve years of Maya's life.

As he slid his phone in his coat pocket, he saw that it was too late to cancel his food. Willow was once again coming toward him, this time carrying a plate.

"You texting your girlfriend?" she asked, flirting with him as she put down his meat loaf and mashed potatoes.

He allowed himself another glance at the blonde sitting at the counter. Her meal had come, too, and yet she held her fork, turning it over and over in one hand, staring at her food without taking a bite.

"Did you hear me?" Willow asked.

Putting his napkin in his lap, he picked up his fork. "I'm sorry. What'd you say?"

She looked over her shoulder in the direction *he'd* been looking and lowered her voice. "I see you've noticed Harper."

"*Harper?*" he repeated.

"Yeah, Harper Devlin—Axel Devlin's wife. She's been in here before."

"Who's Axel Devlin?"

"Are you kidding me? He's the lead singer of Pulse. They're, like...the biggest band on the planet!"

He'd heard of Pulse, was familiar with their music and liked it. He'd also heard the name of the band's lead singer many times. He'd just never dreamed Willow could be referring to *that* Axel Devlin—although there was no good reason why she couldn't be. A lot of celebrities came to artsy, spiritually focused Silver Springs. Quite a few, especially movie people, retired here. And he often interacted with Hudson King, a professional football player, at New Horizons Boys Ranch, where he worked doing grounds and building maintenance. Hudson did a lot to help the troubled teens who attended the boarding school—both the boys' side and the recently built girls' school on the same prop-

erty. He'd donated the money to buy an ice-skating rink both sides could use. "Do they live in the area?"

"No. She and her two kids are staying with her sister for the holidays. I overheard her talking to the owner."

"She looks a little..." When he let his words trail off, Willow jumped in to finish the sentence.

"Depressed?"

"I was going to say 'lost.'"

"Probably is. I watched an interview with Axel a few months ago. He said they were splitting up. Maybe that's why."

It was none of his business, but Tobias couldn't help asking, "Did he give a reason?"

She seemed to like that they'd found something to talk about that wasn't so strained and awkward for her. "Blamed it on the travel. He has to be gone too much. Yada, yada. What else is he going to say? That he's cheating with a different girl every night?" she added with a laugh.

Tobias felt bad for Harper. It couldn't be easy to be married to a rock star. She wasn't that old, likely hadn't been prepared for that kind of life. If Tobias remembered correctly, Axel was from a small town in Idaho, and he and his band had become famous almost overnight. Now he was sitting on top of the world.

But where did that leave her?

"You said they have kids?" he asked.

"Yeah. Two little girls. I don't remember their ages—maybe eight and six? Something like that."

So Harper had married Axel *before* he'd become a big success, and they'd started a family. That indicated she'd married for love. "Where are the kids?"

"With her sister, I guess." Willow lowered her voice. "It would suck to be her, right? I mean, she has to see his name and his face *everywhere*, can't escape the constant reminder."

Now that he wasn't paying as much attention to Willow's hopeful smiles and nervousness when she was around him, To-

bias could see others in the restaurant nudging their companions and pointing to Harper. Apparently a lot of people knew who she was—or word was spreading fast.

Poor thing. He understood what it was like to be the talk of the town. He'd been only seventeen when he'd been prosecuted as an adult and jailed for thirteen years. Returning to Silver Springs after his release this past summer had been like being put under a microscope. Suffering privately was one thing. Suffering publicly was something else entirely. That took what she was going through to a whole new level.

"Shouldn't be too hard for her to find someone else." He said it as though he wasn't particularly invested, but Harper had caught *his* eye, hadn't she?

"Are you kidding me?" Willow responded again. "How will anyone else ever compare?"

She had a point. It would be tough for a regular guy to match Axel, financially and otherwise. "True."

"*You're* not interested in her, are you?" Willow looked slightly crestfallen.

Apparently he hadn't been as careful to hide his feelings as he'd thought. But he was an ex-con, making a modest wage working for a correctional school. He'd never known his father, and his mother was a meth addict, constantly in and out of rehab. He knew when he was out of his league. "No."

"Good." A relieved smile curved her lips. "Because I've been watching you for a while and...well... I hope there's someone *else* in this restaurant you might be interested in." She finished in a rush, couldn't quite look at him and then hurried away—only to return with a slip of paper that had her number on it when she brought the check.

Harper shoved her garlic mashed potatoes from one side of her plate to the other as she listened to the hum of voices in the diner. Although surrounded by people, she'd never felt so alone.

“I’ve got a number five,” the cook barked out for the waitresses.

Harper checked the menu, which she’d left open at her elbow so she’d have something to look at. It was difficult to go out in public right now. After the documentary she did with Axel last year, trying to remove the stigma of depression and using a therapist when necessary, people often recognized her, so she had little privacy.

A number five was a chicken breast with lemon-dill sauce, steamed vegetables and a gluten-free corn muffin. She’d ordered a number seven—peppercorn steak, garlic mashed potatoes and green beans, which had sounded good at first, but the only thing she’d been able to make herself eat was part of the dinner roll. She doubted it was gluten-free. Axel had made a big deal about staying away from gluten, but *he* was allergic to it, not her. And although she thought it was probably wise to avoid it, she didn’t care about her diet right now. She didn’t care about much of anything since her marriage had unraveled. It’d been all she could do just to hold herself together for the sake of her kids, and now Christmas would be here in only three weeks. It would be her and the girls’ first Christmas without Axel. He was touring Europe and wouldn’t be back until after the first of the year, since his last big concert was scheduled for New Year’s Eve.

Now that everything had changed between them, they wouldn’t have spent the holidays as they had in the past, anyway.

He might’ve asked to take the girls, however.

She could only imagine how lonely she would have felt with them gone, and yet...she sort of wished he had taken them. She didn’t feel capable of holding up her end, of putting on a brave face and telling their children that everything was going to be okay when it felt as though the ground had given way beneath her feet. She had no interest in decorating, putting up a tree or buying presents, which was why her sister had insisted she come

for an extended visit, even if it meant having the girls transfer schools for a couple of months. Piper and Everly were at a church Christmas party tonight with their cousins—twin girls who were older than Everly by four years. But Harper needed to be ready to face them with a smile when they came home.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, but she didn't bother to get it out. No doubt it was her sister. They'd had an argument before Harper stormed out of the house. Karoline had grown angry when Harper told her how little she was getting for child support. According to her sister, she was letting Axel off far too easy.

He *was* making a fortune, but Harper didn't want to fight. She was still in love with him. As soon as he'd made it clear that he didn't want to be married to her anymore, that he was no longer willing to try to work through their differences, she'd settled for the first figure his lawyer had thrown out. Otherwise, she was afraid the media would start to claim they were going through a "bitter" divorce. As she'd told Karoline, she'd make it on her own *somehow*, even though she hadn't worked in an official capacity since the first three years of her marriage, when Axel was trying so hard to get a start in show business and he'd needed her to cover their basic living expenses.

Maybe she *was* a fool to be so accommodating. But she couldn't imagine Axel would consider keeping the family together if she turned into a bitch. Besides, she didn't even know who he was anymore, he'd changed so much. She couldn't decide what she had a right to demand. Had she let Axel down? Or had *he* let her down? He'd always suffered from anxiety and depression. Maybe she hadn't done enough to help him—

"Is everything okay?"

She forced herself to look up. The waitress working the counter had paused in front of her, obviously wondering if there was something wrong with the food.

"Fine," Harper mumbled. She hadn't really come to eat. She just needed some time alone, couldn't face going back to her

sister's quite yet. As nice as it was of Karoline to provide a refuge during this difficult month, being with her only sibling wasn't much easier than being alone, because now she had to constantly explain and justify her actions. And with her emotions zinging all over the place, she wasn't being consistent, *couldn't* be consistent. Most of the time, she wasn't even making a whole lot of sense.

Elvis's "Blue Christmas" came on the sound system as the waitress moved on to her other customers.

Harper took a sip of her coffee and braved a quick glance around. Although she liked this restaurant, she didn't feel she belonged in Silver Springs. Why wasn't she in Denver, where she and Axel had lived after their college days at Boise State?

Because as much as she and Axel had once believed that they'd be the exception to the rule, that nothing could come between them, they'd been wrong. Slowly but surely, Axel had lost all perspective and started caring more about his work than he did his family. Fame had destroyed their relationship like so many celebrities' before them.

With a sigh, she took the bill the waitress had put near her plate and paid at the register. She owed her sister more respect than to make her worry. She had to go back and face Karoline whether she wanted to or not.

Harper hadn't put on makeup for weeks, hadn't done anything with her hair, either, other than to pile it in a messy bun on her head, so it didn't bother her that it was raining. She was cold, though; couldn't seem to get warm. Tightening her over-size coat—a castoff of Axel's from the good old days when they were first married—she pushed out of the warm café into the bad weather.

Putting her head down, she stared at her feet, bracing against the gusts of wind that whipped at her hair and clothes while stepping over two or three puddles to reach the Range Rover

Axel had let her keep when they split. If she got desperate, she supposed she could sell it. It had cost a pretty penny.

She was opening the driver's door when she noticed a tall, lanky man with longish dark hair crossing the lot toward her.

"Don't be frightened," he said, lifting one hand in a gesture intended to show he wasn't being aggressive. "I just... I saw you inside and..."

Prepared to rebuff him, she set her jaw. She was *not* in the mood to be hit on. But when she met his eyes, something about his expression told her that wasn't what this was about. Taking a long-stemmed white rose from inside his coat, he stepped forward to give it to her.

"Hang in there. It'll get easier," he said. Then he walked off before she could even ask for his name.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Thought I heard the garage door,” Karoline said, coming into the kitchen.

Harper glanced over her shoulder at her older sister, who was wearing jeans, sheepskin-lined slippers and a maroon V-neck sweater with pearl earrings. Karoline was always well put together. Her house was immaculate. Her kids were well behaved. And her husband was a podiatrist who was not only intelligent and well-spoken but kind. Karoline managed life better than anyone Harper had ever met, which was intimidating, especially now that *her* life was in shambles. “Sorry about what happened earlier,” she mumbled.

Her sister sat on a bar stool at the island. “It’s okay. I’m sorry, too. After you left, Terrance told me I should’ve let it go.”

“He overheard us?” Harper’s brother-in-law had been watching TV in the other room and hadn’t participated in the argument. He didn’t care for large displays of emotion, so she could see why he’d stay out of it.

“Yeah. He thinks I’m right. I *know* I’m right. But he also thinks you’re not ready to hear it.”

“Then he’s right, too.”

Karoline propped her chin up with one fist. “Look, I understand that you’re going through hell, and I don’t mean to make it worse. I just don’t want to see Axel get the best of you. He has you on the ropes right now and yet you’re still trying to play nice. Since I don’t love him the way you do, I have a different perspective, and I was trying to use that perspective to put you in a better position.”

“I know. You’ve done a lot for me, and I’m grateful.” She reached into the cupboard above her sister’s double ovens, retrieving a small vase.

“Where did you get that?” Karoline asked when Harper filled the vase with water and put the rose she’d been given inside it.

“Some man gave it to me.”

“Some man...”

“Yes.”

“*What* man?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me his name.”

Karoline scowled, obviously suspicious. “Where did you meet him?”

“I didn’t meet him. Not really. He came up to me in the parking lot as I was leaving the Eatery and handed me this.”

“Was he selling them? Or looking for some type of donation?”

Harper balked at telling her sister what the stranger had said. She was embarrassed to admit she’d been so transparent, and she didn’t want to cheapen the gesture by having Karoline claim he must’ve had some ulterior motive, as she’d first assumed. “No.”

“Roses aren’t exactly in bloom this time of year. Where’d he get it?”

“You can buy a rose anytime.”

“So he bought it.”

“Yes. From the grocery store across the street.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw the price tag, okay? It was still wrapped around the stem.”

“He spent money to buy you a rose and he doesn’t even know you?”

“It was only seven dollars, Karol. Relax. He was just being nice.”

When her sister didn’t respond right away, Harper used the opportunity to change the subject. “What time will the girls be ready to come home?”

“Terrance left to pick them up right before you arrived.”

“Oh. I could’ve done it. You should’ve called me.”

“I tried.”

Harper winced at her tone. “I couldn’t really talk in the restaurant,” she said. She could’ve texted Karoline but, fortunately, her sister didn’t point that out.

“No worries.”

Harper set the rose in the middle of the granite-topped island. Her sister had done a lot of decorating, but none of it could top the natural beauty of that one perfect flower. It reminded her that she needed to return to the basics and keep life simple, which, for her, meant continuing to put one foot in front of the other no matter how painful the situation.

*It’ll get easier...*

“Why would you ever wear *that*?” Karoline asked, grimacing at Harper’s coat as Harper took it off.

“It’s warm.”

Her sister rolled her eyes. “I don’t care how warm it is. Get rid of it. Get rid of everything of his.”

“Don’t say that.”

“He’s not coming back, Harper. The divorce will be final this week. If he regrets what he did, he would’ve said so by now, would’ve tried to save his family.”

“He’s been pretty distracted.”

“Yeah—by sleeping with other women.”

Harper bristled. “We don’t *know* he’s been sleeping with other women.”

“He’s a thirty-two-year-old rock star who hasn’t had time for his wife in ages. I think it’s safe to assume.”

“If he has, it’s because so many women, *beautiful* women, throw themselves at him. How would you or I deal with the same kind of attention? The same kind of worship? It’s possible we wouldn’t do any better.”

