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Cowboys of Cold Creek • by New York Times bestselling author RaeAnne Thayne

When librarian Celeste Nichols’s children’s book becomes a success, she’s stunned. Enter Flynn Delaney, her childhood crush, and his young daughter, who could use some of Celeste’s storytelling magic since her mother passed away. With the help of Cupid and Santa, this trio might just have the best Christmas yet!

Harlequin® American Romance®

HER MISTLETOE COWBOY
Forever, Texas • by USA TODAY bestselling author Marie Ferrarella

When journalist Kimberly Lee is injured while working on a story on The Healing Ranch, Garrett White Eagle takes her in. But the rancher and the writer soon find that wounds old and new might just heal in time for Christmas…

Love Inspired®

A RANGER FOR THE HOLIDAYS
Lone Star Cowboy League • by Allie Pleiter

Ranger Finn Brannigan wakes up in a hospital with no clue who he is. But this Christmas, with philanthropist Amelia Klondike by his side, he’ll recover more than his memory—he’ll find a love to last a lifetime.

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INTO THE STORM
Cameron’s Pride • Helen DePrima

Horse trainer Shelby Doucette goes from one job to the next, never stopping long enough to put down roots or get close to anyone. But when she meets widowed rancher Jake Cameron, she has to decide whether it’s time to stop running and face her past.
PROPOSAL AT THE WINTER BALL
by Jessica Gilmore

When one Christmas kiss between best friends Alex Fitzgerald and Flora Buckingham unleashes the feelings Alex has kept hidden for years, he must make a decision—step back and protect their friendship, or risk everything by going down on one knee...

A SAVANNAH CHRISTMAS WISH
Fitzgerald House • by Nan Dixon

Bess Fitzgerald never forgot her one night with Daniel Forester. Now they’re working together converting a mansion into a B and B, and the sparks between them are very much alive. But can she open her heart again to a man who sees her as his biggest mistake?
Excerpt from *A Cold Creek Christmas Story* by RaeAnne Thayne

Excerpt from *Her Mistletoe Cowboy* by Marie Ferrarella

Excerpt from *A Ranger for the Holidays* by Allie Pleiter

Excerpt from *Into the Storm* by Helen DePrima

Excerpt from *Proposal at the Winter Ball* by Jessica Gilmore

Excerpt from *A Savannah Christmas Wish* by Nan Dixon
A Cold Creek Christmas Story

RaeAnne Thayne
Chapter One

If she didn’t have thirty children showing up in the next half hour, Celeste Nichols would have been tempted to climb into her little SUV, pull out of the Pine Gulch library parking lot and just keep on driving.

She shifted the blasted endlessly ringing cell phone to the crook of her shoulder while she sorted through the books scattered across her cubicle in the offices of the library to find what she would be reading for story hour.

“I told you earlier in the week, I’m not ready to make a decision about this yet.”

Joan Manning, her and Hope’s long-suffering literary agent, gave a low, frustrated sound of disapproval. “We can’t hold them off much longer. We’ve already stalled for two weeks. They want to start production right after the holidays, and they can’t do that without signatures from you and Hope.”

Celeste gazed down at a copy of Dr. Seuss’s perennial holiday favorite, How the Grinch Stole Christmas. She had a feeling she was the one being the Grinch here. Hope was completely on board with the extraordinary offer one of the leading animation companies had made for movie rights to their book, Sparkle and the Magic Snowball.

Celeste was the one who couldn’t quite be comfortable with the idea of someone else taking control of her words, her creation, and turning Sparkle into an animated movie, complete with the attendant merchandising and sublicensing. A fast-food chain was already talking about making a toy for its kids’ meals, for crying out loud.

The whole journey of the past twelve months seemed like a bizarre, surreal, completely unbelievable dream.

A year ago she had known exactly who she was—an unassuming children’s librarian in the small town of Pine Gulch, Idaho, in the western shadow of the Teton Mountain Range.

Now, to her immense shock, she was a celebrated author about to see the release of her second children’s book with several more scheduled in the next few years. Along with that had come things she had never imagined when she’d been writing little stories for her niece and nephew—she had a website, a publicist, a literary agent.

Her quiet, safe world seemed to be spinning out of her control, and this movie deal was the prime example.

“A few more days, Celeste,” Joan pushed. “You can’t keep stalling. You have to make a decision. Hollywood has a short attention span and an even shorter supply of patience. Do you want your story made into a movie or not?”

She liked Joan very much, as brash and abrupt as the woman could be, but everything with her was an emergency and had to be decided right now. Pressure pains stabbed with little forks behind her eyes and her shoulders felt as if someone had jammed them in a vice and was cranking down hard.

“I know. I just need to be sure this is the right choice for Sparkle.”

“Sparkle is a fictional character. You need to be sure it’s the right choice for you and for your sister. We’ve been going over this for weeks. I don’t know what else I can say to convince you this is the best deal you’re going to get.”
“I know that. You’ve done a great job with the negotiations. I just need...a little more time.”
“A few days,” Joan said, her voice clipped with frustration. “That’s all, then I have to give them some kind of an answer.”
“I know. Thank you. I’ll get back with you tomorrow or the day after.”
“Just remember, most people would see this as a dream come true.”
Apparently, she wasn’t most people. After they said their goodbyes, Celeste set her cell phone back on the desk, again fighting the urge to climb into her SUV and keep on driving.
That was her sister Hope’s way, to wander from place to place as they had done in their itinerant childhood. Celeste was different. She liked security, consistency.

Normalcy.
In the past twelve months her life had been anything but normal. She had gone from writing only for herself and her niece and nephew to writing for a vast audience she never could have imagined.

It had all started when her sister Hope had come home the previous Christmas for what was supposed to be a brief stay between overseas teaching jobs. Hope had overheard her reading one of her stories to Louisa and Barrett and had put her considerable artistic skills to work illustrating the story to sell in the gift store of their family’s holiday-themed attraction, The Christmas Ranch.

The result had been a sweet, charming Christmas story about a brave little reindeer named Sparkle. Neither Hope nor Celeste had ever imagined the book would be touted by a presenter on one of the national morning news program—or that the resulting sales would explode internationally and end up saving the floundering Christmas Ranch and the family’s cattle operation, the Star N Ranch.

She was beyond gratified that so many people liked her writing and the story—and especially Hope’s delightful illustrations—but some part of her wanted to go back to that peaceful time when her biggest decisions revolved around what to read for her weekly story hour at the Pine Gulch Public Library.

With a sigh, she turned back to the job at hand. She was still sorting through the final choices when the head librarian poked her head into the cubicle.

“Looks as if we’re going to have a nice crowd.” Frankie Vittori, the head librarian, looked positively gleeful. “I hope we have room for everybody.”

“Oh, that’s terrific!” she exclaimed, mentally shelving her worries about the movie deal for now. She meant the words. She loved nothing more than introducing children to the wonder and magic to be found inside the pages of a good book.

Books had saved her. During the chaos of her childhood, they had offered solace and safety and hope amid fear. She had no idea how she would have survived without friends such as Anne of Green Gables, Bilbo Baggins, Matilda, Harry Potter and Hermione and Ron Weasley.

“I only hope we’ve got enough of our craft project to go around. It seems as if the crowd increases every month.”

Frankie grinned. “That’s because everybody in town wants to come hear our local celebrity author read in hopes of catching a sneak peek at the new Sparkle story coming down the pike.”

She managed to conceal her instinctive wince. She really didn’t like being a celebrity. On one level, it was immensely gratifying. Who would have ever dreamed that she—quiet, awkward, introverted Celeste Nichols—would be in this position, having people actually care what she had to say?

On another, it was terrifying. At some point the naked emperor was always exposed. She feared the
day when somebody would finally ask why all the fuss about her simple little tales.

For now, Frankie was simply thrilled to have a crowd at the library for any kind of reason. Celeste’s boss and friend vibrated with energy, as she always did, her toe tapping to unheard music and her fingers fidgeting on the edge of the desk. Frankie was as skinny as a flagpole, probably because she never stopped moving.

Her husband, Lou, on the other hand, was the exact opposite—a deep reservoir of calm serenity. They made the perfect pair and had two adorable kids who fell somewhere in the middle.

“I know it’s more work for you,” Frankie went on. “But I have to say, it’s a brilliant idea to have two story times, one for the younger kids in the morning and one for early and middle readers after school.”

Celeste smiled. “If you do say so yourself?”

Frankie beamed. “What can I say? I’m brilliant sometimes.”

“That you are.” Since Frankie had come to the library from upstate New York two years earlier, patron usage was way up and support had never been higher.

Frankie was bold and impassioned about the need for libraries, especially in the digital age. Celeste was more than a little envious of her overwhelming confidence, which helped the director fight for every penny of funding from the city council and the community in general.

Celeste would never be as outgoing and vivacious as Frankie, even though she was every bit as passionate about her job as the children’s librarian. She liked being behind the scenes—except for the weekly story times, her favorite part of the job.

She checked her watch and quickly stood up. “I guess I’d better get out there.”

She picked up the box of craft supplies they would use for the activity she had planned and headed for the large meeting room they had found worked best for story times.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Frankie said with a sly grin. “Make sure you check out the major hottie dad out there at ten o’clock.”