Her sister shook her head. “You’re too understanding, Harper. One of a kind.”

“If that’s true, what happened to my marriage?”

“Axel happened. But he’s stupid to throw you away. He’s going to wind up with nothing in the end.”

“He won’t wind up with *nothing*. Even if his career suddenly tanks, he’ll have what he’s already achieved. Besides, he’s always been charismatic. He could easily find someone else even if he wasn’t famous.” That was one of her biggest issues with the divorce. These days, she felt so inherently replaceable, as if there was nothing special about her, nothing worth hanging on to—ironic, given that in the beginning he’d made her feel as though she was the only person who could ever fulfill him.

*Be careful what you wish for.* She remembered her mother telling her that while Harper was working so hard to help Axel make it in the music biz.

She should’ve listened. Her mother, a superior court judge in Idaho, where the family had been raised, was always right. Her father, who was in commercial real estate, agreed that it was never wise to disregard her advice.

“You mean we won’t have the pleasure of even that much revenge?” Karoline asked.

“Probably not,” Harper admitted.

“That sucks.”

The door opened and the girls spilled into the house, laughing and talking about the party and how the Santa who’d shown up was someone they’d recognized, under that red suit, as one of their teachers from school. As she’d been doing for almost eight

months, Harper pretended to be interested in regular life and tried to contribute to the conversation, but she was infinitely relieved when the kids were in bed and she could once again lay down the burden of putting on a good show.

The night wasn't over, though. Once Harper was finally alone, Karoline knocked and poked her head into the room. "You okay?"

Harper forced one more smile. "Yeah, of course."

"About that man who gave you the rose..."

Piper and Everly hadn't noticed the flower on the island. At least, they hadn't mentioned it. Maybe they assumed Terrance had given it to Karoline. It wasn't elaborate enough to have come from their father, who used to send her vast arrays of flowers to try to placate her whenever he broke another promise. "What about him?"

"How old was he?"

"Around my age."

"What'd he look like?"

She rolled her eyes. "He was just some guy, Karoline."

"You don't know what he looked like?"

"Of course I do, but..." Reining in her irritation, she let her breath go. "Okay, he was maybe six foot three with dark hair and really unusual, light-colored eyes."

"How light?"

"I don't know!" She'd been pretty defensive at the time, hadn't been evaluating his looks.

"Seriously?"

"It was tough to see in the parking lot! The lights there aren't very bright, but his eyes seemed to be a...a pale green, I guess. With thick eyelashes," she added.

"So he was handsome."

She remembered his bold jaw and the dark stubble covering it, the high cheekbones, the shape of his mouth, which

was quite sensual even from a strictly objective point of view. “Yeah. Why?”

“I’m wondering if I know him...”

“You’re making a big deal out of nothing. It was just a sweet gesture, one that cheered me up when I needed it. It’s not as though anything will ever come of it.”

“I wish something *would* come of it,” Karoline grumbled. “That’s exactly what you need—and what Axel deserves.”

“Being angry with Axel isn’t going to change anything.”

“It helps. Trust me. You should try it.”

The door closed and Harper slumped back on the bed. But after the house had gone quiet and she knew everyone was asleep, she couldn’t resist pulling out her laptop to watch the YouTube video of her soon-to-be *ex*-husband’s latest concert.

He looked amazing.

His performance *was* amazing.

He didn’t seem to be hurting at all.

When Tobias arrived at the sixteen-acre tangerine orchard where he lived, there was a strange car in the driveway. He tried to pull around it to his usual spot near the small house he was renting behind the 1920s farmhouse closer to the road. But the old beat-up Chevy Impala was parked such that there wasn’t enough room on either side.

With a sigh, he shoved his gearshift into Park. He’d have to go to the door and ask the driver to move it. He couldn’t leave his truck out on the road. Someone coming around the bend might not see it, especially in the rain. And it wouldn’t do any good to leave it where it was, tucked behind the Impala. The driver would just have to knock on *his* door and ask him to move it later.

On the other hand, it had been a big step for his landlord to start dating again. Uriah had been married for fifty years before he lost his wife, and the old guy still wasn’t comfortable

with moving on. So Tobias didn't want to interrupt if he could avoid it...

He checked his watch. Uriah's lady friends typically didn't come over, except to bring him a meal or a piece of pie or something. If one ever did, she didn't stay long. Uriah was nothing if not old-fashioned. He picked up whomever he asked out, took her on an official date and then drove her home.

Besides, he'd been a farmer all his life. He was in bed by ten and up at the crack of dawn, and it was almost ten now.

If Tobias just waited for a few minutes, whoever it was would probably leave.

But then, she might not. And he was dying to get in the shower.

"Better get it over with," he muttered and climbed out, ducking his head against the wind and the rain.

Before he even reached the stoop, he could hear voices coming from inside the house. Uriah was getting on in years and losing his hearing, so he spoke loudly. Tobias spent a lot of time with him eating dinner, playing chess, restoring an old Buick in the detached garage or helping out with chores around the property, so he was used to the volume of his voice. But it was surprising to him that both voices were male.

Apparently, whoever was driving the Impala *wasn't* one of the women Uriah was dating.

Tobias turned to take a closer look at the car blocking his way. The license plate was so dirty and the weather so bad that he hadn't noticed when he first drove up, but it had Maryland plates.

Who did Uriah know from Maryland?

And then it hit him. This wasn't Carl, was it?

Tobias had never met Uriah's only child, but he'd heard enough about him to be leery. The two had been estranged for years. Uriah rarely mentioned him, but from what Tobias had heard from Aiyana Turner, who owned the school where Tobias

worked and knew just about everyone in Silver Springs, Carl hadn't even come to his mother's funeral fifteen months ago.

What was he doing here now?

Tobias took the porch steps in one leap and banged on the door. He expected Uriah to answer. But the door opened almost immediately and the face looking out at him was much younger—around forty.

The resemblance between father and son was striking, eradicating any doubt Tobias had left as to the identity of Uriah's guest. While Uriah was tall and thin and wore his salt-and-pepper hair in a military-style flattop, Carl wore his long, and it didn't look as though he'd washed it recently. He didn't resemble his father in stature or bearing, but the narrow bridge of his nose, the long shape of his face and the flat slash of a mouth were very similar to Uriah's, although those features were somehow more attractive in the older man.

"Who are *you*?" Carl asked.

Before Tobias could answer, Uriah managed to get out of the recliner, which gave him a bit more trouble than usual since he was trying to do it in a hurry, and came to the door himself. "Carl! Is that any way to greet a person?"

"*What?*" Carl said, instantly defensive. "Did I say something wrong? Do I owe this guy something?"

Uriah scowled. "That's enough."

Tobias had met a lot of men in prison. Those who acted like Carl were seldom *good* news. They often tried to pick on everyone else, but Tobias wasn't the type of person to let them get away with it. Carl was Uriah's son, however, and Tobias respected his landlord—who had become his friend—so he maintained a pleasant expression. "Sorry to bother you," he said. "I was just hoping you could move your car."

Carl's eyebrows jerked together. "What for?"

"So he can get through," Uriah explained. "He lives in the back house. I was about to tell you I rented it out."

“This guy lives on the property? In *my* house?”

Tobias felt his back and shoulder muscles tense. It'd been a long time since he'd taken such an instant dislike to someone. But Uriah seemed determined to defuse the situation, although Tobias could tell he was embarrassed by his son's behavior.

“Carl, this is Tobias Richardson,” he said, speaking with almost exaggerated calm. “He's lived here for four or five months. Helps out around the place, in addition to working at New Horizons. I've come to rely on him a great deal.”

Even Tobias could feel Uriah's desire for Carl to behave, but he was willing to bet that if Carl *did* behave, it wouldn't be for long.

“Why's he wearing tights?” Carl asked, looking him up and down.

Tobias gritted his teeth. “They're not *tights*. They're for hiking or jogging.”

Carl ignored him. “So *this* is the son you never had?” he said to his father.

“I didn't say that,” Uriah protested.

*From what I've heard, it wouldn't take much to be a better son than you.* Those words rose to the tip of Tobias's tongue. But he held back. “I'm just the renter,” he said as though he and Uriah weren't as close as they'd become. “And if you're not going anywhere, I'll leave my truck where it is.” He started to walk away. He didn't want any part of Carl. If Uriah was excited to have his son home, if he thought they might be able to patch things up, Tobias wasn't going to get in the way. He understood how much that relationship had to mean to the old guy. The fact that Uriah never talked about Carl served as the biggest indicator. His inability to get along with his own son had created a deep wound, one he tried to keep hidden. But, other than Maddox, Uriah was the best man Tobias had ever known. As far as Tobias was concerned, Carl didn't deserve a father like him.

“Wait,” Carl said. “I don't want to be blocked in.”

Keeping his fingers outstretched so they didn't automatically curl into fists, Tobias waited while Carl went in search of his keys.

Uriah stood at the door with him, but he didn't say anything. Tobias could only imagine what he had to be feeling. Hope? The desire to make everything all right, at last, mixed with the knowledge that, even now, he probably couldn't? Aiyana had told Tobias that Carl was moody at best. Through the years, he'd often lost his temper and started kicking the furniture or throwing things. Uriah had tried to help him a number of times. It wasn't until Uriah came home one day to find Carl so enraged he was choking his mother that he made his son leave and told him never to come back.

Now that Shirley was gone and her safety wasn't a concern, Tobias couldn't see Uriah turning Carl away even if he crossed the line, and that worried Tobias.

But maybe he was jumping to conclusions. Maybe Carl was only home for the holidays.

He pulled up the collar of his coat to cut the wind as Carl strode past him and, after exchanging a look with Uriah, followed a complaining Carl down the steps. "It's cold out here!" he muttered as though Tobias was purposely putting him out.

Once Carl moved his Impala to the side, he waved Tobias past, obviously impatient to get back into the warmth of the house.

Tobias stared at him for a few seconds and knew in that moment they would never be friends.

When Carl simply glared back at him, he drove past the Impala to park in his customary spot.

Behind him, Carl didn't say anything as he got out and trudged inside, so Tobias didn't say anything, either. "Prick," he muttered and went into his own house, where he turned on the TV and tried to forget about Axel Devlin's wife, who'd looked so sad in the diner, and the fact that vulnerable, seventy-

six-year-old Uriah had someone who was potentially dangerous staying with him.

Tobias was still having difficulty relaxing an hour later when he received a text from his ex-girlfriend. Tonya Sparks, the sister of his last cellmate, had managed to give him enough hope to be able to endure his final year in prison, but things had fallen apart between them almost as soon as he was released.

I'm having a Christmas party on the 21st at 7:00 p.m. here at my place. I was hoping you'd come.

They spent some time together here and there, but Tobias knew they weren't good for each other. Tonya partied a lot and didn't have any direction in her life. She reminded him too much of his mother. He was better off staying away from her.

He'd been trying to, but it wasn't easy since Maddox had gotten married. Tobias hadn't been out of prison long enough to have made many friends. Sometimes he hung out with two of Aiyana's sons—Elijah and Gavin, who also worked at the school—but they were married with kids and couldn't do a whole lot after hours. If he wasn't out hiking or mountain biking, he usually spent his evenings with Uriah. But until Carl went back to Maryland, if he even planned to, Tobias had a feeling that was about to change.

What the hell. He had to steer clear of his mother. She was using again, and he couldn't risk getting caught up in that. He had to stay away from the eighteen-year-old at the diner who'd given him her number. He had to avoid being a nuisance to Maddox so that Maddox could enjoy his new wife and the daughter he never knew he had until last summer. And now he had to give Uriah some space so that he could potentially rebuild his relationship with his troubled son.

But a man had to have *some* friends, didn't he?

Yeah. I'll be there, he wrote.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Saturday, December 7*

Axel called the following morning after Harper had rolled out of bed and brushed her teeth. She hated herself for being so excited when she saw his face come up on her screen. But he was and always had been the love of her life. She'd never dreamed she'd have to live without him, so she'd never prepared herself for the possibility, which was probably why the divorce had devastated her so much.

Wasn't it during the documentary that he'd told the world she was the best person he'd ever known? That was only twelve months ago! How had everything fallen apart since then? What'd happened to always remembering what was important in life, as they'd promised each other right from the start?

He'd lost sight of it, after all.

Or was it *her* fault? He claimed she wasn't being supportive enough. That she didn't understand how much good he could do in his career, and he had a point. He threw a benefit concert for St. Jude Hospital every summer and raised at least a million dollars with each one. To command that kind of audience, he

had to keep writing, performing and promoting his music. She felt selfish for craving more of his attention. But during the long days and nights when she took care of their children alone, they drifted further and further apart.

Promising herself she wouldn't argue with him no matter what he said, she quietly slipped back into her bedroom and closed the door so there was no chance of Karoline overhearing and then critiquing her side of the conversation. Everyone else was in the kitchen having pancakes for breakfast, which Terrence made every Saturday morning, and she wanted as much privacy as she could get.

"Hello?" She put some lift into her voice—which took considerable effort.

"Harper? How are you?"

*Not good.* She felt as though she'd been in a terrible car accident and was still stumbling around the scene, shocked by all the wreckage and unable to think clearly. But he didn't want to hear her complaints. As he'd become more and more popular, *she'd* become less and less important to him. And the less important she became, the more she'd tried to get them back to where they once were—and the more that aggravated him. It was a terrible cycle. Revealing her pain and neediness, her complete and utter uncertainty on how to proceed from here, only chased him further away. "Great," she lied. "And you?"

"Exhausted." He sighed audibly. "This tour is really kicking my ass."

"You put a lot into every show," she said, and that was true. She admired his work ethic, the huge amount of energy he gave his fans. He was a phenomenal performer. "How are the girls?"

They missed their daddy. She almost said so. They wanted him back as much as she did. But, again, she refrained. He'd interpret that as criticism, and he wouldn't call if all he got was a guilt trip. "Having a great time with their cousins," she said instead.

"That's good. Do they like their new school?"

It was an adjustment, just like everything else they were going through. Harper hated that she'd made them move, but she'd had no choice. Without the support of her sister, she was afraid she'd melt down entirely. "For the most part. When will you be back in the States?"

"Looks like it won't be until mid-January."

"Does that mean you added a new show or...?"

"No, I have to do some promotional stuff for the label while I'm across the pond."

"Right. Promotional stuff is important."

There was a brief pause during which she cursed herself for sounding so mechanical and insincere and knew he'd picked up on it when he asked, "Are you being sarcastic?"

She cleared her throat. "No, not at all. It's just...with Christmas coming up in a couple of weeks... I don't know, I guess I'm thinking of how much Piper and Everly are hoping you'll be back sooner than you planned, not later."

"I wish I could, but it doesn't make sense to keep flying back and forth. The travel is killing me. You know how anxious I get on a plane. I had to take a Xanax just to make it over here."

It was difficult to feel any empathy. She was too numb—and when the numbness receded, which occasionally it did, she was hit with such agonizing pain she was grateful when the numbness returned. "I'll tell them that...that you'll be back as soon as you can."

"I appreciate it. Listen, I'm transferring some money into your account. Can you get them Christmas presents from me?"

She stared at her reflection in the mirror above the dresser—the dark circles under her eyes, the haggard, almost-gaunt look that was beginning to creep into her face. "What would you like me to get them?"

"Whatever they're asking for."

He didn't even know what they wanted, didn't seem to particularly care. "Okay..."

“Oh, and my mother would like to see the girls. She just asked me when you’d be back in Colorado.”

So he’d called his mother first? Harper knew his mother wasn’t thrilled about the divorce, either, but maybe she was a better actor. “I don’t know yet.”

“Well, can you give her a call? Let her talk to the girls for a few minutes, at least? I don’t think she expected you to be gone for quite so long.”

“Of course,” she managed to say.

Karoline knocked on her door. “Harper? What’s taking you so long? We’re almost finished eating.”

“Be right there!” she called out. Then she told Axel, “I have to go.” She wasn’t sure she could tolerate much more of the conversation. She felt like a dam holding back an entire reservoir of feeling—a dam that had little cracks and fissures that were threatening the entire structure. If she wasn’t careful, she’d break into a million tiny pieces, releasing a flood of hurt, anger and recrimination.

Even so, she thought of Piper and Everly before she let him go. She knew how disappointed they’d be if he called and they didn’t have a chance to talk to him. “Or...if you’ve got a minute, I’ll go get the girls.”

“Not now,” he said. “I’ll have to call later. I’m late for a meeting with our social media coordinator.”

Biting back what immediately came to her lips—that surely his social media coordinator wasn’t more important than his children—she managed a “No problem.” This wasn’t the man she’d married, she told herself. That man had always put his family first. This was some preoccupied stranger who didn’t seem to know them very well, let alone care.

Karoline knocked again, then opened the door. “Harper?”

Harper said a quick goodbye and disconnected before turning to face her sister. “Sorry. I got held up. I’m ready now.”

Karoline frowned as she studied her. “That was him, wasn’t it?”

She hesitated but ultimately nodded.

“What’d he have to say?”

“He’s sending money so I can get the girls some Christmas presents.”

“From him?”

“Yeah.”

“How thoughtful of him,” she said.

Harper tried to ignore the heavy sarcasm. Her conversation with Axel had stung badly enough. “We’d better go eat.”

Karoline caught her arm as Harper tried to pass her. “I’m considering taking the girls to LA.”

“*Your* girls?”

“Yours, too.”

“For...”

“A Disneyland trip.”

“When?”

“Today.”

“But...it’s a two-hour drive to Orange County! They’ll miss half the day by the time we can get there.”

“We won’t be going to Disneyland until tomorrow. Actually, we might even wait until Monday. It’ll be less crowded then.”

“So why do you want to leave today?”

“Why not? It was June the last time we took a family vacation.”

“Oh. You plan to stay. For how long?”

“Five or six days. Maybe a week. We could also go to the San Diego Zoo, the La Brea Tar Pits, shopping on Rodeo Drive. There’s so much to do.”

“Then we’d better get packed.”

Her sister gave her a pointed look. “*You’ll* need to pack only if you want to go with us.”

Harper blinked at her. “What do you mean?”

“Terrance is off work for the holidays, so this is a good time for us,” her sister said. “We’re willing to take Everly and Piper without you—to give you a chance to recover. I feel like you could use that.”

The prospect of being alone, of having even a few days without the heavy responsibility of trying to pretend she was okay for the sake of her children, was tempting. “Are you sure that would be okay?” she asked tentatively.

Her sister seemed resolute. “Positive. We’d like them to build some good memories that include Aunt Karoline and Uncle Terrance and their cousins.”

Somehow Axel could be gone for weeks, miss birthdays and holidays, and feel no guilt. But Harper couldn’t miss a few days at Disneyland without feeling as though she was letting her children down. “Shouldn’t *I* be part of those memories?”

“*You* should pull yourself together while they’re happily engaged with us.”

The lump that rose in Harper’s throat made it difficult to speak. “I’m trying. You know that, don’t you?”

“I do,” she said softly. “And you’ll figure it out, I promise.”

Hoping and praying her sister was right, she nodded as though she believed it was true, even though she wasn’t entirely convinced. So what if she wasn’t bleeding on the outside? She’d never felt so deeply wounded.

“When is Axel coming back, by the way?” Karoline asked.

“Not for several weeks.”

“Piper is under the impression he plans to surprise her for Christmas. You’ve heard her talk about that, right? That’s what she’s asking Santa Claus for. She’s mentioned it to me several times.”

Briefly closing her eyes, Harper imagined the disappointment her daughters would suffer and wished there was some way to avoid it—or at least help them understand. “I’ll have a talk with her and Everly and...and try to let them down easy.”

“Okay, but wait until we get back. Let’s not ruin the trip.”

Harper folded her arms as if that might hold her together. “Thank you, Karol. Thanks for everything.”

“That’s what sisters are for,” Karoline said. But even as Harper followed her out to breakfast, she wondered if one week alone would make much of a difference. It’d been eight months since Axel had first told her he wanted out of their marriage, and it hadn’t gotten any easier.

Tobias was afraid he was in for a long weekend. The weather wasn’t good enough that he felt like hiking again or biking, either, so he’d spent the morning cleaning his house, and had gotten caught up on laundry and other chores. But now he couldn’t decide what to do next. He would’ve liked to spend the afternoon working on the Buick with Uriah. They were almost ready to put it up for sale. They’d be splitting the profits, and he was excited about that. But he didn’t want to stick around if Carl was going to be there. The brown Impala was still parked in the drive, over far enough that Tobias could get past it. He decided to take the opportunity to leave so Uriah could focus on his son—and so he didn’t have to run into Carl himself.

As he climbed into his truck, he considered going to Maddox’s house. He really enjoyed spending time with Maya, his niece. She was always trying to come up with a new type of cookie to sell at Sugar Mama, the cookie shop Jada’s mother owned in town, and used him as one of her taste testers. But he worried he spent too much time at his brother’s place as it was and didn’t want Jada to think of him as a pain in the ass. Didn’t want to do anything to harm the close relationship he and Maddox finally had the chance to rebuild.

Besides, he never knew whether her brother, Atticus, would be there. Atticus treated him well enough. Since he also worked at New Horizons, they saw each other occasionally on campus and were thrown together whenever Jada and Maddox hosted

some kind of event, like the party they threw when they announced the sex of the baby they were having in May.

But those were difficult times for Tobias. He hated having to face Atticus knowing *he* was the one who'd put him in that wheelchair. That terrible night seemed like a lifetime ago and yet he couldn't escape it.

Instead of going to Maddox's, he drove to The Daily Grind, a quaint redbrick coffee shop with black-and-gold lettering on the windows and comfortable leather chairs. Since Silver Springs didn't allow chain stores within the city limits, there wasn't a Starbucks in town or a McDonald's or any other fast-food joint. There were only mom-and-pop establishments, and of the coffee shops, The Daily Grind was by far the most popular. It was always filled with hipsters typing away on laptops, and this afternoon was no exception.

Tobias figured he'd grab a cup of coffee and hang out for a bit, then go over to the school. He already spent a lot of time at New Horizons, often staying late to help out with football practice, teach the fundamentals of basketball to any students who were hanging around the courts—he'd gotten pretty good at the sport in prison—practice skating with the kids at the new ice rink or tutor those who were taking auto shop. He'd been put away before he could finish high school, so he didn't have a traditional college education, but he'd taken advantage of whatever classes were offered in prison, and they'd made a decent mechanic out of him. He could fix almost any kind of vehicle and hoped to own his own repair shop one day.

After Tobias placed his order, someone stood up to leave, enabling him to snag a seat at a small corner table near a window that had a Christmas wreath hanging in the middle of it. The guy who'd just walked out had left his newspaper behind, which was lucky. Tobias wanted to check out the sports page and hadn't thought to buy a paper on his way over, but before

he could even turn to that section, he heard the barista call out a name that made him look up.

“Harper!”

He’d only ever heard of one Harper.

A quick glance at the faces around the counter confirmed it *was* Harper Devlin, the woman he’d noticed at the Eatery last night.

What were the chances that he’d run into her again, especially so soon?

She didn’t hear the barista. At least, she didn’t react when he called her name. Standing to one side, away from the line that snaked out the door, she stared off into space, obviously a million miles away.

That was when Tobias realized there was a song by Pulse playing on the sound system. He could hear Axel Devlin singing, “I will always love you.” Had he written those lyrics for her?

“Harper?” the barista called again.

Still no reaction. She was completely lost in thought.

Dropping the newspaper, Tobias got up and claimed her drink for her. But even as he approached, she didn’t seem to see or hear him.

“Hey, you okay?” He gave her arm a slight nudge as he held out her coffee.

Startled, she glanced up and, as her eyes finally focused, he noticed the shimmer of unshed tears—which she immediately blinked away. “You,” she said, recognizing him.

She took her drink, and he slipped his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt. “Yes, me. But don’t worry, I’m not following you. When I heard the barista call your name, I looked up and there you were.”

She didn’t so much as smile. “Thanks.”

“Are you okay? Because I think you could use a minute to sit down and relax, and I just happen to have a table.” He motioned to where he’d left the paper.

She seemed as lost or bewildered as she'd been last night. "Do you know my sister or my brother-in-law?"

"I've only been in town for five months, so I doubt it. What are their names?"

"Karoline and Terrance Mathewson. He's a podiatrist. She's a housewife who gets involved in about every good cause that comes along—even helped out with the tree-lighting ceremony downtown a week ago. They have two twelve-year-old daughters, identical twins—Amanda and Miranda."

"They sound like stellar citizens, so I'm sorry to say no, I've never heard of them."

She narrowed her eyes. "You have no frame of reference where I'm concerned. I'm a *total* stranger to you."

"Last night the waitress told me you were Axel Devlin's wife. I guess that's a frame of reference."

Glancing away from him in the crowded coffee shop, she took a sip of her drink. "Is that why you bought me the rose? Because you thought I was married to someone famous and that makes me more desirable?"

She wasn't wearing makeup. She had on a pair of yoga pants and a parka with ear warmers and looked as though she'd just rolled out of bed. But he couldn't see how fancier clothes or makeup could make her any more appealing. He loved her golden, dewy-looking skin and the cornflower blue of her eyes. He could all too easily identify with the pain he saw in them.

Actually, that was what drew him more than anything else.

"Your connection to Axel had no bearing on it whatsoever," he said. "I just thought you were beautiful, and it seemed as though you could use the encouragement."

Tucking the fine strands of blond hair falling from her ponytail behind her ears, she stepped back. "I'm sorry. I'm—I'm not open to a relationship."

The compliment had spooked her, as he'd known it might. But he was only being honest. "That's good."

She seemed taken aback. “It is?”

“Yes—because I’m the *last* guy you should ever get with even if you were.”

Her mouth fell open. “Why’s that?”

“Never mind. Now that you have your drink, I’ll leave you alone.”

She caught him by the sleeve as he turned away. “You’re going?”

“Isn’t that what you want me to do?”

She bit her bottom lip. “I don’t know. You’re...confusing. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like you.”

He couldn’t imagine she’d associated with many ex-cons. No doubt she’d be horrified if he were to tell her he’d spent more than 40 percent of his life behind bars. Chances were she wouldn’t even be willing to talk to him.

He’d met other women like that, who thought he must be the devil incarnate, especially here in Silver Springs, where so many people knew Jada’s family and how he’d hurt them. Some women were drawn to the “danger” of associating with a “bad boy” like him but, sadly, those who *were* drawn to him were often like Tonya—a mess themselves.

“That’s probably a safe assumption,” he said with a grin.