Despite her amazing husband, Frankie was always locating hot guys, whether at their weekly lunches at one of the restaurants in town or on the few trips they’d taken into Jackson Hole or Idaho Falls. She always said she was only scouting possible dates for Celeste, which made Celeste roll her eyes. Her last date had been months ago.

“Is he anybody I know?”

“I’ve never seen him before. He’s either new in town or a tourist. You can’t miss him. He’s wearing a Patek Philippe watch and a brown leather jacket that probably costs as much as our annual nonfiction budget. He’s definitely not your average Cold Creek cowboy with horse pucky on his boots.”

Okay, intriguing. She hadn’t heard of anybody new moving into the small town, especially not someone who could afford the kind of attire Frankie was talking about. Sometimes well-to-do people bought second or third homes in the area, looking for a mountain getaway. They built beautiful homes in lovely alpine settings and then proceeded to visit them once or twice a year.

“I’ll be sure to check him out while I’m trying to keep the kids entertained.”

Frankie was right about one thing—the place was packed. Probably thirty children ranging in age from about six to eleven sat on the floor while roughly that same number of parents sat in chairs around the room.

For just an instant she felt a burst of stage fright at the idea of all those people staring at her. She
quickly pushed it down. Normally she didn’t like being in front of a crowd, but this was her job and she loved it. How could she be nervous about reading stories to children? She would just pretend their parents weren’t there, like she usually did.

When she walked in, she was heartened by the spontaneous round of applause and the anticipation humming in the air.

She spotted a few people she recognized, friends and neighbors. Joey Santiago, nephew to her brother-in-law Rafe, sat beside his father, waving wildly at her.

She grinned and waved back at him. She would have thought Rafe was the hot dad—all that former navy SEAL mojo he had going on—but Frankie knew him well and he wasn’t wearing a leather jacket or an expensive watch anyway.

She loved Rafe dearly, for many reasons—most important because he adored her sister Hope—but also because she wasn’t sure she would be standing here, ready to entertain a group of thirty children with the magic of literature if not for his role in their lives so many years ago.

She saw a few other hot dads in the crowd—Justin Hartford, who used to be a well-known movie star but who seemed to fit in better now that he had been a rancher in Cold Creek Canyon for years. Ben Caldwell, the local veterinarian, was definitely hot. Then there was the fire chief, Taft Bowman, and his stepchildren. Taft always looked as though he could be the December cover model on a calendar of yummy firefighters.

All of them were locals of long-standing, though, and Frankie knew them well. They couldn’t be the man she was talking about.

Ah, well. She would try to figure out the mystery later, maybe while the children were making the snowman ornaments she had planned for them.

“Thank you so much for coming, everybody. We’re going to start off with one of my favorite Christmas stories.”

“Is it Sparkle and the Magic Snowball?” Alex Bowman, Taft’s stepson, asked hopefully.

She blushed a little as everyone laughed. “Not today. Today we’re focusing on stories about Christmas, snow and snowmen.”

Ben’s son raised his hand. “Is Sparkle going to be here today, Ms. Nichols?”

Was that why so many people had turned out? Were they all hoping she’d brought along the actual Sparkle, who was the celebrity in residence at The Christmas Ranch?

Last year, Hope had talked her into having their family’s beloved reindeer—and the inspiration for her eponymously named series of stories—make a quick appearance in the parking lot of the library.

“I’m afraid not. He’s pretty busy at The Christmas Ranch right now.”

She tried to ignore the small sounds of disappointment from the children and a few of their parents. “I’ve got tons of other things in store for you, though. To start out, here’s one of everyone’s favorite holiday stories, How the Grinch Stole Christmas.”

She started reading and, as usual, it only took a few pages before a hush fell over the room. The children were completely enthralled—not by her, she was only the vehicle, but by the power of story.

She became lost, too, savoring every word. When she neared the climax, she looked up for dramatic effect and found the children all watching her with eager expressions, ready for more. Her gaze lifted to the parents and she spotted someone she hadn’t seen before, a man sitting on the back row of parents with a young girl beside him.

He had brown hair shot through with lighter streaks, a firm jaw and deep blue eyes.
This had to be the hot dad Frankie had meant. Her heart began to pound fiercely, so loud in her ears she wondered if the children could hear it over the microphone clipped to her collar.

She knew this man, though she hadn’t seen him for years. Flynn Delaney.

She would recognize him anywhere. After all, he had been the subject of her daydreams all through her adolescence.

She hadn’t heard he was back in Pine Gulch. Why was he here? Was he staying at his grandmother’s house just down the road from the Star N? It made sense. His grandmother, Charlotte, had died several months earlier and her house had been empty ever since.

She suddenly remembered everything else that had happened to this man in the past few months and her gaze shifted to the young girl beside him, blonde and ethereal like a Christmas angel herself. Celeste’s heart seemed to melt.

This must be her. His daughter. Oh, the poor, poor dear.

The girl was gazing back at Celeste with her eyes wide and her hands clasped together at her chest as if she couldn’t wait another instant to hear the rest of the story.

Everyone was gazing at her with expectation, and Celeste realized she had stopped in the middle of the story to stare at Flynn and his daughter.

Appalled at herself, she felt heat soak her cheeks. She cleared her throat and forced her attention back to the story, reading the last few pages with rather more heartiness than she had started with.

This was her job, she reminded herself as she closed the book, helping children discover all the delights to be found in good stories.

She wasn’t here to ogle Flynn Delaney, for heaven’s sake, even when there was plenty about him any woman would consider ogle-worthy.

* * *

Flynn didn’t think he had ever felt quite so conspicuously out of place—and that included the times he had walked the red carpet with Elise at some Hollywood premiere or other, when he had invariably wanted to fade into the background.

They all seemed to know each other and he felt like the odd man out. Was everybody staring? He didn’t want to think so, but he seemed to feel each curious sidelong glance as the residents of Pine Gulch tried to figure out who he was.

At least one person knew. He was pretty sure he hadn’t imagined that flicker of recognition in Celeste Nichols’s eyes when she’d spotted him. It surprised him, he had to admit. They had only met a few times, all those years ago.

He only remembered her because she had crashed her bike in front of his grandmother’s house during one of his visits. Charlotte hadn’t been home, so Flynn had been left to tend her scrapes and bruises and help her get back to the Star N up the road.

Things like that stuck in a guy’s memory bank. Otherwise he probably never would have made the connection between the author of his daughter’s favorite book, Sparkle and the Magic Snowball, and the shy girl with long hair and glasses he had once known in another lifetime.

He wouldn’t be here at the library if not for Celeste, actually. He had so much work to do clearing
out his grandmother’s house and really didn’t have time to listen to Dr. Seuss, as great as the story might be, but what other choice did he have? Since leaving the hospital, Olivia had been a pale, frightened shadow of the girl she used to be. Once she had faced the world head-on, daring and curious and funny. Now she was afraid of so many things. Loud noises. Strangers. Crowds.

From the moment she’d found out that the author of her favorite book lived here in Pine Gulch where they were staying for a few weeks—and was the children’s librarian, who also hosted a weekly story hour—Olivia had been obsessed with coming. She had written the date of the next event on the calendar and had talked of nothing else.

She was finally going to meet the Sparkle lady, and she couldn’t have been more excited about it if Celeste Nichols had been Mrs. Santa Claus in the flesh.

For the first time in weeks she showed enthusiasm for something, and he had jumped at the chance to nurture that.

He glanced down at his daughter. She hadn’t shifted her gaze away from Celeste, watching the librarian with clear hero worship on her features. She seemed utterly enchanted by the librarian.

The woman was lovely, he would give her that much, though in a quiet, understated way. She had big green eyes behind her glasses and glossy dark hair that fell in waves around a heart-shaped face.

She was probably about four years younger than his own thirty-two. That didn’t seem like much now, but when she had crashed her bike, she had seemed like a little kid, thirteen or so to his seventeen.

As he listened to her read now, he remembered that time, wondering why it seemed so clear to him, especially with everything that had happened to him since.

He’d been out mowing the lawn when she’d fallen and had seen her go down out of the corner of his gaze. Flynn had hurried to help her and found her valiantly trying not to cry even though she had a wide gash in her knee that would definitely need stitches and pebbles imbedded in her palm.

He had helped her into his grandmother’s house and called her aunt Mary. While they’d waited for help, he had found first-aid supplies—bandages, ointment, cleansing wipes—and told her lousy jokes to distract her from the pain.

After Mary had taken her to the ER for stitches in her knee and he had finished mowing for his grandmother, he had gone to work fixing her banged-up bike with skills he had picked up from his mother’s chauffeur.

Later that day, he had dropped off the bike at the Star N, and she had been almost speechless with gratitude. Or maybe she just had been shy with older guys; he didn’t know.

He had stayed with his grandmother for just a few more weeks that summer, but whenever he had seen Celeste in town at the grocery store or the library, she had always blushed fiercely and offered him a shy but sweet smile.

Now he found himself watching her intently, hoping for a sight of that same sweet smile, but she seemed to be focusing with laser-like intensity on the books in front of her.

She read several more holiday stories to the children, then led them all to one side of the large room, where tables had been set up.

“I need all the children to take a seat,” she said in a prim voice he found incongruously sexy. “We’re going to make snowman ornaments for you to hang on your tree. When you’re finished, they’ll look like this.”

She held up a stuffed white sock with buttons glued on to it for eyes and a mouth, and a piece of felt
tied around the neck for a scarf.

“Oh,” Olivia breathed. “That’s so cute! Can I make one, Dad?”

Again, how could he refuse? “Sure, if there are enough to go around.”

She limped to a seat and he propped up the wall along with a few other parents so the children each could have a spot at a table. Celeste and another woman with a library name badge passed out supplies and began issuing instructions.

Olivia looked a little helpless at first and then set to work. She seemed to forget for the moment that she rarely used her left hand. Right now she was holding the sock with that hand while she shoved in pillow fluff stuffing with the other.

While the children were busy crafting, Celeste made her way around the tables, talking softly to each one of them.

Finally she came to them.

“Nice job,” she said to his daughter. Ah, there it was. She gave Olivia that sweet, unguarded smile that seemed to bloom across her face like the first violets of springtime.

That smile turned her from a lovely if average-looking woman into a breathtaking creature with luminous skin and vivid green eyes.

He couldn’t seem to stop staring at her, though he told himself he was being ridiculous.

“You’re the Sparkle lady, aren’t you?” Olivia breathed.

Color rose instantly in her cheeks and she gave a surprised laugh. “I suppose that’s one way to put it.”

“I love that story. It’s my favorite book ever.”

“I’m so happy to hear that.” She smiled again, though he thought she looked a little uncomfortable. “Sparkle is pretty close to my heart, too.”

“My dad bought a brand-new copy for me when I was in the hospital, even though I had one at home.”

She said the words in a matter-of-fact tone as if the stay had been nothing more than a minor inconvenience. He knew better. She had spent two weeks clinging to life in intensive care after an infection had ravaged her system, where he had measured his life by each breath the machines took for her.

Most of the time he did a pretty good job of containing his impotent fury at the senseless violence that had touched his baby girl, but every once in a while the rage swept over him like a brushfire on dry tinder. He let out a breath as he felt a muscle flex in his jaw.

“Is that right?” Celeste said with a quick look at him.

“It’s my very favorite book,” Olivia said again, just in case Celeste didn’t hear. “Whenever I had to do something I didn’t want to, like have my blood tested or go to physical therapy, I would look at the picture of Sparkle on the last page with all his friends and it would make me feel better.”

At Olivia’s words, Celeste’s big eyes filled with tears and she rocked back on her heels a little. “Oh. That’s...lovely. Thank you so much for letting me know. I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

“You’re welcome,” Olivia said with a solemn smile. “My favorite part is when Sparkle helps the animals with their Christmas celebration. The hedgehog is my favorite.”

“He’s cute, isn’t he?”

The two of them gazed at each other in perfect charity for a moment longer before a boy with blond
hair and a prominent widow’s peak tried to draw Celeste’s attention.

“Ms. Nichols. Hey, Ms. Nichols. How do we glue on the hat?”

“I’ll show you. Just a minute.” She turned back to Olivia. “It was very nice to meet you. You’re
doing a great job with your snowman. Thanks for letting me know you enjoy the book.”

“You’re welcome.”

When she left, Olivia turned back to her project with renewed effort. She was busy gluing on the
button eyes when the woman beside Flynn finally spoke to him.

“You’re new in town. I don’t think we’ve met.” She was blonde and pretty in a classic sort of way,
with a baby on her hip. “I’m Caroline Dalton. This is my daughter, Lindy. Over there is my son,
Cole.”

He knew the Daltons. They owned much of the upper portion of Cold Creek Canyon. Which brother
was she married to?

“Hello. I’m Flynn Delaney, and this is my daughter, Olivia. We’re not really new in town. That is,
we’re not staying anyway. We’re here just for a few weeks, and then we’re going back to California.”

“I hope you feel welcome here. This is a lovely place to spend the holidays.”

“I’m sure it is, but we’re not really tourists, either. I’m cleaning out my grandmother’s home so I
can put it up for sale.”

He could have hired someone to come and clean out the house. There were companies that handled
exactly that sort of thing, but as he and Olivia were Charlotte’s only surviving descendants, he’d felt
obligated to go through the house himself.

“Delaney. Oh, Charlotte! She must have been your grandmother.”

“That’s right.”

Her features turned soft and a little sad. “Oh, everyone adored your grandmother. What a
firecracker she was! Pine Gulch just doesn’t feel the same without her.”

His life didn’t feel the same, either. He hadn’t seen her often the past few years, just quick
semiannual visits, but she had been a steady source of affection and warmth in his chaotic life.

He had barely had the chance to grieve her passing. That bothered him more than anything else. He
hadn’t even been able to attend the memorial service members of her church congregation had held
for her here. He had been too busy in the ICU, praying for his daughter’s life.

“I miss her, too,” he said quietly.

She looked at him with kindness and warmth. “I’m sure you do. She was an amazing person and I
feel blessed to have known her. If you need help sorting through things, please let me know. I’m sure
we could find people to give you a hand.”

With only a little more than a week to go before Christmas? He doubted that. People were probably
too busy to help.

He didn’t bother to express his cynicism to Caroline Dalton. “Thanks,” he said instead.

“Despite your difficult task, I hope you’re able to find a little holiday spirit while you’re here.”

Yeah, he wasn’t a huge Christmas fan for a whole slew of reasons, but he saw no reason to share
that with a woman he’d just met.

“Daddy, I can’t tie the scarf. Can you help me?” Olivia asked.

She could use her left arm and hand. He’d seen her do it at therapy or when she lost herself in an
activity, but most of the time she let it hang down uselessly. He didn’t know how to force her into
using it.
“Try again,” he said.
“I can’t. It’s too hard,” she answered plaintively. He sighed, not wanting to push her unnecessarily and ruin her tentative enjoyment of the afternoon.
He leaned down to help her tie the felt scarf just as Celeste made her way back around the table to them.
“I love that snowman!” she exclaimed with a smile. “He looks very friendly.”
Olivia’s answering smile seemed spontaneous and genuine. Right then Flynn wanted to hug Celeste Nichols on the spot, even though he hadn’t talked to her for nearly two decades.
His little girl hadn’t had much to smile about over the past few months. He had to hope this was a turning point, a real chance for her to return to his sweet and happy daughter.
At this point, he was willing to bring Olivia to the library every single day if Celeste could help his daughter begin to heal her battered heart.
She was late.

By the time she helped the last little boy finish his snowman, ushered them all out of the meeting room and then cleaned up the mess of leftover pillow stuffing and fleece remnants, it was forty minutes past the time she had told her sisters to expect her.

They would understand, she was sure. Hope might tease her a little, but Faith probably wouldn’t say anything. Their eldest sister saved her energy for the important things like running the cattle ranch and taking care of her children.

She stopped first at the foreman’s little cottage, just down the driveway from the main house. It felt strange to be living on her own again after the past year of being back in her own bedroom there. She had moved back after her brother-in-law Travis died the previous summer so she could help Faith—and Aunt Mary, of course—with the children and the housekeeping.

Hope had lived briefly in the foreman’s house until she and Rafe married this fall. After she’d moved into the house they purchased together, Faith and Mary had taken Celeste aside and informed her firmly that she needed her own space to create. She was a bestselling author now. While Faith loved and appreciated her dearly, she didn’t want Celeste to think she had to live at the ranch house for the rest of her life.

Rather reluctantly, she had moved to the foreman’s cottage, a nice compromise. She did like her own space and the quiet she found necessary to write, but she was close enough to pop into the ranch house several times a day.

As she walked inside, her little Yorkie, Linus, rolled over with glee at the sight of her.

She had to smile, despite her exhaustion from a long day, the lingering stress from the phone call with Joan and the complete shock of seeing Flynn Delaney once more.

“How was your day?” she asked the little dog, taking just a moment to sink onto the sofa and give him a little love. “Mine was crazy. Thanks for asking. The weirdest I’ve had in a long time—and that’s saying something, since the entire past year has been surreal.”

She hugged him for a moment. As she might have predicted, a sleek black cat peeked her head around the corner to see what all the fuss was about.

Lucy, who had been with her since college, strutted in with a haughty air that only lasted long enough for her to leap onto the sofa and bat her head against Celeste’s arm for a little of the same attention.

The two pets were the best of friends, which helped her feel less guilty about leaving them alone during the day. They seemed to have no problem keeping each other company most of the time, but that didn’t stop them from exhibiting classic signs of sibling rivalry at random moments.

She felt her tension trickle away as she sat in her quiet living room with her creatures while the Christmas tree lights that came on automatically gleamed in the gathering darkness. Why couldn’t she stay here all evening? There were worse ways to spend a December night.

Linus yipped a little, something he didn’t do often, but it reminded her of why she had stopped at the house.

“I know. I’m late. I just have to grab Aunt Mary’s present. Give me a second.”
She found the gift in her bedroom closet, the door firmly shut to keep Lucy from pulling apart the tissue paper inside the gift bag.