She seemed further confused by his response and the fact that he not only accepted her words, he agreed with them. “Let me get this straight. What, exactly, are you offering me?”

He gestured at the table. “A seat.”

“That’s all?”

“What more do you want?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know *anything* right now. I feel like I’ve just been put through a meat grinder.”

He’d never experienced heartbreak on the level she seemed to be experiencing it—not the romantic kind. But pain was pain, and he was certainly acquainted with that. “Well... I’m a good listener, if you need to talk.”

She kept her gaze fastened to his as she took another sip of her drink. “A man who looks as good as you do is never quite *that* harmless.”

He heard the barista call his name above their conversation and those of everyone else in the shop. His coffee was ready. “How long will you be in town?” he asked.

“Not long. Just a few weeks.”

“How much damage could knowing me do in such a short time?”

“I’m already a wreck. I doubt knowing you could do *any* more damage,” she admitted.

“Then what do you have to lose?” He held out his hand. “Can I see your phone?”

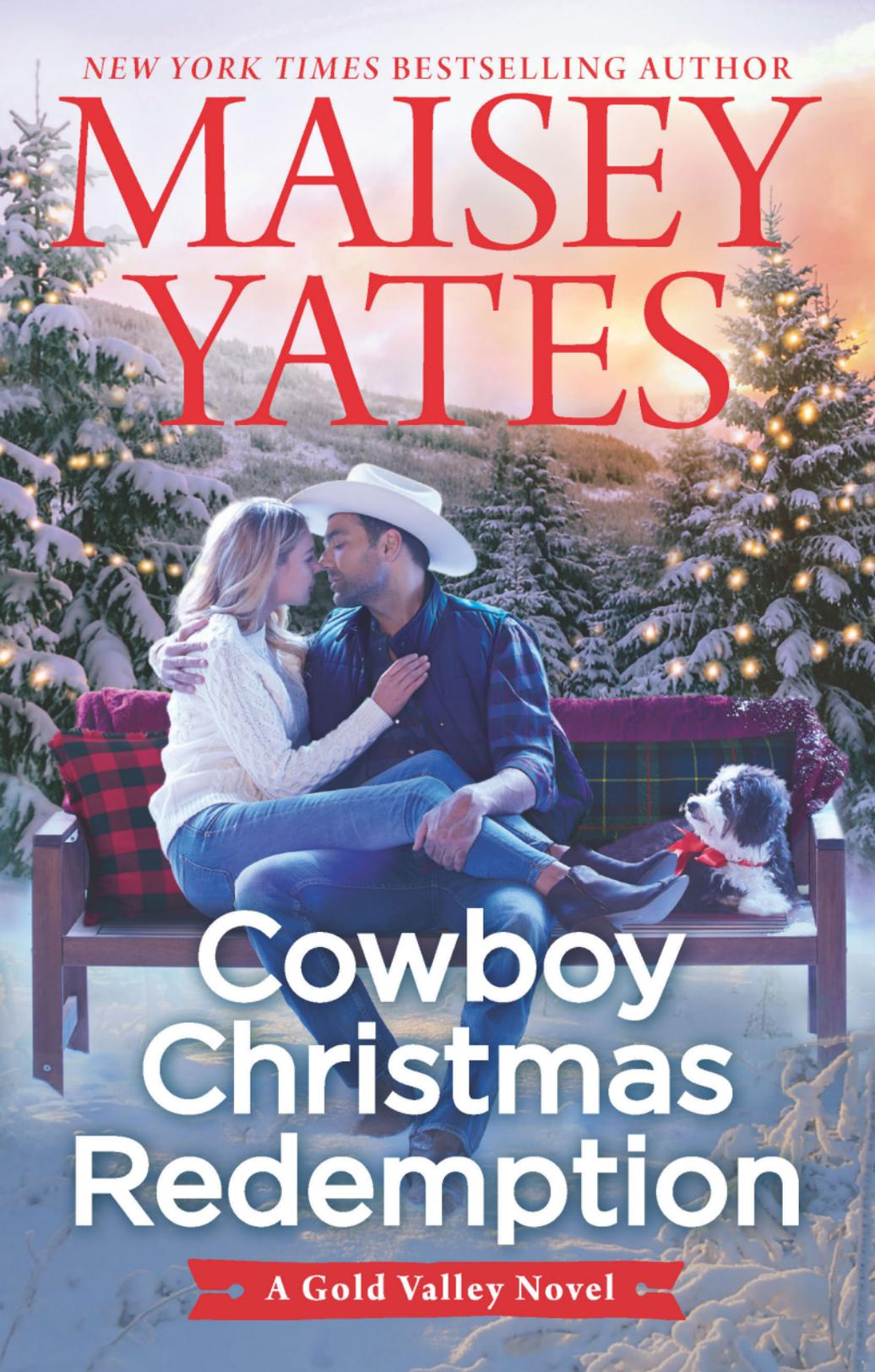
She pulled her cell from her purse and, somewhat skeptically, let him take it, watching as he added his name and number to her contacts. “I’ll leave you alone for today. You can have my table. But if you need a friend while you’re here, you’ve got someone to call,” he said and picked up his drink before walking out.

Want to know what happens next?  
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# MAISEY YATES



## Cowboy Christmas Redemption

A Gold Valley Novel

## *CHAPTER ONE*

ELLIE BELL COULD sometimes imagine that she lived an entirely different life. Not because she didn't love so much about what she had, but because it was nice, even for a little while, to set down the various burdens that she carried around with her and just focus on the moment.

Getting chickens had been an interesting endeavor, one that had proved to be quite a bit more sanity-preserving than she had anticipated.

Sometimes when she was out collecting eggs, she felt like she'd fallen through a time warp. Where she was younger than twenty-eight. Not a woman with a heavy burden of responsibility, or the crushing weight of loss deep inside her.

But somebody liked. Somebody carefree. Whose only responsibility was to collect eggs and look out at the beautiful view that stretched out before her.

Her little farmhouse was modest, and it was old, with a porch that had white peeling paint that she hadn't been able to rally herself to fix. But she'd hung baskets of flowers from the rafters, and she supposed that was something.

At least it was something she was much more up for than painting.

Maybe someday she would get it together and do all the renovation that the place needed.

She took a deep breath, and she focused her gaze on the horizon. On the long stretch of emerald field that faded into the evergreen-covered mountains, currently bathed in a rose-gold glow from the setting sun. The days were getting shorter, heading into the Christmas season, and honestly, that was something else that just made her tired.

She had to do things.

For Amelia's sake.

Well, handily, Tammy Dalton was always around to do something. The Daltons had been her late husband's surrogate family, and after Clint's death, had become hers and Amelia's, as well.

Tammy always made a wonderful Christmas dinner, and the gathering that they had was spectacular. And it gave Ellie an excuse not to make a big fuss about Christmas at her house, which always felt vaguely sad to her.

She didn't want to drag out the ornaments that she had gotten with Clint. And she didn't want to get rid of them and get new ones, either. They'd had cozy Christmases in their apartment back by the high school in town. Their own ornaments. First Christmas, with a bride and groom. The Bells, on a big silver bell...

She'd loved him so much. Right from the beginning. He was just a nice man. In spite of the fact he'd had a rough upbringing. He'd been open, and he'd laughed easily. He'd taught *her* to laugh a little easier.

He'd taught her to love in a way that was so different from the way she'd known love as a child.

She'd spent her growing-up years craving her mom's attention, while her mom craved only the attention of whatever man had her heart at the time.

She'd hated it. And she'd sworn off love herself.

But then she'd met Clint.

He'd been tall, with dark hair and a slight build. Ranga and athletic. He was the kind of guy who had to climb up the side of a rock face on a hike if there was one; the kind who had to jump over obstacles just as easily stepped over.

He'd been the one thing to distract her even slightly from her laser-focused vision. She'd wanted to go to college, be a teacher. Because it was teachers who'd given her the support, the help, that her own mother didn't.

She'd made Clint wait to get married until she was finished with school. She'd been strong that way. She'd been determined to forgo boyfriends, especially while she was studying. But she hadn't been able to stay away from him. He was so magnetic and happy, and she'd wanted that.

As soon as she'd graduated, they'd gotten married.

They'd lived in little apartments near the high school, and Ellie had gotten jobs substitute-teaching in the area, and then spent a year as a teacher's assistant at the school right near their house.

They'd been young when Clint wanted to try for a baby, but he'd been so excited about it. So they'd started trying, and not just for a baby but also to find a house.

They'd found the farmhouse. She'd found out she was pregnant.

He'd been the proudest, happiest man alive that day.

And four weeks later he'd died.

Before they'd moved into their home. Before he'd ever even gotten to hear his child's heartbeat.

She'd never had a Christmas in the farmhouse. Her and Amelia's Christmas traditions were built around the Dalton family, and that was okay with Ellie.

Her egg-collecting was feeling terribly sad at the moment. But she blamed the upcoming Christmas season for that.

It was inescapably bittersweet.

Always, she thought about that first Christmas without him. When she had been eight months pregnant and so miserable. So alone.

Alone, except for Caleb Dalton.

The entire Dalton family had been good to her in the years following the loss of Clint, but no one had been quite as good as Caleb.

Caleb had been Clint's best friend in the world. A man who was like a brother to him, so he'd said often. He'd talked about Caleb all the time, from the beginning of their relationship. She could still remember going to her first Dalton family barbecue with Clint. He'd been nervous, because it had been like meeting his parents, he'd said.

All three Dalton brothers had presence. A perfect combination of their father Hank's charm and charisma, and their mother Tammy's beauty and quick wit.

Caleb had been unlike any man she'd ever met. A daredevil with an easy smile, and he was so big. Larger than life, both in height and in presence.

He could fix anything. If her car needed a tune-up or an oil change, Caleb could just do it. Why call the landlord when their apartment had an issue? Caleb could always handle it. She'd been in awe of that. The way his hands worked to puzzle together anything that might have been broken.

She could see why Clint loved the family the way he did, and Caleb in particular. She'd bonded with him easily, quickly.

And now...

Caleb had become her best friend in the entire world. She'd always liked him. But he became something more during these long, lonely years.

He'd become her rock. Her salvation.

He was always on hand in an emergency. If she needed cold medicine in the middle of the night for Amelia, yet didn't want to drag her little girl to the store, she could call Caleb. And he would go get the cold medicine. He would bring it to her. If she wasn't well, he would be the first person to come by with soup, and to make sure that Amelia was taken care of while she convalesced.

He had built her chicken coop. Had been the one to help her figure out what you were supposed to do with chickens in the first place.

And when she had partnered with his brother Gabe to help start the school that she now taught at on the Dalton family ranch, Caleb had immediately partnered with her, too.

He had helped make her dream a reality, the moment that she was able to have dreams again.

She felt much happier, thinking about Caleb.

He was definitely a lot more of a safe space than Christmas could ever be.

As if thinking of him conjured him up, she heard the sound of truck tires on gravel, mixed with the sound of an old engine from a Ford F-150.

It was Caleb, coming home with Amelia. Amelia had spent the day with Tammy. The school that Ellie had been part of founding, and that she worked at full-time, specifically geared toward troubled boys, was on the Dalton family ranch, and Hank and Tammy Dalton lived there in a large house. Tammy had graciously of-

ferred to watch Amelia after preschool on the days when Ellie worked.

It just so happened that today, by the time Ellie had finished up, Amelia and Tammy were in the middle of a baking project.

Usually, Ellie would have hung out, but today she had been eager for escape. For a moment in silence. Out of time.

And she wasn't even sorry it was over. Because Caleb was here. And so was Amelia. No matter how difficult or chaotic life could seem, she loved the people in it.

She stepped out of the coop, her basket clutched in her hands, and she made her way across the field, toward her driveway. Her floral dress caught the breeze and fluttered around her legs, strands of blond hair whipping across her face. She pushed them away and smiled as Caleb got out of the truck.

"Was she good for you?" Ellie asked.

"We've been singing the theme song to a show I've never heard of for twenty minutes," he said, opening up the driver-side door wider so he could put the front seat down.

And there was Amelia, strapped into her car seat and looking extremely pleased with herself. "It was *Shimmer and Shine*, Caleb," she informed him.

"*Shimmer and Shine*," Caleb amended, directing that toward Ellie. "I think I like *Peppa Pig* better."

"You and me both," Ellie said.

She took a step toward the truck and Caleb grinned. "I've got her."

He pushed his black cowboy hat back on his head, his blue eyes catching the light. He had a dusting of light stubble on his jaw, not unusual for him at this hour of the

day, and his muscular arms were still streaked with dirt, she noticed, as he began to unfasten Amelia's seat belt.

He had battered workman's hands. He worked the ranch that his family owned, and he was a firefighter by trade. He'd ridden rodeo for a while before that, though not for very long. But still, everything he did had a certain amount of labor involved, and no small amount of danger.

She'd always liked curling up on the couch with a book, safe indoors, over doing anything outside. She knew that for his own reasons, that would be torture for Caleb. He was a man who needed movement, who needed open spaces. A man who preferred hands-on learning over book learning.

It unnerved her that he continued to fight wildfires, even after what had happened to Clint. But she knew that it was unreasonable to ask him to quit his job.

Didn't mean she didn't want him to.

He set Amelia down gently on the ground, and her little girl launched herself at Ellie. She swung her up for a hug before depositing her back in the driveway. "Did you have a fun day with Grandma Tammy?" she asked.

Tammy Dalton was the closest thing Amelia had to a grandmother.