“Okay. I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Linus’s tail wagged with excitement, but Lucy curled up on the sofa, making abundantly clear her intent to stay put and not venture out into the cold night.

“Fine. Be that way,” she said, opening the door for the dog. The two of them made their way through lightly falling snow to the ranch house, a sprawling log structure with a steep roof and three gables along the front. Linus scampered ahead of her to the front door. When she opened it, the delicious scents of home greeted her—roast beef, potatoes and what smelled very much like cinnamon apple pie.

As she expected, her entire family was there, all the people she loved best in the world. Aunt Mary, the guest of honor, was busy at the stove stirring something that smelled like her heavenly brown gravy. She stepped aside to let Faith pull a pan of rolls out of the oven as Hope helped the children set the table, where her husband, Rafe, sat talking with their neighbor Chase Brannon.

The children spotted Linus first. They all adored each other—in fact, the children helped her out by letting him out when they got home from school and playing with him for a little bit.

“There you are,” Faith exclaimed. “I was beginning to worry.”

“Sorry. I sent you a text.”

Faith made a face. “My phone ran out of juice sometime this afternoon, but I didn’t realize it until just now. Is everything okay?”

Not really, though she wasn’t sure what bothered her more—the movie decision she would have to make in the next few days or the reappearance of Flynn Delaney in her world. She couldn’t seem to shake the weird feeling that her safe, comfortable world was about to change.

“Fine,” she said evasively. “I hope you didn’t hold dinner for me.”

“Not really. I was tied up going over some ranch accounts with Chase this afternoon, and we lost track of time.”

“Fine. Blame me. I can take it,” Chase said, overhearing.

“We always do,” Hope said with a teasing grin.

Chase had been invaluable to their family since Faith’s husband died, and Celeste was deeply grateful to him for all his help during the subsequent dark and difficult months.

“I’m happy to blame you, as long as that means I wasn’t the cause of any delay in Aunt Mary’s birthday celebration,” Celeste said with a smile as she headed for her great-aunt.

She kissed the woman’s lined cheek as the familiar scent of Mary’s favorite White Shoulders perfume washed over her. “Happy birthday, my dear. You are still just as stunning as ever.”

Mary’s grin lit up her nut-brown eyes. “Ha. Double sevens. That’s got to be lucky, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“I don’t need luck. I’ve got my family around me, don’t I?”

She smiled at them all and Celeste hugged her again, deeply grateful for her great-aunt and her great-uncle Claude, who had opened their hearts to three grieving, traumatized girls and gave them a warm haven and all the love they could need.

“We’re the lucky ones,” she murmured with another hug before she stepped away.

For all intents and purposes, Mary had been her mother since Celeste turned eleven. She had been a wonderful one. Celeste was all too aware that things could have been much different after their
parents died if not for Mary and Claude. She and her sisters probably would have been thrown into
the foster care system, likely separated, certainly not nurtured and cared for with such love.

She had a sudden, unexpected wish that their mother could be here, just for a moment, to see how
her daughters had turned out—to meet her grandchildren, to see Hope so happily settled with Rafe, to
see the completely unexpected success of their Sparkle book.

December always left her a little maudlin. She supposed that wasn’t unexpected, considering it had
been the month that had changed everything, when she, her sisters and their parents had been hostages
of a rebel group in Colombia. Her father had been killed in the rescue effort by a team of US Navy
SEALs that had included Rafe Santiago, who was now her brother-in-law.

She wouldn’t think about that now. This was a time of celebration, a time to focus on the joy of
being with her family, not the past.

She grabbed a black olive out of a bowl on the counter and popped it in her mouth as she carried
the bowl to the table.

“I talked to Joan this afternoon,” she told Hope.

“I know. She called me, too. I reminded her that any decision about making a movie had to be made
jointly between us, and each of us had veto power. Don’t worry, CeCe. I told her firmly that I
wouldn’t pressure you. You created the Sparkle character. He belongs to you.”

That wasn’t completely true and both of them knew it. She might have written the words, but it was
Hope’s illustrations that had brought him to life.

“I don’t know what to do,” she admitted as Faith and Mary joined them at the table carrying
bowls and trays of food.

“Your problem has always been that you analyze everything to death,” Mary pointed out. “You
know someone is going to make a Sparkle movie at some point. It’s as inevitable as Christmas coming
every year. People love the story and the characters too much. If you like this production company and
think they’ll do a good job with it based on their reputation, I don’t know why you’re dragging your
feet.”

Mary was right, she realized. She was overthinking, probably because she was so concerned with
making the right decision.

She hated being afraid all the time. She knew it was a by-product of the trauma she and her sisters
had endured at a young age, but neither Hope nor Faith seemed as impacted as she had been.

Hope seemed absolutely fearless, spending years wandering around underdeveloped countries with
the Peace Corps, and then on her own teaching English. Faith had plowed all her energy and attention
into her family—her marriage, her children, the ranch.

Celeste’s life had become her job at the library and the stories she created.

In some ways, she supposed she was still a hostage of Juan Pablo and his crazy group of militants,
afraid to take a move and embrace her life.

“Everything’s ready and I’m starving,” Mary said cheerfully. “What are we waiting for? Let’s eat.”
Dinner was noisy and chaotic, with several different conversations going at once.

“How did story time go?” Faith asked when there was a lull in the conversation.
She instantly remembered the shock of looking up from Dr. Seuss to see Flynn and his daughter.

“Good.” She paused. “Charlotte Delaney’s grandson, Flynn, and his daughter were there. I guess
he’s in town to clean out Charlotte’s house.”

“Flynn Delaney.” Hope made a sound low in her throat. “I used to love it whenever he came to stay
Celeste dropped her fork with a loud clatter, earning her a curious look from Hope.

“Really?” Rafe said, eyebrow raised. “So all this time I should have been taking my shirt off to mow the lawn?”

Hope grinned at him. “You don’t need to take your shirt off. You’re gorgeous enough even when you’re wearing a parka. Anyway, I was a teenage girl. Now that I’m older and wiser I prefer to use my imagination.”

He shook his head with an amused look, but Celeste was certain his ears turned a little red.

“You said Flynn came into the library with his daughter,” Faith said, her voice filled with compassion. “That poor girl. How is she?”

Considering Flynn’s connection to Charlotte, whom they all had loved, everyone in Pine Gulch had followed the news reports. Celeste thought of Olivia’s big, haunted eyes, the sad, nervous air about her.

“Hard to say. She limped a little and didn’t use her left arm while we were doing the craft project, but other than that she seemed okay.”

“You remember,” Hope insisted. “We talked about it. He was married to Elise Chandler.”


“Right?” Hope frowned. “What a tragedy. I saw on some tabloid in the supermarket that Flynn never left her side through the whole recovery.”

Somehow that didn’t seem so surprising, especially considering his devotion to his daughter during story time.

“What happened to her?” Louisa asked. At eleven, she was intensely interested in the world around her.

Her mother was the one who answered. “Elise Chandler was a famous actress,” Faith said. “She was in that superhero movie you loved so much and a bunch of other films. Anyway, she was involved with someone who turned out to be a pretty messed-up guy. A few months ago after a big fight, he shot Elise and her daughter before shooting and killing himself. Even though she was injured, Olivia managed to crawl to her mother’s phone and call 911.”

Celeste had heard that 911 call, which had been made public shortly after the shooting, and the sound of that weak, panic-stricken voice calling for help had broken her heart.

“She seems to be doing well now. She didn’t smile much, but she did tell me she loves the Sparkle book and that her dad used to read it to her over and over again in the hospital.”

“Oh, how lovely!” Hope exclaimed. “You should take her one of the original Sparkle toys I sewed. I’ve still got a few left.”

“That’s a lovely idea,” Mary exclaimed. “We definitely should do something for that poor, poor girl. It would have broken Charlotte’s heart if she’d still been alive to see Flynn’s little girl have to go through such a thing.”

“You have to take it over there,” Hope insisted. “And how about a signed copy of the book and the new one that hasn’t come out yet?”
Her heart pounded at the idea of seeing the man again. She couldn’t imagine knocking on his door out of the blue. “Why don’t you take it over? You’re the illustrator! And you made the stuffed Sparkle, too.”

“I don’t even know him or his daughter.”

“As if that’s ever stopped you before,” she muttered.

“It would be a really nice thing to do,” Faith said.

“I baked an extra pie,” Aunt Mary said. “Why don’t you take that, too?”

All day long people had been pushing her to do things she didn’t want to. She thought longingly of jumping in her SUV again and taking off somewhere, maybe Southern California where she could find a little sunshine. As tempting as the idea might be sometimes, she knew she couldn’t just leave her family. She loved them to bits, even when they did pressure her.

She wanted to tell them all no, but then she thought of Olivia and her sad eyes. This was a small expenditure of effort on her part and would probably thrill the girl. “That’s a very good idea,” she finally said. “I’ll go after dinner. Linus can probably use the walk.”

“Perfect.” Hope beamed at her as if she had just won the Newbery Medal for children’s literature. “I’ll look for the stuffed Sparkle. I think there’s a handful of them left in a box in my old room.”

What would Flynn think when she showed up at his house with a stuffed animal and an armful of books? she wondered as she chewed potatoes that suddenly tasted like chalk.

It didn’t matter, she told herself. She was doing this for his daughter, a girl who had been through a terrible ordeal—and who reminded her entirely too much of herself.
“Are you sure you don’t want to help? This tinsel isn’t going to jump on the tree by itself.”

Flynn held a sparkly handful out to his daughter, who sat in the window seat, alternating between watching him and looking out into the darkness at the falling snowflakes.

She shook her head. “I can’t,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “My arm hurts too much.”

He tried to conceal his frustrated sigh behind a cough. The physical therapist he had been taking her to since her injury had given him homework during this break while they were in Idaho. His assignment was to find creative activities that would force her to use her arm more.

He had tried a wide variety of things, like having Olivia push the grocery cart and help him pick out items in the store, and asking her help in the kitchen with slicing vegetables. The inconsistency of it made him crazy. Sometimes she was fine; other times she refused to use her arm at all.

After their trip to the library, he’d realized his grandmother’s house was severely lacking in holiday cheer. She had made a snowman ornament and they had nowhere to hang it.

Any hope he might have harbored that she would show a little enthusiasm for the idea of decking their temporary halls was quickly dashed. She showed the same listless apathy toward Christmas decorations as she had for just about everything else except Celeste Nichols and her little reindeer story.

Other than hanging her own snowman ornament, she wasn’t interested in helping him hang anything else on the small artificial tree he had unearthed in the basement. As a result, he had done most of the work while she sat and watched, not budging from her claim of being in too much pain.

He knew using her arm caused discomfort. He hadn’t yet figured out how to convince an almost-seven-year-old she needed to work through the pain if she ever wanted to regain full mobility in her arm.

“Come on. Just take a handful and help me. It will be fun.”

She shook her head and continued staring out at the falling snow.

Since the shooting, these moods had come over her out of nowhere. She would seem to be handling things fine and then a few moments later would become fearful, withdrawn and just want him to leave her alone.

The counselor she had seen regularly assured him it was a natural result of the trauma Olivia had endured. He hated that each step in her recovery—physical and emotional—had become such a struggle for her.

After hanging a few more strands, he finally gave up. What was the point when she didn’t seem inclined to help him, especially since he’d never much liked tinsel on trees anyway?

His father hadn’t, either, he remembered. He had a stray memory of one of his parents’ epic fights over it one year. Diane had loved tinsel, naturally. Anything with glitz had been right down her alley. Her favorite nights of the year had been red carpet events, either for her own movie premieres or those of her friends.

His father, on the other hand, had thought tinsel was stupid and only made a mess.

One night when he was about seven or eight, a few years before they’d finally divorced, his mother had spent hours hanging pink tinsel on their tree over his father’s objections, carefully arranging each
When they’d woken up, the tinsel had been mysteriously gone. As it turned out, Tom had arisen hours before anyone else and had pulled off every last shiny strand.

After a dramatic screaming fight—all on his mother’s side—she had stormed out of their Bel Air house and hadn’t been back for several days, as he recalled.

Ah, memories.

He pushed away the bitterness of his past and turned back to his daughter. “If you don’t want to hang any more tinsel, I guess we’re done. Do you want to do the honors and turn out the lights so we can take a look at it?”

She didn’t answer him, her gaze suddenly focused on something through the window.

“Someone’s coming,” Olivia announced, her voice tight. She jumped up from the window seat. “I’m going to my room.”

He was never sure which she disliked more: large, unruly crowds or unexpected visitors showing up at the door. Nor was he certain she would ever be able to move past either fear.

With effort he forced his voice to be calm and comforting. “There’s no reason to go to your room. Everything is fine. I’m right here. You’re okay.”

She darted longing little glances down the hall to the relative safety of her bedroom, but to her credit she sat down again in the window seat. When the doorbell rang through the house, Flynn didn’t miss her instinctive flinch or the tense set of her shoulders.

He hoped whoever it was had a darn good excuse for showing up out of the blue like this and frightening his little girl half to death.

To his shock, the pretty librarian and author stood on the porch with a bag in her hand and a black-and-brown dog at the end of a leash. In the glow from the porch light he could see her nose and cheeks were pink from the cold, and those long, luscious dark curls were tucked under a beanie. She also wasn’t wearing her glasses. Without the thick dark frames, her eyes were a lovely green.

“Hello.” She gave him a fleeting, tentative smile that appeared and disappeared as quickly as a little bird hunting for berries on a winter-bare shrub.


She gave him another of those brief smiles, then tried to look behind him to where Olivia had approached. At least his daughter now looked more surprised and delighted than fearful.

“And hello, Miss Olivia,” the librarian said. “How are you tonight?”

Her voice was soft, calm, with a gentleness he couldn’t help but appreciate.

“Hi. I’m fine, thank you,” she said shyly. “Is that your dog?”

Celeste smiled as the dog sniffed at Olivia’s feet. “This is Linus. He’s a Yorkshire terrier and his best friend is a black cat named Lucy.”

“Like in Charlie Brown’s Christmas!” She looked delighted at making the connection.

“Just like that, except Linus and Lucy are brother and sister. My Linus and Lucy are just friends.”

Olivia slanted her head to look closer at the little dog. “Will he bite?”

Celeste smiled. “He’s a very sweet dog and loves everybody, but especially blonde girls with pretty red sweaters.”

Olivia giggled at this, and after another moment during which she gathered her courage, she held out her hand. The little furball licked it three times in quick succession, which earned another giggle from his daughter.
"Hi, Linus," she said in a soft voice. "Hi. I'm Olivia."

The dog wagged his tail but didn't bark, which Flynn had to appreciate given how skittish Olivia had been all evening.

She knelt down and started petting the dog—using her injured left arm, he saw with great surprise. "He likes me!" Olivia exclaimed after a moment, her features alight with a pleasure and excitement he hadn't seen in a long time.

"Of course he does." Celeste smiled down at her with a soft light in her eyes that touched something deep inside him.

"I'm sorry to just drop in like this, but I couldn't help thinking tonight about what you told me earlier, how the Sparkle book helped you in the hospital."

"It's my favorite book. I still read it all the time."

"I'm so happy to hear that. I told my sister, who drew all the pictures, and she was happy, too. We wanted to give you something."

"Is it for my birthday in three days? I'm going to be seven years old."

"I had no idea it was your birthday in three days!" Celeste exclaimed. "We can certainly consider this an early birthday present. That would be perfect!"

She reached into the bag and pulled out a small stuffed animal.

"That's Sparkle from the book!" Olivia rose to see it more closely.

"That's right. My sister made this while she was drawing the pictures for the first Sparkle book last Christmas. We have just a few of them left over from the original hundred or so she made, and I wondered if you might like one."

Olivia's eyes went huge. "Really? I can keep it?"

"If you want to."

"Oh, I do!" Almost warily, she reached for the stuffed animal Celeste held out. When it was in her hands, she hugged it to her chest as if afraid someone would yank it away.

For just a moment she looked like any other young girl, thrilled to be receiving a present. The sheer normalcy made his throat suddenly ache with emotions.

"He's soo cute. I love it! Thank you!"

Olivia threw her arms around Celeste in a quick hug. Flynn wasn't sure if he was more shocked at her use of her injured arm or at the impulsive gesture. Like a puppy that had been kicked one too many times, Olivia shied away from physical touch right now from anyone but him.

Her therapist said it was one more reaction to the trauma she had endured and that eventually she would be able to relax around others and return to the sweet, warm little girl she once had been. He wondered if Dr. Ross ever would have guessed a stuffed reindeer might help speed that process.

Celeste probably had no idea what a rare gift she had just been given as she hugged Olivia back. Still, she looked delighted. "You're very welcome," she said. "You will have to come up to The Christmas Ranch sometime. That's where the real Sparkle lives."

"Can we go see them, Dad? Can we?"

He shrugged. That was the thing about kids. They dragged you to all kinds of places you didn't
necessarily want to go. “Don’t know why not. We can probably swing that before the holidays.”

Christmas was just around the corner and he was completely unprepared for it. He didn’t like celebrating the holidays in the first place. He didn’t really feel like hanging out at some cheesy Christmas moneymaking venture aimed at pouring holiday spirit down his throat like cheap bourbon.

But he loved his daughter, and if she wanted to go to the moon right now, he would figure out a way to take her.

“I like your tree,” Celeste said, gazing around his grandmother’s cluttered living room. “I especially like the tinsel. Did you help your dad put it up?”

A small spasm of guilt crossed her features. “Not really,” she admitted. “My dad did most of it. I have a bad arm.”

She lifted her shoulder and the arm in question dangled a little as if it were an overcooked lasagna noodle.

To her credit, Celeste didn’t question how she could use that same arm to pet the dog or hold a stuffed reindeer.

“Too bad,” she only said. “You’re probably really good at hanging tinsel.”

“Pretty good. I can’t reach the high parts of the tree, though.”

“Your dad helps you get those, right?”

“I guess.”