Both Clint and Ellie hadn't had involved families at all. In fact, it was one of the things that had bonded them together when they'd met.

Ellie had been cautious. She'd never dated. Not after watching the way her own single mother had burned through men, the quality of which had been incredibly variable.

Of course, she had ended up a single mother anyway.

Which seemed fully unfair, given how very much she had tried not to perpetuate the cycle she'd been

born into. She'd gotten into school. She'd finished. She'd started a teaching career. Gotten married.

But she'd been widowed.

If there was one thing she'd learned, it was that you couldn't plan everything, no matter how much you might want to.

"It was good," Amelia said. "We made chocolate chip cookies and peanut butter cookies."

"And where are the cookies?" Ellie asked.

"We ate them all," Caleb said.

"Did you really?"

She hunted around behind him, trying to see if she could find a plate of cookies in the truck.

"Of course not," he said. "I have some for you."

"Can I take the eggs in the house?" Amelia asked.

"Sure," Ellie said, handing her daughter the basket.

She raced up the stairs as quickly as her little legs could carry her, her pink cowgirl boots glittering with each movement. A gift from the Daltons. So of course, they were Amelia's favorite.

"Thank you," Ellie said. "It was nice to have a few minutes to myself this evening."

"No problem. You're on my way home."

"I am. It's handy."

It really was. More than handy. A lifeline. The man was like one of the mountains that surrounded her home. Stalwart and steady, never changing, even as the seasons around them did.

Evergreen.

He reached into the truck and pulled out a plate of cookies, handing it to her. She didn't wait. She dived in, taking a peanut butter one from the top and helping herself to a large bite. "Your mom is a genius," she

said. "I try, based on everything she's taught me, but they still never turn out this good."

"I don't even try," he said, shrugging. "I just eat them."

As if to demonstrate his point, he grabbed one of the chocolate chip ones from the top and put the whole thing in his mouth.

"That's mean," she said. "You could have taken some more from your mother's house."

"I did," he said.

"Then you have no call taking my cookies."

"It's a delivery fee."

"For my child or for the snacks?"

"Thanks for reminding me," he said, this time taking a peanut butter one.

She expected him to go then, because it had been a long day, and it wasn't like she hadn't seen him at work earlier. But he didn't. Instead, he stood for a moment, his expression uncharacteristically thoughtful. "I might not be able to drop Amelia off at home as often in the future."

"Oh?"

It was abrupt and weird. Especially considering she'd just been thinking about what a stalwart Caleb was.

"Yeah," he said. He braced himself on the truck, and her eyes were drawn to his biceps, to the way the muscle shifted beneath his tanned, scarred skin.

She wondered what the scar on the inside of his arm was from. Barbed wire? An angry bull? Maybe just from a youthful misdeed. It was very hard to say with a man like Caleb.

It really was a wonderful arm. It had to be said. Objectively speaking, Caleb was a perfect masculine specimen.

He wasn't pretty. No, he was too raw to be anything like pretty. Even with those blue eyes, which were the kind of blue that women had difficulty letting pass by without remarking on. But he was scarred, and he was weathered from working outdoors, and, as she had previously been thinking, his hands were rough.

Though, they could be gentle when they needed to be.

If she had a single friend, she would definitely set her up with Caleb.

"I... Why?"

"I'm buying a new piece of property."

"Really?" Caleb hadn't given any indication that he was thinking of moving away from the acre lot that he lived on.

"Yeah," he responded, maddeningly opaque.

"Details, Caleb." Having a man for a best friend could be annoying, because they didn't tell you things, like the fact that they were considering moving. And then, when they finally did tell you, they didn't tell you anything about it.

"I bought Jehoshaphat Brown's place."

"You didn't," she said.

Jehoshaphat Brown was an eccentric who lived a few miles up out of town, and had the largest Christmas tree farm in the area. "I did," he said. "I mostly don't believe it because I don't believe he would move. But he is. He's moving to Hawaii."

"Now, I really don't believe that," she said.

"Hey," he responded, "believe whatever you want, but he is. He's moving to Hawaii, taking a job as a bartender at a resort. Oceanside. He bought a condo with the money I paid him."

“But you are... You’re going to run a Christmas tree farm?”

“At least temporarily. Everything’s ready to go now, which means finishing out the year, or the next few years, is guaranteed money in the bank to begin other ventures. There’s contracts already made with outfits around the country, truckers on hand to drive the things to their destinations. And he owns that small lot down on the main street of town. So, I’m all set not only to sell this year’s crop around the country, but also sell it here.”

“But you don’t... You don’t actually want to...be a Christmas tree farmer?”

“My ultimate goal is cattle,” he said.

She’d had no idea. None at all. Not that he wanted his own ranch, not that he’d been unhappy at the school. Was he unhappy at the school? Was he leaving?

“What does this mean for your position at the school?”

“I will be leaving. Which I will be talking to Gabe about later tonight.”

“But...”

“With West Caldwell coming into town, there’s no need for me to hang around. He’s going to be working on the ranch.”

“Your half brother that you’ve never met. That’s putting a lot of stock in a man you don’t even know.”

“Gabe figures we owe him. And, since Gabe is awash in guilt over the whole half-sibling thing, I figure that works in my favor.”

As much as Ellie loved Hank Dalton, the patriarch of the Dalton clan, it was becoming more and more clear that he was problematic. A couple of years ago it had been discovered that he had a daughter that none of them had known about. McKenna Tate. She’d come

into town after discovering the identity of her family, and after some adjusting, the Dalton family had welcomed her into the fold. But on the heels of that revelation had come another one.

There were three more children. All adults now.

Hank had never known about them. But Tammy had.

It had changed the relationship, that reveal.

But Hank was awash enough in the guilt from the actions in his past, that the two of them were trying to work through it, to an extent. And Ellie really hoped that they did. For some selfish reasons, if she was honest. Because she loved them, and they were the closest thing to a family for her, and she didn't want to lose them.

"But... Don't you want to wait and see if it's going to work out?"

"No," Caleb said. "I don't want to work at the school forever. This is what I want."

That made her...angry, and she couldn't figure out exactly why. He deserved to have dreams; of course he did. But she'd just...assumed he was happy with the way things were. She'd somehow meshed his dreams together with hers.

Had decided that what she was doing with his family ranch, with the school, was what he wanted, too.

But if she didn't feel great about him fighting fires anymore, maybe he didn't, either. And she'd never asked. She'd only thought about it in terms of her own comfort. That wasn't right at all.

Still, the idea of him having his own endeavors, his own life farther away from her and not right all around her while they worked...

She *needed* him. She really had. She still did.

She didn't like this...this change. But she should be

happy for him, and it made her feel... She felt bad. And she didn't like feeling bad about something that was good for her friend.

"I'd... Well, congratulations," she said. Even though she didn't feel like congratulating him at all. She felt like having a tantrum.

She really didn't know why.

"Thank you," he said, his mouth quirking up into a half smile that made it very clear he was well aware she wasn't having the best reaction to his news.

"I'll miss seeing you." The words more plaintive than she'd intended.

"I'm not moving away," he said.

"Yeah, but I see you *all the time*," she protested.

"You will still see me *all the time*."

"But you won't be dropping Amelia off when I want you to."

"Probably not."

Her stomach twisted, but that wasn't what was upsetting her. She knew it wasn't.

And then it hit her, as strongly as that melancholy had when she'd realized it was nearly the Christmas season.

This phase of life was over.

The one where he was here to carry her. Where she had a crutch to get her through what life looked like without Clint. Being a single mother.

It was changing.

It had begun to change months ago, when the idea for the school had come about. She had gone back to work.

But she'd been a fledgling, and he'd been there to help her.

In the years since Amelia was born, she had lived off the insurance settlement she'd gotten after Clint's death.

And settlement money from the helicopter company, which had been found negligent. It was overloaded, and they knew it, knew that it didn't have the capacity to carry the number of people that had been on it.

Every man who'd been on the helicopter had died.

Money didn't bring back people you lost.

It in fact seemed like a laughable pursuit when you were grieving a husband. But once she'd had it she'd realized why it mattered. Because she hadn't been able to do anything beyond the bare minimum to keep herself alive. And she was having a baby.

It was how she'd bought this house.

And all the furniture in it. Everything that had made the place a home that she and Amelia could inhabit. And even when it had been difficult to care about such a thing, part of her had known that she had to.

And it had been Caleb, of course, who had assembled it all. Who had helped with everything.

And now she was being a jerk about something that he'd achieved. After all he'd done for her.

Well, the little scolding session she gave herself was nice, but she still felt unhappy. But that didn't mean she had to act unhappy. She had ample experience with pretending to be more okay than she was. She should be able to do it now.

"I'm happy for you," she said. "Really. I'm sorry. We can go get furniture that's difficult to assemble, and I'll help you put it together."

"Meaning?"

"I'll...offer you a drink while you put it together?"

"Right." He nodded. "Sounds about right. Hey, don't worry about it, Ellie. Things are going to be fine."

There was so much she wanted to say to him, but

she didn't know how to articulate it. Mostly because she couldn't quite explain the discomfort happening in her own chest. So instead, she just watched him get into his truck, and didn't even scold him when he stole another cookie.

She tried to figure out exactly what the feeling was as she watched his truck disappear down her driveway. Then she turned and walked to her porch, sitting down on the bottom step.

“What is wrong with me?”

And suddenly, it hit her.

He was moving on, and she hadn't.

It was different, because of course, he had been Clint's best friend. She'd been Clint's wife. So Caleb moving on from the whole situation was easier. More expected.

But she wished... Well, she wished for a whole lot of things.

Things that were coming up more and more often. Her best female friend at the moment was Vanessa Logan. Vanessa was pregnant, getting ready to have a baby with her husband, Jacob, a man who loved her so much that just looking at the two of them together made Ellie's whole body hurt.

She didn't want that. She didn't want to fall in love. She didn't want a relationship. But she wanted...

It would be nice to be kissed under the mistletoe, maybe. To have something to wear a dress to. To go dancing in that dress.

And suddenly, those thoughts she had in the chicken coop, about those moments that felt out of her life, that felt like an escape, crystallized.

That was what she wanted. Just some moments. To

feel like something other than a tired single mother, or a sad, grieving widow.

A moment to feel like a woman.

Maybe she needed to make some changes, too.

Maybe, instead of dreading Christmas, she needed to get started on her wish list.

## *CHAPTER TWO*

CALEB DALTON HADN'T had much to smile about for a long time. It had been a bear of a few years, since his best friend's death, and while time might ease a wound, it wouldn't ever bring Clint back.

But that permanence made space for movement, around the grief, around the pain. And finally toward a future he'd been planning for a long time.

Clint had been, honest to God, one of the best men on earth. The hole he'd left behind had been huge, and Caleb had dedicated himself to caring for his friend's widow and child in his absence.

That had been his life, his whole life, for nearly five years. And it was fair, because it had been Ellie's life, too.

He cared for Ellie. A hell of a lot. He'd met her because of Clint, but she'd been in his life now for more than ten years.

His feelings for Ellie were complicated. Had been from the beginning. But she'd been with Clint. And there was no doubt Clint was the better man. More than that, Clint was his brother. Maybe not in blood, but in every way that counted.

Caleb had never claimed to be a perfect friend. Clint was one of those people who'd drawn everyone right to him. He was easy to like. Caleb's own parents had been bowled over by Clint from the time they were kids.

And Caleb's jealousy had gotten the better of him once when they'd been younger. Something that made him burn with shame even now.

He hadn't let it happen when they'd been adults. No matter how tempting it had been. No matter how much he'd...

A muscle in his jaw ticked.

He gave thanks that there was a space in front of the Gold Valley Saloon, and he whipped his truck there up against the curb, ignoring the honk that came from behind him.

He turned around and saw Trevor Sanderson in his Chevy, giving Caleb the death glare.

"Hold your damn horses, Trevor," he muttered as he put his truck in Park.

He should have been quicker.

Hell, that was life in a nutshell. Sometimes, you were just too late. For parking spots, and for women.

He'd tried to get that image out of his head. More times than he could count over the past decade. Had tried to erase that first time he'd seen Ellie.

It was at his parents' barbecue. Late one summer afternoon.

He'd been talking and laughing with his brothers, and he'd lifted a beer to his lips and looked out away from the party. Then he'd frozen.

It was like the world had slowed down, all of it centering on the beautiful blonde walking toward him. The golden light from the sun illuminated her hair like a halo, and her smile seemed to light him up from the inside out.

As she'd gotten closer, he'd taken in every last detail. The way the left side of her cheek dimpled with that grin; her eyes, a mix of green and blue and a punch

in the gut. Her lips were glossy pink, and he wondered if it was that stuff that women wore that smelled and tasted like cherries. He couldn't decide if he hoped that it was or not.

Twenty years old, more experienced with women than he probably should be, and ready right then and there to drop down to his knees and propose marriage to the one walking in his direction.

It took him a full minute to realize that the beautiful blonde was holding hands with someone.

And that that someone was Caleb's best friend on earth.

It was a surreal moment. It had been a sea change in his soul. When his feelings for Ellie had tipped over from nothing to everything.

A revelation he hadn't been looking for, and one he sure as hell hadn't enjoyed.

It was like the whole world had turned, then bucked, like a particularly nasty-ass bull, and left him sprawled out on the ground.