Celeste picked up the bag of tinsel where Flynn had left it on the console table. “Can I help you put the rest of it up on the side you didn’t get to yet? I’m kind of a tinsel expert. Growing up on The Christmas Ranch, I had to be.”

Olivia looked at the tree, then her father, then back at Celeste holding the tinsel. “Okay,” she said with that same wariness.

“It will be fun. You’ll see. Sparkle can help. He’s good at tinsel, too.”

How she possibly could have guessed from a half-tinselied tree that he had been trying to enlist his daughter’s help with decorating, he had no idea. But he wasn’t about to argue with her insight, especially when Olivia obediently followed her new heroine to the tree and reached for a handful of tinsel.

“Can I take your coat?” he asked.

“Oh. Yes. Thanks.” She gave a nervous little laugh as she handed him her coat. At the library, she had been wearing a big, loose sweater that had made him wonder what was beneath it. She had taken that layer off apparently, and now she wore a cheerful red turtleneck that accentuated her luscious curves and made his mouth water.

He had an inkling that she was the sort of woman who had no idea the kind of impact she had on a man. As he went to hang her coat by the front door, he forced himself to set aside the reaction as completely inappropriate under the circumstances, especially when she was only trying to help his kid.

When he returned to the living room, he found her and Olivia standing side by side hanging tinsel around the patches of the tree he had left bare.

Her cute little dog had finished sniffing the corners of the room and planted himself on his haunches in the middle of the floor, where he could watch the proceedings.

Flynn leaned against the doorjamb to do the same thing.

How odd, that Olivia would respond to a quiet children’s librarian and author more than she had...
her counselor, her physical therapist, the caregivers at the hospital. She seemed to bloom in this woman’s company, copying her actions on the lower branches she could reach. While she still seemed to be favoring her injured arm, occasionally she seemed to forget it hurt and used it without thinking.

All in all, it wasn’t a terrible way to spend a December evening while a gas fire flickered in Grandma Charlotte’s fireplace and snowflakes fluttered down outside the window.

After several moments, the two of them used the last of the tinsel and Celeste stepped away to take in the bigger picture.

“That looks perfect!” she exclaimed. “Excellent job.”

Olivia’s smile was almost back to her normal one. She held up the stuffed animal. “Sparkle helped.”

“I told you he would be very good at hanging tinsel.”

Whatever worked, he figured. “Let me hit the lights for you,” he said. “We can’t appreciate the full effects with the lights on.”

He turned them off, pitching the room into darkness except for the gleaming tree. The tinsel really did reflect the lights. His mom had been right about that, even if she had gotten so many other things wrong.

“Oh. I love it. It’s the prettiest tree ever,” Olivia declared.

“I have to agree,” Flynn said. “Good job, both of you.”

“And you,” Olivia pointed out. “You did most of it earlier. We only filled in the gaps.”

“So I did. We’re all apparently excellent at decorating Christmas trees.”

Celeste met his gaze and smiled. He gazed back, struck again by how lovely she was with those big green eyes that contrasted so strikingly with her dark hair.

He was staring, he realized, and jerked his gaze away, but not before he thought he saw color climb her high cheekbones. He told himself it must have been a trick of the Christmas lights.

“Oh, I nearly forget,” she exclaimed suddenly. “I have another birthday present for you. Two, actually.”

“You do?” Olivia lit up.

“Well, it’s not actually your birthday yet, so I completely understand if you want to wait. I can just give them to your dad to hold until the big day.”

As he might have predicted, Olivia didn’t look all that thrilled at the suggestion. “I should open them now while you’re here.”

“I guess I should have asked your dad first.”

He shrugged, figuring it was too late to stop the cart now. “Go ahead.”

With a rueful, apologetic smile, she handed the bag to Olivia. “It’s not wrapped, since I didn’t know it was your birthday when I came over. I’m sorry.”

His daughter apparently didn’t care. She reached into the bag and pulled out a book with colorful illustrations on the cover.


“This one is signed by both me and my sister, who did the illustrations. I figured since it’s your favorite book, you ought to have a signed copy.”

“I love it. Thank you!”

“There’s something else,” Celeste said when his daughter looked as if she were going to settle in
right on the spot to reread the story for the hundredth time.

Olivia reached into the bag and pulled out a second book. While it was obvious the artist had been the same, this had different, more muted colors than the original Sparkle book and hearts instead of Christmas ornaments.

“I haven’t seen this one! *Sparkle and the Valentine Surprise.*”

“That’s because it’s brand-new. It’s not even in stores yet. It’s coming out in a few weeks.”

“Dad, look!”

She hurried over to him, barely limping, and held out the book.

“Very nice. We can read it tonight at bedtime.”

“I can’t wait that long! Can I read it now?”

“Sure. First, do you have something to say to Ms. Nichols?”

Olivia gazed at the woman with absolute adoration. “Thank you so much! I just love these books and the stuffed Sparkle.” Again, she surprised him by hugging Celeste tightly, then hurried to the window seat that she had claimed as her own when they’d first arrived at Charlotte’s house.

He gazed after her for a moment, then turned back to Celeste.

“How did you just do that?” he asked, his voice low so that Olivia couldn’t hear.

She blinked, confusion on her features. “Do what?”

“That’s the first time I’ve seen her hug anyone but me in months.”

“Oh.” Her voice was small, sad, telling him without words that she knew what had happened to Elise and Olivia and about Brandon Lowell.

“I guess you probably know my daughter was shot three months ago and her mother was killed.”

Her lovely features tightened and her eyes filled with sorrow. “I do. I followed the case, not because I wanted to read about something so terribly tragic, but because I...knew you, once upon a time.”

Color rose on her cheeks again, but he had no idea why.

“She’s been very withdrawn because of the post-traumatic stress. I haven’t seen her warm up to anyone this quickly since it happened.”

“Oh.” She gazed at Olivia with a soft look in her eyes. “It’s not me,” she assured him. “Sparkle is a magic little reindeer. He has a comforting way about him.”

He was quite certain Celeste was the one with the comforting way, especially as she had created the fictional version of the reindeer, but he didn’t say so.

“Whatever the reason, I appreciate it. I had hoped bringing her here to Idaho where we can be away from the spotlight for a few weeks might help her finally begin to heal. It’s good to know I might have been right.”

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No.”

Stunned, Garrett White Eagle stared at his older brother, Jackson. He’d just checked his email and when he read the notification from the editor in chief of a well-known magazine, asking to do an in-depth article on the work he and his brother were doing at the Healing Ranch, he thought that Jackson would be as excited about it as he was.

Obviously not.

This was going to take some work on his part, Garrett decided.

“No?” he repeated incredulously. “What do you mean, no?”

Jackson rose from behind the scarred, second-hand desk he’d rescued from being turned into kindling half a dozen years ago. He had a full day ahead of him at the ranch and he’d already wasted enough time with the stack of unpaid bills that seemed to be breeding on his desk. Apparently, moving them from one pile to another didn’t diminish their number or get them paid off any sooner.

He couldn’t think about them right now. The boys were waiting for him at the corral. The bunkhouse was almost filled to capacity and every teen currently staying at the ranch required individual care. He’d sworn when he took all this on that nothing short of that would suffice and he had meant it. But it did get hard to live up to at times.

“Okay,” Jackson repeated. “It’s a simple enough word to grasp.” The corners of his mouth curved just the slightest bit as he glanced toward his younger brother. “Even you, with your limited education, should be able to figure out its meaning.”

“Look, I get it. You’re not into social media. But I’m not asking you to get on Twitter, or Facebook, or any of the other modern innovations you keep insisting on staying clear of. I’m not even asking you to use smoke signals, like our ancestors. But to turn your back on a magazine interview is positively criminal,” Garrett accused. “Western Times is a big-time magazine,” he emphasized, as if the increased volume would somehow get his brother to agree. This was an opportunity and he wasn’t about to give up until he made Jackson see the light. He had his work cut out for him, seeing as Jackson could bring new meaning to the word stubborn when he wanted to.

Jackson turned around for a split second, looking his brother in the eye and enunciating every word slowly. “I can’t make time for it.”

“Do you have time to make money?” Garrett asked. “How about that? Do you have time to do that?”

Jackson stifled an impatient sigh. “What are you talking about? They’re not paying us for the interview.”

“No, but doing the interview could really pay off in the long run.” Garrett picked up his pace to keep up with Jackson.

Just like when we were younger, he couldn’t help remembering. Back then, he’d worshipped Jackson, who was five years his senior. Technically, Jackson was his half brother. They shared a father who wasn’t interested in either of them. Ben White Eagle walked out on them just the way Jackson’s mother had walked out on him several years before that. It was his own mother who was left with the task of raising both of them.

Sylvia White Eagle was a warm, loving woman who more than had her hands filled with a very
hostile, rebellious Jackson. Jackson was always rushing off to be with his friends, friends who were interested in grabbing what life hadn’t given them. Friends who kept getting him into more and more trouble.

Desperate, Sylvia had turned to Sam, her ex-husband’s brother, and Sam had taken Jackson in hand, putting him to work on his ranch. It was there that Jackson got his life back.

As for Garrett, he had joined Jackson and his uncle when his mother died. They worked the ranch together and when Sam passed away, he had left the ranch to both of them.

It was Jackson’s idea to start up the Healing Ranch, creating it in Sam’s honor. There Jackson and Garrett put Sam’s methods to work, using horses as a way to get through to misguided, wayward boys and make them come around rather than turning into hardened criminals.

Since its slow start, the ranch had been growing increasingly successful. Despite that, it wasn’t making any money, but that was because Jackson, ever mindful of the dire circumstances some people found themselves in, only charged what he felt the parents or guardians who came to him as their last hope could afford to pay. But their bills to run the ranch just kept on growing.

From what Jackson had let slip recently, they couldn’t be ignored too much longer.

And now, Garrett thought, it seemed that Fortune had decided to smile on the Healing Ranch—except that Jackson refused to see it that way.

Garrett was determined not to have him pass up on what just might be their one chance to make things work.

He blew out a frustrated breath. Jackson apparently had stopped paying any attention to the conversation he thought he was having with his brother.

“The Saunders kid is finally ready to get in the saddle,” Jackson was saying as he walked toward the front door.

Garrett hurried after him. Spotting Debi in the living room, Garrett immediately enlisted his sister-in-law as an ally. “Debi, talk some sense into this lunkhead you married,” he pleaded.

The blonde, green-eyed nurse willingly obliged. “Lunkhead, listen to your brother.” Debi smiled at Garrett as she lifted her shoulders in a helpless shrug. “I tried. By the way, what’s he supposed to be listening to?”

“The voice of reason,” Garrett answered, doing his best to keep his temper.

“Ha!” was Jackson’s response. He looked at his wife of three months, appealing for her to back him up. “He wants some woman to come out and follow us around, asking a bunch of questions, snooping and getting in the way.”

“Auditioning for a wife, Garrett?” Debi asked her brother-in-law, amused.

“No point. Jackson’s already snatched away the love of my life,” Garrett replied with a good-natured wink. And then he grew serious. “I’m just trying to find a way to keep the wolf from the door.”

As down to earth as her husband, Debi took an active interest in the monetary issues that went into running the school. It was the school that had initially brought her here, looking for a way to get through to her younger brother before he destroyed himself. If possible, she was even more dedicated to keeping the ranch operating than either of the brothers.

“Keep talking,” she urged Garrett.

Jackson groaned. “Don’t encourage him.”

But Garrett was quick to get his sister-in-law to join forces with him. He felt confident that Jackson
wouldn’t say no to her. *Western Times Magazine* wants to send a writer to come out and do a story about the ranch.”

Surprised, Debi turned toward her husband. “That’s wonderful!”

“What’s wonderful about it?” Jackson asked. “I’ve got a ranch to run, I don’t have time to answer a bunch of questions.”

“Then don’t,” Debi told him simply. Before Jackson could say something about being vindicated or Garrett could complain that he thought that she would have been on his side, she came through with the natural solution. “Have Garrett do it. He’s a lot more outgoing than you are, anyway.”

Jackson pretended to scowl. “Thanks.”

Debi hooked her arm through his, looking up into his eyes. Her own were sparkling with humor. “But you have all these other fine qualities.”

“I guess I do at that.” Jackson laughed, allowing himself one quick kiss before he looked at his brother. “Okay, call them and tell ’em she can come.”

This time it was Garrett’s turn to kiss Debi, planting one on her cheek. “Bless the day you came here, Debi! I’ll call them right now before Smiley here changes his mind!”

And with that Garrett raced up the stairs to his room and his computer.
Chapter One

“Really? You’re serious? Two weeks before Christmas and you’re sending me to Siberia?” Kimberly Lee cried, appalled and stunned.

“Forever, Texas,” Stan Saunders corrected her tranquilly.

The editor in chief of *Western Times Magazine*, as well as several other magazines that came under the Union-Post Publishing masthead, was known for his calm, almost monotone demeanor. He had a voice to match. It never rose above a certain level, no matter what was being said or how upset the person on the receiving end might be.

As was the case with Kim, who had asked to see the editor in chief in order to score an assignment for one of the magazines he oversaw. At the time she definitely hadn’t set her sights on an article for *Western Times Magazine*, in her opinion the least sophisticated of the magazines in the array.

She’d grown more and more stunned as Stan described the article he wanted and the place that he was sending her to.

“Same thing,” Kim complained. Grasping the armrests, she moved to the edge of the chair she’d taken in his glass-enclosed office. “Look, I know I’m just a lowly freelance writer—”

“Yes, you are,” Stan agreed all too readily, indicating that she had made her point for him.

Refusing to be deterred, Kim forged on. “But you’ve got to have some other story than this you want me to write.”

She stopped just short of pleading, aware that Stan had no use for that sort of tactic. She’d been writing for Stan for a little over a year now, coming in twice a month to see what sort of articles were up for grabs. Each magazine had its own small in-house stable of writers. The slack was taken up by freelance writers who were eager, like her, to prove their worth while earning extra pocket money. Most stitched together a living—if that was their goal rather than just some additional income—by making the rounds to various publishers, as well as haunting blog-oriented websites.

“No, I don’t,” Stan told her. “It’s either this, or come back in a couple of weeks.”

She sighed. “I don’t have a couple of weeks. My rent check is due now—not to mention that in a couple of weeks, it’ll be Christmas and last year, there was nothing to be had,” she reminded him.

There was just a hint of concern on the crusty, bald man’s face as he asked, “Can’t hit up Mom and Dad for the money?”

Kim knew he was aware of her backstory. At least, as much as she’d told to him. Whether or not he remembered it, given how many writers he dealt with, was another matter.

Giving him the benefit of the doubt, she pretended he remembered. “And have them look at me with pity in their eyes?” She shook her head emphatically. “I’d rather die first.”

Stan inclined his head, conceding the point. “Fair enough. How about those two successful sisters of yours? Didn’t you tell me they were surgeons or something like that? They must have money they can lend their little sister.”

Monica and Maureen would have more than readily given her the money she needed, but they were like her parents, convinced that she should have done something better with her life and if nothing else, should now be running, not walking, to the nearest university to enroll and get herself on track for a real career, not one that was grounded in make-believe.

That was how her whole family viewed her career path—chasing after make-believe.
More than anything, ever since she could remember, she had dreamed of being a writer, an *important* writer who would someday write that one book people would always remember. Not for a week, or a month, but one that would live on through the decades, a book that would make a real *difference* to people.

In the meantime, she had resigned herself to the fact that she had bills to pay, so any work she could get as a freelance writer had to make do for now.

*Almost* any work, she silently amended. There *had* to be something else, some other article that didn’t involve sagebrush and horses and brawny, uneducated cowboys.

“See the above answer,” Kim quipped regarding asking her sisters for help.

Stan believed in being helpful, but only up to a point. That point did not include fabricating work for his writers, even if he had come to secretly like their spirit, and Kim was nothing if not the embodiment of that old-fashioned term, *spunk*.

“Well, unless you have a rich sugar daddy tucked away somewhere, or are planning on selling your soul to the devil by midnight to keep that old wolf from the door, I’d say you’d better get busy, pack up your go-bag and book a flight to Laredo.”

“Laredo?” she repeated, confused. “I thought you said that I was going to some place in Texas called Farewell.”

“Forever,” Stan corrected patiently. “And your hearing’s good. You are.”

She didn’t get it. “If I’m going to Forever, why am I flying to Laredo?”

“Simple,” he told her. “Forever doesn’t have an airport. You’re going to have to rent a car and drive the rest of the way. Keep your receipts,” he advised. “There’s a little extra in petty cash. I’ll see what I can do about reimbursing you for some of that.”

This was beginning to sound better and better, she thought, exasperated.

“Do they have indoor plumbing?” she asked. She was only half kidding.

Stan never cracked a smile. “So I hear.” He raised his deep-set eyes to hers. “I also hear they’ve built a hotel.”

Why was he telling her that? “Is there something unusual about it?”

Thin, bony shoulders rose and fell beneath a light gray shirt that appeared to have been slept in at least a couple of times. “Not that I know.”

Okay, she still wasn’t enlightened about the point of this conversation.

“Then why are you...?” And then it hit her. “Wait, you don’t mean that they didn’t have hotels there before this one.”

This time, he did allow a small smile to edge out. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

“What kind of a hellhole *is* this place?” she cried.

“The kind of hellhole where kids whose parents think there’s no reaching them get turned around and become the decent people they were always meant to be.” The editor paused for a long moment, as if silently debating something with himself. Finally, in the same low-key voice he always used, he said, “My nephew, Jordy, is there.”

Kim’s dark brown eyes widened. He’d told her it was a sort of reformatory school with horses. That meant his nephew was one of those troubled delinquents he’d mentioned.

“I’m so sorry.” She assumed that would be the response Stan was expecting.

But the editor surprised her by saying, “Don’t be. That place is the best thing that could have happened to him.” The most genuine smile she’d ever seen was curving Stan’s lips as he went on to
tell her, “My sister Paula said Jordy actually called home last week. Told me he sounded more like
himself than he had in the last three years. She was crying those ridiculous happy tears at the time, the
ones that you women use to confuse men.