It had been the beginning of a thorny, painful set of years. As he'd gotten to know Ellie, as his feelings for her had become knit deep into his heart, into his soul. She'd become more than his friend's woman, and more than a woman he'd desired. She'd become a friend to him.

In many ways he was thankful for the depth of the feeling, because it was the reason he'd been able to put aside the lust. The idea that he'd fallen in love with her at first sight.

When Clint had first started dating her, she'd been in school, so she hadn't been around all the time. But during the summers, and on breaks, she came around with Clint.

Went to the lake with them. Went fishing. Came to Christmas and Thanksgiving.

The summers at the lake, though, that had been a particular kind of torture. All of them swimming out in the water, her and her swimsuit. A tiny bikini that had left little to the imagination.

And he had been so very interested in imagining all the things that it did conceal.

And he'd felt like the biggest, most perverse asshole.

Then there had been the time that Clint had asked him to take her out riding.

Just the two of them.

Because Clint trusted him. Of course he did. Why wouldn't he trust his best friend? So he'd done it.

Had taken her out on the trails that wound behind the Dalton family property, up to the top of a mountain. And he looked over at the view with her, watched the sunset. And everything in him had wanted to lean over and kiss her on the mouth. To act on the feelings that were rioting through his chest.

For just a breath she'd looked back at him, met his eyes. And he'd thought maybe she'd wanted it, too.

Yeah, it would have exploded his relationship with Clint, but for a minute it seemed like it might be worth it.

Then she'd looked away. And then he'd come back to himself.

Clint was his brother. In every way but blood.

And he couldn't betray his friend like that.

Anyway, Ellie loved Clint.

She didn't love Caleb.

And no matter how much he might not want to, he had to respect that.

So he hadn't kissed her. They had ridden back down

that mountain, and nothing happened between them. But late at night, Caleb had taken himself in hand and fantasized that it had.

Two days later Clint and Ellie had been engaged.

Caleb had agreed to be the best man.

She'd married Clint. And while his feelings for her had remained, they'd shifted. As they'd had to.

He wasn't perfect. He'd never touched Ellie. Not like a man touched a woman, though that hadn't stopped him from going over the accidental brush of fingertips, of their elbows touching, over and over in his mind if it had happened on accident.

It hadn't stopped him from keeping and cherishing secrets with her, even when he knew he shouldn't. Hadn't stopped him from pushing some boundaries that not even Ellie had realized he'd been pushing at.

Ellie was the one who'd realized, for the first time, that he was dyslexic. And he'd sworn her to secrecy. And in that secrecy had come secret reading lessons.

And he'd...well, he'd lost control of his own feelings again. And once he'd recognized that, he'd cut them off. Cut her off.

But then Clint had died, just a month later. And everything changed again.

Since then, his relationship with Ellie was about their coming together to try to fill the gap Clint had left behind. His helping where she needed it.

Helping with the house, with her grief, with Amelia. That was all.

He got out of his truck on a groan and pushed the door open to the Gold Valley Saloon. It wasn't too busy, being early on a weeknight, but the locals were definitely out, drinking and playing darts. Sitting around

eating fried food and complaining about their bosses and day jobs—which around here often meant livestock.

A rancher was beholden to his animals, and Caleb did know that.

He wasn't under any illusion that a life raising cattle would be an easy one. But it was the one he wanted.

His dad had wanted better for his sons. He'd said that, in his own words.

Hank Dalton had been poor trash from the trailer park made good. He'd earned himself a whole lot of money on endorsement deals and championship purses in the rodeo, and he'd expected that it would make his sons want to be scholars. Just because they had the opportunity to go to college.

Sadly for Hank, none of them had a very deep abiding interest in higher education.

After Gabe had gone to the rodeo, followed by Caleb and Jacob, he'd seemed to accept that more or less.

But Caleb knew that Hank had been hard on his oldest son.

Sometimes, Caleb wondered if it was because he had the foresight to not want them to be like him.

He hadn't seemed to possess that level of concern with Caleb.

He'd wanted Gabe to go to college. He'd wanted it for Jacob, too.

He hadn't even thought for a moment that Caleb would go.

But then...he'd been right. Caleb would have rather had metal rods shoved under his fingernails than continue on in school a minute longer than he had to.

Though whatever Hank did, it might have had a lot more to do with being worried his boys would follow in his footsteps. His bad behavior had caused a lot of tur-

moil during their growing-up years, but it was recently that the full extent of the consequences became clear.

First with the appearance of McKenna, and then with the revelation that followed about West Caldwell, and about the other as yet to be named half siblings.

All Hank's infidelity, wandering out there in the world. Mistakes that were more than thirty years old.

Caleb frowned. He supposed that wasn't fair. To think about other people as mistakes.

For his part, he hadn't thought much at all about his half siblings. Gabe seemed to feel driven to make it right, and given the fact that his brother was the only person who knew that those half siblings existed back years ago, he could understand why Gabe felt some guilt about it.

Caleb had too much guilt and responsibility as it was, and he couldn't take any more on.

He saw his brother sitting at a table over in the corner and he made his way over there, crossing the scarred wooden floor and scanning the room as he did.

There were two women who made eye contact with him. Offered him a smile.

And he waited.

For something.

For a lick of interest.

Something to make him feel hot. To make him feel that tug low inside of him. That anticipation of a potential hookup. A conversation that might lead to flirtation, which might lead to dancing and kissing and a whole lot more.

That was part of the problem with taking care of Ellie like he had for the past few years. He hadn't been interested in other women.

At first he'd put it down to grief. He didn't like the taste of food. Why would he want sex?

But as the sharpness of the loss faded, he'd started to realize it had to do with the proximity to Ellie.

And that was one of the things that had spurred the purchase of the ranch.

He needed something else. He needed his own life.

The fact that he hadn't had sex in four years—nearly five—was getting a little bit ridiculous.

And the fact that he'd finally realized that made him a little bit less of a sad sack. Maybe.

"Hey," Gabe said, nodding and pushing a beer bottle to the center of the table.

Caleb sat down and pulled the bottle toward him.

"Thanks."

"No problem. I see you got Amelia home safely."

"No," he said. "I left her in the truck. Told her to play with my air freshener."

"Well, I know you're lying, because your truck doesn't have an air freshener."

"Why would I cover up the glorious scent of work boots and sweat?"

"Why indeed," Gabe said, taking a sip of beer. "So, what's on your mind?"

"How do you know something is on my mind?"

"Because sometimes we happen to get a beer after work. But you rarely make an appointment with me to grab a beer."

"Yeah, there's something I wanted to talk to you about," Caleb said.

"Fire away."

"I'm leaving the school." He cleared his throat. "I'm leaving the ranch."

"Oh," Gabe said.

“What? You sound...”

“I don’t know,” Gabe said. “I just thought it was kind of a family thing. Especially with West coming...”

“West isn’t family. I mean, he is. Genetically. But he hasn’t earned a place with us as family.”

“That’s not how that works,” Gabe said.

“Yeah, it is. We had Clint. Clint was like family. Because we knew him. Genetics is about the thinnest link I can think of in family. And it’s definitely not necessary.”

“I’m not...trying to replace Clint with West. It has nothing to do with Clint.”

“I didn’t say you were,” he said.

“I guess not. But it sounds to me like you’re worried about it.”

“It’s just that from my perspective, having West on the ranch will give you the help that you need. It doesn’t make it...some family thing we all need to be involved in.”

“Are you...avoiding involvement with West?”

“Nope,” Caleb said honestly. “I don’t really have any feelings one way or the other about the half-sibling stuff.”

“Why not?”

“Because. Because we have a full life. I have a full life. They’re adults. It’s not like they’re children that need to be taken care of.”

“Are you upset about the idea of them getting a piece of the inheritance when Dad dies?”

Caleb drew back. “No. I don’t care about money. I have my own. I might not be rich like Dad, but I had enough to go out and buy my own ranch. That’s what I want. I want to make my own way. I don’t need to take any of Hank Dalton’s fortune.”

“I’m sorry,” Gabe said. “I guess I’m just having a

hard time figuring out why you and Jacob are so disconnected from all of this. I can't be. You love McKenna..."

"I know," Caleb said. "And it isn't that I'm not going to make an effort to get to know West. It's just... I've got a new ranch that I want to run, and you know, Ellie will probably still need my help..."

"Is this about Ellie?"

"Why would it be about Ellie?" he asked.

A little disingenuous because he'd just been thinking about the link between her and his celibacy. But it was complicated.

It always had been.

"This is about *me*," Caleb said. "You went out and did the rodeo, and now this...this school, this is what you want. Jacob is happy there, too, because he's with Vanessa. You guys went out, you made your own thing. Why wouldn't you think that I'd want that?"

He did want it. More than that, he needed it. Needed to prove to his dad that he could make something of himself.

Needed to prove that he tried, and that his best was good enough. Damn good enough.

"I guess because Jacob's plans ended up aligning closer with mine."

"Yeah, I know that seems surprising."

Jacob and Caleb had been the hellions. Irish twins and always in scrapes together.

They had gone into the rodeo at the same time, and gotten out at roughly the same time, too. They had decided to get into fighting wildfires along with Clint, because the money was good, and it had seemed like an adrenaline high. Which was something the three of them were all very into.

Of the three of them, it had always been very hard to

say which one was the instigator. They had been equal partners in crime, for all of their lives. And losing Clint had been a blow. One that had changed things. Even between him and Jacob. It changed the dynamic. Because they had been the Three Musketeers, and they had become two, and right between them had been a deep, intense sense of mortality that hadn't existed there before.

Jacob had closed himself off, guilt nearly destroying him, until he'd met his wife, Vanessa. And as for Caleb...

His purpose had become Clint's memory. Had become his legacy. Caring for Amelia. Caring for Ellie.

But Ellie was getting back on her feet. Ellie was teaching at the school again, back in the saddle of her dream. Building a life that didn't revolve around what she'd lost. He would always be tied up in that loss. It was inescapable. Utterly and totally.

That was just one of many reasons it was best to take a step back. Perhaps take a step into something else. A different kind of life.

"Not about you, Gabe. I know that might be difficult to understand."

"It's not difficult for me to understand."

"Sure it is. You're the oldest. And a lot of things happened to be about you. And us following you. But we're grown-ass men now."

"Christmas tree farming," he said.

"*Cattle ranching*. But I would be a fool not to make the most of the revenue that's on my land."

*My land.*

That made him feel something good. Because he was going to have something. Something that was his. He wasn't going to work on his father's ranch. He wasn't going to follow in his brother's footsteps in the rodeo.

He wasn't the disappointment. The son who'd barely graduated high school.

The least of the three. Soon to be the least of more when they found the others, because he was sure he'd find a way to pale in comparison in Hank Dalton's eyes, even put up against the kids he'd just met.

But now Caleb had something that was *his*. And it might be a Christmas tree farm.

But from where he was sitting, the idea of being out there, in one of those large flat fields, surrounded by evergreen trees...

Silence.

Yeah, it didn't sound so bad.

"I want you to have the boys work at the Christmas tree lot," Gabe said finally.

"What?"

Gabe rolled his eyes as if Caleb had been demanding he rephrase. "Can the boys work at the Christmas tree lot this season? It would give them something else to do."

"Yeah, I guess it would."

As much as this whole school thing wasn't his ideal—hell, that was an understatement; anything to do with school was his nightmare—he did have a soft spot for the boys. Maybe because in some of them he could see himself. Kids who were struggling to do what was so easy for seemingly everyone around them.

And if he could help them out, give them something to do outdoors, show them there were plenty of vocations and passions out there for people who found sitting and reading to be exercises in torture...

Well, that was fine by him.

“Sure,” Caleb said. “How much do you suggest I pay the little devils?”

“Fair wages,” he said. “It’s been good. Physical labor. You know it’s helped.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know.” He sighed heavily. “I may have other work, too. If you have a kid that is keeping up with his schoolwork, and who might benefit from a little bit more time outdoors.”

“I think Aiden might be a candidate,” Gabe said.

A kid who had come at the beginning of the school year, along with the rest. He was a tough nut to crack, and last month when Vanessa and Jacob had been going through some things, the stress of the tension sent Aiden over the edge. He’d ended up running away from the school.

Jacob had rescued him, because somehow he’d fallen off the trail and ended up halfway down a cliff.

He was an angry kid, and he’d been through the kinds of things that could destroy people who weren’t half as strong. He was a brat.

And they all loved him.

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “That would be good.”

“Well, why don’t I make up a schedule and send it to you? We can debate the logistics of Christmas tree farming. Maybe I can enlist Calvin to paint some signs for your lot. With Vanessa’s oversight, of course.”

Calvin was another kid at the school. One who had discovered he had a little bit of an affinity for paint.

Caleb sighed. “Yeah, yeah. I’m still part of your bleeding-heart project.”

“Good.” Gabe shook his head. “We are family. You can’t get rid of us that easily.”

“I wasn’t trying to get rid of you.”

It had less to do with his brother than he'd ever understand. It was about him, carving out a path for himself, a life that he'd built. Where he would have something to be proud of. Something to shove in Hank Dalton's face.

It was easy for Gabe. He'd become a champion in the rodeo. He'd not only denied their father's desire that they "do better for themselves" by going to college instead of working with the land, but he'd excelled, too.

Jacob had never cared what anyone thought. He'd brushed off their father's expectations with a cocky grin and extended middle finger.

But then their father had offered to pay for college for Jacob. It had been his choice to refuse it.

Hank hadn't offered it to Caleb.

But Clint, who had been an effortless straight-A student, had gotten an offer from Hank. And Clint had deserved it.

There was no call for Caleb to be angry that he hadn't been offered something he didn't want. But he would show Hank now.

"Let me buy another round," Gabe said.

"What?"

"To celebrate. Your Christmas tree farm."

He grimaced. "Don't say it like that."

"There's no other way to say *Christmas tree farm*."

As his brother got up to get that next beer, Caleb leaned back in his chair and wondered if he really was insane.

Actually, he knew he was insane. He had a decade of proof on that subject. But oh, well. Insane he was, then.

And apparently, now he was a crazy Christmas tree farmer.

When Gabe brought back the beer, Caleb knocked it back as quickly as possible.

It was going to be a very interesting holiday season, that was for damn sure.

## *CHAPTER THREE*

ELLIE WAS FEELING a bit like a badger by the end of the next school day. Restless, cranky and unsettled.

And she was in the mood to badger Caleb. Because it was the only thing that might manage some of the emotions that were clanging around inside her.

She'd been thinking about his move, and not only the move, but what that meant for her, for nearly twenty-four hours now.

She was still a bit ashamed of herself, and the general possessiveness she felt over him and his life.

The fact that it seemed to shock her that he had dreams and aspirations.

She had never thought of him like that.

He had existed, for so long, to serve her.

And that wasn't fair. Not really.

He hadn't come by her classroom today, either, and she wondered if she had made it so apparent that she was a selfish jerk when he had spoken to her yesterday, that he was a little bit mad.

Of course, the other piece of having a male best friend. He often didn't pick up on subtext, which meant that he usually wasn't mad at her when she thought that he might be. Because he hadn't realized she had done anything that should make him mad. As soon as school ended, she left her classroom, wandering out toward the barn, hoping that she might find Caleb.

She stepped into the structure where it was dim and cool, and heard the sound of mucking stalls. The unmistakable smell of shavings, and the musky odor of horse urine, mingled with dust.

It was a strange smell to feel any sense of nostalgia about, she supposed.

But it was indelibly linked to her joining the Dalton family.

Which she had done the moment she had become involved with Clint.

With that, she had inherited this whole scope of life that she hadn't even realized existed before.

She'd never ridden a horse, not till Caleb had taken her out on the trails one day nearly eight years ago. There had been something defining about it. Something in the memory that still made her stomach feel tense with anticipation. She could remember it clearly. The exhilaration of riding the horse along the rugged trails, the way they had broken through the trees and come out at the top of the mountain, at a clearing. And the look on his face as he took in the beauty in front of them.

He was a man connected to the land in a way that just seemed to be a part of him.

Of course he wanted a ranch. That was who he was.

His brother Jacob wasn't like that. Didn't seem to have the same affinity for it. No, it was more than an affinity. It was like it was in his blood. He was more than a cowboy. He was a rancher. Through and through. A man who needed to spend his life doing this kind of work.

She was the keeper of Caleb's biggest secret. She should have known all along he would want something like this, knowing what she did.

She'd figured it out a year or so before Clint had died, and she'd felt bad it had taken as long as it had.

She'd realized it watching him fill out a DMV form, of all things. And so many moments from the years had suddenly crystallized.

He was dyslexic.

She was the first person to put a name to what he'd struggled with all of his life. And she offered to help him. They'd sat together in her apartment, on the couch she still owned, and had gone over information about a host of different learning disabilities, piecing together his struggles, and ways they could combat them.

And she'd devised a lesson plan. She was a teacher, and it was what she did. And it had been such a great thing for her, to be able to use her passion to help someone she cared about so much.

The relief in his eyes as he'd learned about those things. As they'd found names, diagnoses and reasons for his struggles. Reasons that weren't: "I guess you're just stupid."

He'd confided in her that he'd been afraid he might be. That there was no other explanation for why he couldn't learn what everyone else seemed to be able to.

Caleb was intensely private and intensely proud. And he'd never wanted her to tell anyone, because he'd told her he hadn't wanted it to be seen as an excuse.

She'd honored that. She couldn't do anything but honor that.

He was the only person she would have kept a secret for like that. So perfectly she hadn't even told her husband.

She'd always cared very deeply for Caleb, but that experience had brought them closer. Until it hadn't.

The lessons had ended abruptly one day. Caleb had

just cut them off, with no real explanation. And she'd gone from seeing him like clockwork three days a week to not seeing him at all.

And then Clint had died and it hadn't mattered anymore.

Even during that time he hadn't been speaking to her, she'd known who he was. And somehow in the past few years she'd lost that sense of knowing him, wrapped in her own grief.

But she knew him. Of course he needed this. Of course.

She walked forward and looked into the door, and was not at all surprised to see him, turning shavings with a shovel, his tight black T-shirt stretching each time he flexed his broad shoulders, the muscles in his arms shifting, corded from the hard labor.

There was something about seeing him like this that made her heart swell, made it trip over itself.

She was selfish. So selfish to not want him to have his own ranch. Selfish to consider what it meant for her at all.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was what it meant for him.

"Hi," she said, leaning in the doorway.

He looked up, the brim of his black cowboy hat still shading part of his face. "Hi, yourself," he said.

"I haven't seen you today."

"I know," he said. "I haven't seen you, either."

"Are you busy today?"

"A bit."

She leaned forward, still clinging to the doorway with one hand. "I want to see your ranch."

He didn't pause in his shoveling. "Really?"

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry that I was ridiculous yesterday.”

“Were you ridiculous?” He asked the question without looking at her.

“Yes, I was. I’m happy for you... Change hasn’t exactly been my best friend. So you coming to me and telling me things are changing... It freaked me out a little bit. I’ve gotten into this place in life now where it all feels a little more in my control, and you reminded me today it isn’t. I can’t control everything around me, which is fair and fine. But it hits me in a sore spot.”

“Right. I guess that’s understandable.”

“So anything changing makes me a little bit nervous. But I know we’re friends. Even if we don’t work together. Even if we haven’t worked together all that long.”

“It will be different,” he said, propping himself up on his shovel. “You’re working here now. I’ll be on the ranch. Before you weren’t working and I was just doing the wildfires. So I was either there all the time or gone.”

“Yes. I used you shamelessly as a babysitter, and a shoulder to cry on and any number of other things. And I appreciate that. But... It’s different now.

“You’re my best friend,” she said. “And I’m really happy for you. And I want to see the place.”

“Sure,” he said. “When?”

“Right now,” she said.

“Right now,” he repeated, his brows lifting slightly. “As in right this second?”

“Yes,” she said. “Your mom was planning on staying with Amelia for another hour and a half anyway. And that way I can look at things without answering questions. And then, when we finally do go with Amelia, I can look at things and answer questions for her.”

“You know, you don’t have to go today so that you can convince me that you’re excited for me.”

“That’s not even why,” she said.

“Then why?”

“Because I am excited,” she said, perhaps a little bit too brightly.

“All right, Ellie, let’s go.” He sounded a little too long-suffering for her liking. But she supposed she might deserve that.

“Are you going to have horses?” she asked, following him as he ditched his shovel and walked out of the barn.

“Yeah,” he said. He opened the passenger-side door to his faded red truck and she climbed in, realizing as she did that she took those kinds of actions for granted.

“Thank you,” she said once he was settled inside and had the truck engine turned on. “For everything. I mean, for things like opening the car door.”

“That’s nothing,” he said.

“It’s you,” she said. “You’re the most... The most helpful person. The most loyal. Caleb, I don’t know what would have happened to me if I hadn’t had you for all these years.”

“Why are you being mushy?” he asked.

It was a good question. But she definitely felt a little mushy. “Christmas? Change. There’s a lot of change happening right now. The new school, you leaving, West coming.”

“I doubt West being here will be a very big difference to you. In fact, it may all be the same. One cowboy is basically the same as the next.”

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong,” she said. “Nothing is the same as you.”

She grinned at him, and he shifted, visibly uncomfortable as he pulled the truck out of its spot by the

barn, and headed down the paved road that led out to the highway.

“How far away is the new ranch?” she asked when they were on the road.

“About ten minutes off this way,” he said, turning left, away from town.

“What’s the house like?”

“It has seen better days,” he said. “In other words, it’s a bit rustic. But I’ll be building something new once I get around to it.”

“I don’t mind rustic,” she said. “The farmhouse is a bit that way.”

“This is more of a log cabin,” he said.

“Well, I like log cabins.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

But he didn’t really sound like he thought it was good, and she couldn’t quite figure out why. Also, though, she didn’t really want to ask, and she wasn’t sure why that was, either.

“Tell me more about West,” she said, digging for a subject change.

“I don’t know anything about him,” he said.

“Nothing?”

He sighed heavily. “He rode in the rodeo for a while, but Gabe doesn’t know him. Bull rider, I guess. And stayed more regional. Mostly in Texas.”

“So you do know some things.”

“Yes. Some things.”

“I would think that if he were any good Gabe would know who he was,” she said.

“That’s what I said,” Caleb responded. “But Gabe said that wasn’t necessarily the case. I wonder if he was just being kind, though.”

“Oh, that’s not like Gabe,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“I heard that Jamie was going to start riding pro next year.”

“That’s the word on the street,” he said. “By which I mean, at the ranch.”

Gabe’s fiancée, Jamie, had been wanting to ride professionally in the rodeo for years, and everything was finally coming together for her.

“Do you think that Gabe is going to leave the school?” Ellie asked.

“I can’t imagine he wouldn’t. But he’ll be back and forth.”

“It will be interesting to manage things without them,” she said.

“Well, you’re doing a great job.”

“I’m going to need help with the manual labor and stuff.”

“Yeah, I expect you will.”

“I guess I’ll have to ask West,” she said.

“You can still ask me,” he said, something in his voice getting hard.

“Okay,” she said. “Good to know.”

She fiddled with the radio for a while after that, turning up Dierks Bentley and giving thanks it was one of his party songs, and not one of his sexy songs, because that would just make it a little bit awkward.

She wasn’t sure why. Only that she knew it would.

Mostly because when you were looking for silence filler, you didn’t want that silence to be filled with sincere lyrics about erotic acts.

As if she could even remember what *erotic acts* were like.

It had been so long...

She swallowed hard and turned the music up louder

as she watched the pine trees melt together, a whiskey blur of green out the car window. And up ahead of them were the mountains, rising above wooden telephone poles that created a strange man-made grid with their wires as they zigged and zagged on the uneven roadway.

Caleb hung a sharp right, onto an even narrower paved road with a faded yellow line down the middle. Eventually, the asphalt faded away into gravel, which carried them up a mountain, winding around until they reached another turnoff.

This went back, the land flat suddenly, and a wooden cabin came into view.

It wasn't as worse for wear as Caleb had led her to believe, two stories and with a charming porch that spread out wide, wicker chairs and a love seat right there.

"I think it's lovely," she said.

"It's okay," he said.

"I think it's a little better than okay."

The place he lived in now was much smaller, but he'd said many times that he didn't have use for a big house. It was just him, and he wasn't one for throwing parties.

"Let me show you where the trees are," he said.

"I don't think I have ever been to a place that grew Christmas trees," she said. She looked out the window again. "Of course, all the mountains around us kind of grow Christmas trees."

"Yeah, that's Charlie Brown-looking shit," he said.

"It's God's own handiwork, Caleb," she said dryly.

"Okay," he said.

"Don't tell me that Hank Dalton got his Christmas tree from a tree lot," she said.

"Oh, I wouldn't tell you that." He chuckled. "We never had a real tree when I was growing up."

"You didn't have a real tree?"

“Hell no. The tree was Tammy’s domain,” he said. “She prefers pink and tinsel.”

“I have yet to see a pink or tinsel tree in your mother’s living room.”

“She’s calmed down over the past few years. But when we were growing up, and we first had money, she went flashing it all around. And let me tell you, she didn’t spare any expense. She would do themed trees. Buy new ornaments every year, a whole new color scheme. It was tacky as hell. I will never forget her Las Vegas Cowgirl Christmas tree. You know, with a bunch of mini versions of that neon cowgirl in Vegas? But this was all light-up cowboy boots and all of that. It was insane.”

“Okay, that sounds a little bit much.”

“What about you?”

She realized that they never exactly talked about her childhood Christmases.

“Oh, we didn’t really do anything always. It depended. On where we were living. Who my mother was dating. When I was thirteen I found a small fake tree in the dumpster in our apartment building once. Like a table-top tree. I put it up in the kitchen and decorated it with some old ornaments I found, with a paper chain I made. My mom threw it out.”

“Your mom threw your tree away?” he asked.

She shifted, the incredulity in his tone making her uncomfortable. Yes, it had been a mean thing for her mom to do. And yes, Ellie didn’t have a relationship with her mom. But she’d also spent a lot of time sitting with the things her mother had done. They hurt her, but she’d also seen them as...normal. Because she didn’t know any different.

Caleb being shocked threw into sharp relief the fact that it wasn’t normal. Not at all.

“She said that we couldn’t have Christmas because it wouldn’t be right without Dave. He wasn’t even... He hadn’t even been around that long. He was just the boyfriend of the season. But every man was so important to her. So much more important than anything else. And I...” She swallowed. “I told her I wanted to have Christmas with her.”

She could remember it so keenly. That deep, desperate need to be loved. And that the tree—homely and broken and bedecked with homemade ornaments—felt like a piece of her heart.

“She said I wasn’t enough. To make it Christmas.” She cleared her throat. “So we didn’t have it that year. I got up early and wrapped myself in a blanket and ate cereal. I watched *A Christmas Story* on TV with the sound down.”

And she’d decided then she’d have to be enough for herself. That anything she did would have to be for her. And if she was happy, then that would have to be enough.

Thank God, too. Because if she hadn’t determined to find that inner strength, who knew where she’d be now. Who knew how life would have crumpled her up.

She’d figured out how to love without opening herself up the way her mother had. Without laying herself bare. Anyway, in Ellie’s mind that was obsession.

Ellie had found a brighter side to it. Companionship.

Sadness swept over her and she took a breath.

“Sometimes, I don’t think I’m a whole lot better than her,” she said, feeling miserable as they pulled up to the field with its rows and rows of trees.

“Why don’t you think you’re better?” he asked. “As far as I know, you’ve never done something like that to Amelia. You’re a great mother, El. You’ve certainly

never told your child she wasn't enough for you. And damn, you've lost. And still..."

She took a breath. "I know. But we always go to your parents' house for Christmas. And I love it. Your mom has definitely refined her whole Christmas thing." She swallowed. "But we don't have Christmas things that we get out. I just... I haven't wanted to do it."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"I don't know. I always felt like my mom was the Grinch. For not letting me enjoy Christmas. For making it all about her. Well, I don't really do anything different. It's all about me and what I don't want to do. And what I don't want to deal with."

"It's different," he said. "You lost Clint."

"Yeah. And my mom was often in a state of grief over men. And yes, it was different. But was it to her? It's weird. Sometimes I think about my mom and I get so angry. I think of all the things that she put me through, and how I would never, ever in a million years put Amelia through any of that. And then sometimes I just... I get tired. I get sad. I don't want to do a damn thing and I wonder... Is this what she felt, too? Did I just not know how hard it was sometimes? Because sometimes it's hard. Really, really hard. To put a smile on your face when you just feel crispy inside."

"Crispy?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "Don't you ever feel like that?"

"Define it."

"I don't know, like your insides are dry. And if you're not careful, they might just break. That's how I feel sometimes."

Silence settled between them like an itchy blanket. Heavy and uncomfortable.

“He was great,” Caleb said, finally. “The best. I can’t imagine growing up without him. He was my brother.”

Her heart twisted. It was so easy to forget Caleb’s grief in hers. In her worry about Amelia growing up without a father. But Caleb felt it right along with her. More than anyone else.

“I miss him,” Ellie said. “I miss him every time Amelia has a birthday. Every time she asks me questions about daddies. Sometimes I get really tired of missing him.” Her eyes felt scratchy, but there weren’t any tears. She cleared her throat. “Okay. Let’s look at your Christmas trees.”

She nearly stumbled out of the truck, not waiting for him to open the door for her, and into the crisp late-afternoon air.

There was something about it that helped cut through the cloying sadness that had threatened to overwhelm her just a moment ago.

Wasn’t that an awful thing to admit? That she was tired of grief. It didn’t seem fair.

Some days she felt like she *owed* him her lifelong grief. Because he’d died so young. Because she loved him, and his parents didn’t love him enough. And in many ways it seemed like the best thing to do was for her to carry an eternal flame for him.

But the very idea of that made her feel like she was trudging through a swamp, and in reality she wasn’t sure she could bear it.

She walked across four rows of trees, looking down at the endless paths that were forged through the middle. “How many trees are here?”

“Thirty thousand.”

“No way,” she said. “Thirty thousand trees?”

“Yes,” he said. “All in various stages of growth. But

there's about five thousand that are ready to go this year. The next year there will be twice that amount."

"Do you have enough room to have cattle and the Christmas trees on the ranch?"

"I should," he said. "If the trees are lucrative enough, I may never quit doing it. It's all lined out to keep going for the next four more years, even if I didn't replant."

"It seems like a pretty smart venture," she said.

"You sound surprised."

"No offense. And you know that I say this with a great amount of love. But you're not only a former bull rider, you're a current firefighter. And you fellas have a screw loose."

"True enough. Although, once I'm doing this full-time, I won't be doing the fires anymore."

"I..." Her heart twisted, did free-fall through her chest. "I'm actually really relieved to hear that. I tried not to be psychotic about it. But it really... It's always scared me that you did that still."

"I know."

"What happened to Clint was... Well, it wasn't even a freak accident. It was the result of neglect and poor safety standards on the part of the helicopter company. The odds of it happening again are so low. It was such a specific thing. But still, what you do is dangerous. And it... It scares me."

She couldn't fathom losing Caleb. She didn't want to. Ever.

"Yeah, well, I won't be doing it anymore. I don't really think you have to worry about any of these Christmas trees going rogue."

She smirked, happy to lighten the conversation a little bit. "I don't know. I seem to recall some late-night TV show. *When Christmas Trees Attack*."

“That seems legitimate.”

She grinned. “Right?”

His lips turned up into a half smile, and he looked out over the field. There was pride there on his face that resonated inside her. His eyes looked so blue in the late-afternoon light, pale though it was. He walked down one of the rows, and she watched him, his long stride, the way his broad shoulders filled up her vision. Everything inside her felt warm.

Just looking at him made her feel... Calm. Happy.

He was the safest of spaces. Her port in the storm, and even if he was here, that wouldn't change.

It wasn't going to change between them. He would be here for her. Because he always was. The very thought made her heart feel slightly too big for her chest.

Caleb Dalton was one of the few things she could count on in this whole world.

“You know Amelia is going to love this,” Ellie said. “She could dress as an elf at the lot.”

“Well, I imagine that would bring in business,” he said, turning and grinning at her.

“During the day it could be a family-friendly affair, and after dark...you could sell the Christmas trees with no shirt on.”

The idea made a funny little zip race through her midsection, up and then disconcertingly back down. She squeezed her thighs together.

He arched a brow. “It's going to be the dead of winter.”

“Sure,” she said. “But you know, it's not for you. It's for your female clientele.”

He snorted a laugh. “Should I ask you to come and wear a miniskirt, be my sexy elf?”

Another little shimmer radiated through her, and she

looked away from him, feeling slightly pinned down by the clarity and his blue gaze.

She sucked in a sharp shot of the cold air and looked down at the ground, trying to clear up some of the heat that had flooded her cheeks.

She looked back at him. "I don't think me in a sexy elf costume would work. It's well documented that women do most of the Christmas tree shopping for the household."

"Well, there are some women who may want to see it, Ellie."

"Okay, how about we don't sexualize the Christmas tree farm," she said.

"Possibly for the best." He pulled a face. "Gabe wants me to have the boys working at the lot anyway. And I don't want them around you if you're to be dressed as a sexy elf."

"No," she said, wrinkling her nose. "I am their teacher."

"Yeah, which means you know they already have inappropriate fantasies, but we don't need to encourage it."

"Yeah. Really no." His blue eyes were somehow just a bit too blue right then. She swallowed hard, confused by the dryness in her throat, and wandered down the same path that he was on. "I can't believe all this is yours."

"That's why I kept doing the fires," he said. "I was able to bank most of my money. Combined with the meager winnings I still had saved up from the rodeo."

She laughed. "Did you ever win in the rodeo?"

"Yes," he said. "I might not have been a champion like Gabe, but I did win some."

"You didn't stay at it very long."

“Yeah, Jacob was done. Clint had a wild new idea in mind...”

“Firefighting.”

“It seemed good. And hey, we got to travel around quite a bit. See the United States. I mean, mostly see the mountains of the United States on fire, but nonetheless.”

She stepped into the next row, peered around the pine tree and smiled at him. “Well, I like the Christmas trees. They are impressive.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Want to see the rest of the place?”

“I do,” she said.

The rest of the tour went easily, smoothly. No more strange pickups, no more moments of extreme sadness. And all of it served to comfort her further.

Things might be changing, but Caleb was staying the same.

Because that was who he was.

Her comfort. Her safety.

No matter where he lived, that would be true.

She knew that she could count on that, of the many, many things she couldn't.

With her intent to start moving forward, changing certain things, knowing that he would be ever constant, never changing, was one of the only things that brought her real comfort.

Want to know what happens next?

Order [\*Cowboy Christmas Redemption\* by Maisey Yates](#), available now, wherever books are sold!



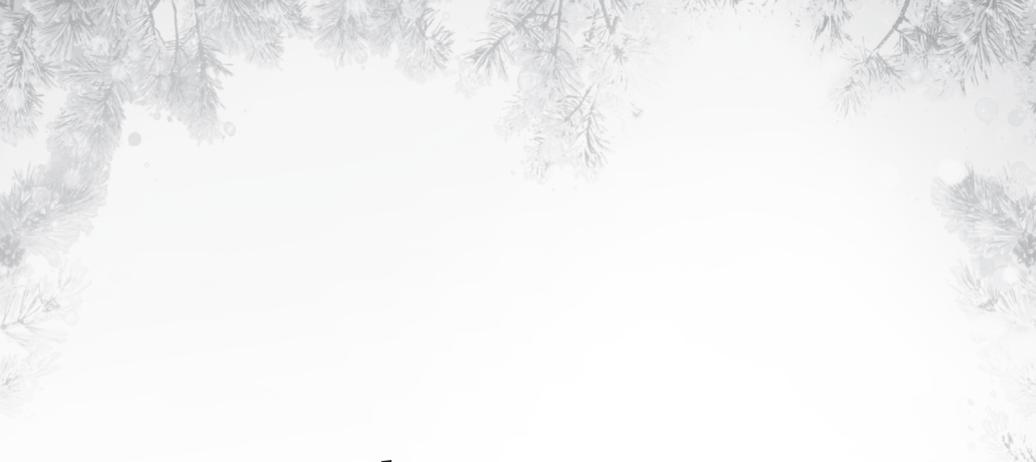
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RAEANNE THAYNE

Coming Home  
for  
*Christmas*

"[Thayne] engages the reader's heart and emotions,  
inspiring hope and the belief that miracles *are* possible."

—Debbie Macomber



# 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 un-

able 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

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 Brambleberry 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-

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.

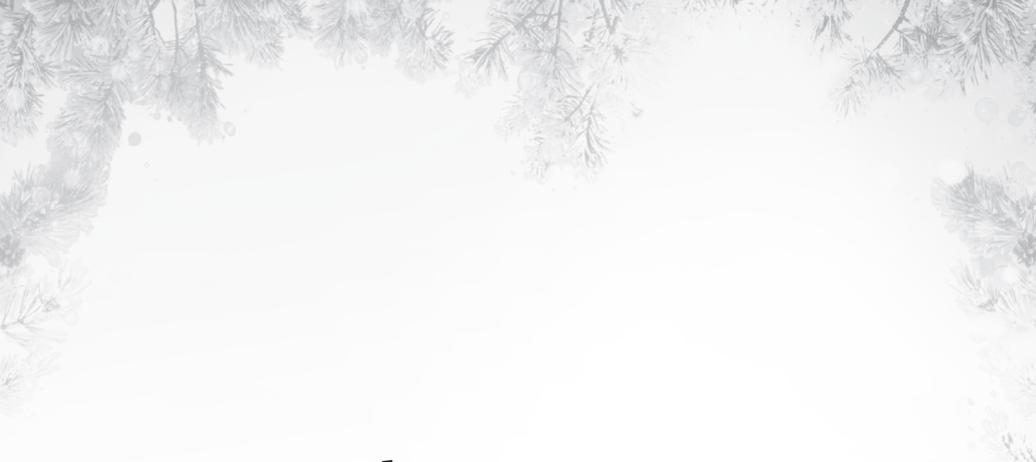
She would not make that mistake again.

“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 apart-

ment. 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 tongue-tied 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.

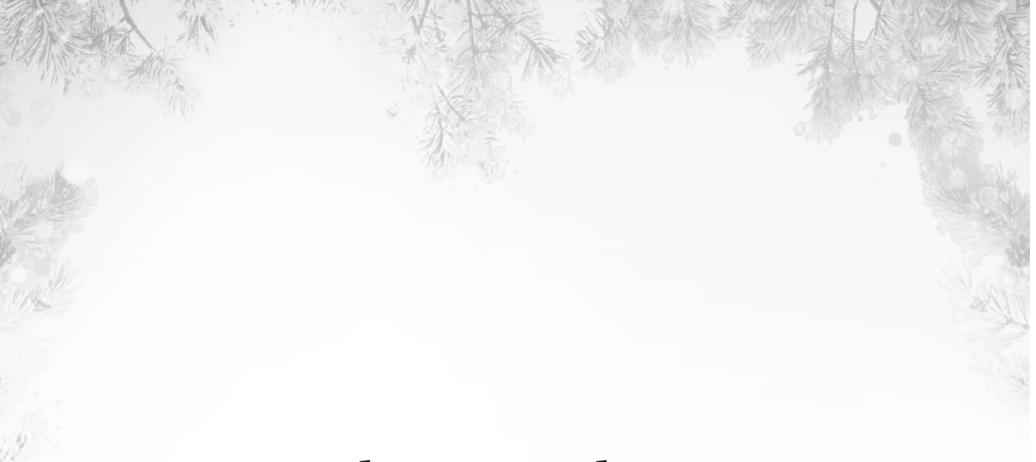
Anger and misery were a twisted coil in his chest as he drove east through the increasing snow along the Columbia River.

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-wheel-drive 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 ice-

cold 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

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.*

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

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.

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