“A place that can do that for a kid, for a family,” he went on to say, “well, other people deserve to
know about it.” He grew very serious now as he looked at her. “You want to do an important story?
This is an important story,” he told her with emphasis. “Go do it and do it right.” It was more of an
order than an instruction. “You do a good enough job, then we’ll talk about where your career could
go with the magazines I edit when you get back.”

She warned herself not to get excited. There was always a downside to everything. She just hadn’t
heard all of it yet. “Is that anything like dangling a carrot in front of me?”

“Carrot?” Stan echoed. He permitted himself a dismissive snort. “More like the whole damn
bushel. Open your eyes, Lee, and take in the whole picture. I’m giving you a chance here.”

Kim tightened her hands on the armrests and pushed herself up to her feet. She knew Stan. She
wasn’t going to get a better offer no matter how much she battered him. It was up to her to turn what
really sounded like a fluff piece to her into something golden. “Then I guess I’m off,” she told him.

The phone on his desk was ringing. Stan covered the receiver with his wide, spidery hand, waiting
just before he picked up the receiver.

“**YES, YOU ARE,**” he acknowledged just before he picked up the receiver.

**THIS WASN’T JUST** another state, Kim thought as she drove the compact tan Toyota she’d rented at the
airport, it was another world. Some parallel universe that perversely coexisted beside the modern,
sophisticated one to which she had not only been born, but where she thrived and definitely preferred
being.

San Francisco had been home to her for all of her twenty-eight years, and while some of the people
she knew claimed to actively love “getting away from it all” by doing things like going camping and
hiking in the mountains, the thought of being somewhere where sidewalks were only a theory, not a
genuine fact of life, seemed somehow barbaric to her.

Even in her teens, she had never had a desire to be “one with the earth” or to even mildly pretend
to be “roughing it.” To her, roughing it meant doing without her cell phone or her laptop for half a day
and even that made her feel more than vaguely uncomfortable, as if she had lost her hold on
civilization, her connection to the outside world.

Which was what she was beginning to feel as she traveled down what she supposed amounted to a
two-lane road to this town that seemed to mean so much to Saunders. A town that some of the maps
didn’t even have listed.

Kim could feel a sense of desperation beginning to build up within her.

“Brigadoon, Stan is sending me to Brigadoon,” she muttered under her breath, thinking of the
village in the musical revival her mother had all but dragged her to when she was only about nine.

Looking back, she recalled that her mother was always trying to infuse a love of music and culture
into her three daughters. Monica and Maureen had lapped it up. She remembered feeling that a play
about a town that popped up every hundred years for a day’s time before disappearing again was
dumb, not to mention scary. Her mother had called her hopeless; her father had come to her defense,
calling her a free thinker. But eventually, even he had given up on her.

Both her parents, she knew, wanted her to “be somebody.” Her sisters had both followed their example, or at least their father’s example. David Lee was a well-respected neurosurgeon at the prestigious UCSF Medical Center and each of her sisters had their own surgical specialties and enjoyed surgery privileges at the same hospital, making her father exceedingly proud.

Her mother was a law professor at the University of San Francisco. Her classes were always in demand. Which made her, with her BA in Liberal Arts—emphasis on English—the official black sheep of the family.

“You’d think, with an Asian-American father and a mother whose grandparents hailed from Ireland and Scotland, and came here eager to make something of themselves in their adopted county, you’d have some real drive, some kind of ambition to become someone,” her mother had lamented when she had informed her parents that she was not applying to either medical school or law school.

Well, she had drive. Only her drive just happened to be in another direction than her parents and sisters had taken.

A drive that was stalling, Kim thought in disgust, with this detour to write a story about a town that was barely a visible dot on the map.

She would have been tempted to say that Stan had made the whole thing up, playing some really bizarre belated April Fool’s prank on her two weeks before Christmas—except that she had actually managed to find the damn hole-in-the-wall on her GPS when she’d gotten into the car she’d rented at the airport.

The airport at Laredo had been all right, she supposed. Nothing like what she was used to in San Francisco, but compared to what she was looking at now on her way to Forever, the airport seemed like an absolute Shangri-la.

How did people survive in places like this? And why would they even want to if they had to live out their whole lives here? Kim couldn’t help wondering. There were miles and miles of miles and miles, nothing else in either direction.

All she knew was that if she’d been born in a place like this, she would have saved every dime she could and the moment she graduated high school, she would have been gone—maybe even before then if the opportunity presented itself—but definitely the second she graduated.

There was nothing out here except for desolation, with an occasional ranch thrown in between, but she hadn’t even seen one of those for an hour now.

People who lived in this part of the country probably looked like dried-up, wrinkled prunes by the time they were thirty-five, she estimated, glancing up toward the sky through her windshield.

Not wanting to usher in the dust, she had her windows rolled up and soon discovered that it was warm in her car. The weather down here was a lot warmer than she was accustomed to this time of year. She shouldn’t have wasted her time packing heavy sweaters and jackets, she thought.

You shouldn’t have wasted your time coming here at all, a nagging voice in her head that sounded suspiciously like her sister, Monica, whispered to her. Mom and Dad would have been more than happy to lend you the money—or better yet, have you move back into the house. It’s way too big for just the two of them.

Great, now she was hearing voices. More specifically, Monica’s voice.

That was all she needed, to get heatstroke out here, Kim thought in exasperation. Next, she would start hallucinating.
Damn it, she should have held out. There had to be some other story on Stan’s docket, something she could have worked on that was a lot closer to home than this. Union-Post Publishing owned a theater magazine, didn’t it? Stan could have easily sent her to do some puff piece on the new theater season that was coming next fall. Anything other than this Sagebrush Cowboys Save Troubled Teens thing he wanted her to write.

With every passing minute, she grew more irritable. She should have stood her ground and dug in. Now it was too late and she was stuck out here. Stuck going to some stupid town called Farewell, or Forever, or Four Miles From Nowhere—Kim’s eyes widened as she stared at the small rectangular screen on the dashboard that had, until a moment ago, been her GPS monitoring unit.

Except now it wasn’t. It wasn’t anything. The screen had gone blank. Desperate, Kim hit the blank screen with the heel of her hand, trying to make it come around. It remained blank.

That was what she got for renting a compact car, she upbraided herself. Trying to figure out what to do, she pulled the car over to the side of the road—although if she just kept on going, what was the difference? she asked herself. It wasn’t as if she’d hit anything. There was nothing for her to hit in either direction, not even a rabbit, or snail, or whatever animals they had out here in the forgotten desert.

With the car idling, Kim shifted in her seat and pulled her purse back onto the passenger seat. Her purse had lunged onto the floor when she’d pulled over a bit too suddenly, spilling, she now saw, its entire contents onto the floor of the car. Everything was in a jumbled heap.

Swallowing a curse, she pulled it all together and deposited it back into her purse—all except for her cell phone. That she took and opened. She swiped past a couple of screens until she found the GPS app that had come preinstalled on her phone.

Despite the fact that she’d lived her entire life in San Francisco, she still managed to get lost on a fairly regular basis and she had come to rely rather heavily on her phone’s GPS feature.

A feature which wasn’t pulling up, Kim noticed angrily as she stabbed over and over again at the small square image on her phone. When the image finally did enlarge, the words below it irritatingly informed her that it couldn’t find a data connection and thus, the very sophisticated feature on her phone containing all the latest bells and whistles wasn’t about to ring any of its bells or blow any of its whistles, at least not now. Not until its lost signal was suddenly restored.

“Damn it, I really am in hell,” Kim declared, looking around.

There were absolutely no signs posted anywhere to tell her if she was going in the right direction or even if she was going around in circles. For all she knew, she wasn’t even in Texas anymore.

The dirt road was too dry and hard to have registered her tire tracks, so she had no idea if she had traveled this way before.

“I could be going around in circles until I die from dehydration out here, and nobody’d know the difference—not even me,” she lamented.

Why had she ever said yes to this horrible assignment?

For two cents, she’d turn around and go back—except that she had no idea if turning around actually meant that she was going back. Maybe if she turned around, she would eventually wind up driving into this town she didn’t want to go to?
Damn it, she was confusing herself.

Feeling panicky, Kim looked around the interior of the pristine vehicle to see if there was anything packed in one of the side pockets that could help her.

After foraging around, she discovered an old folded map tucked into the side of the rear passenger door, but when she opened it, she found that the map did her no good. A product of the digital age, she had absolutely no idea how to actually read a map.

She was going to die out here, Kim thought, tossing the map aside. She was going to die out here and most likely, no one would ever even find her body.

She still stubbornly didn’t regret not going to her parents for money. If she had to die, she would die rebellious and proud.

What did it feel like, she wondered, baking to death inside a low-end economy car? Maybe she should have rented something more high-end, like a Mercedes or a Jaguar. If it was going to wind up being her casket, then maybe—

A flash of something on the hill in the distance caught her eye.

Kim sat up, trying to focus as a glimmer of hope surfaced.

Was that a hallucination, or—?
Damn but it was hot. This had to be the hottest December day to hit the area as far back as he could remember.

Taking off his tan Stetson, Garrett wiped his brow with the back of his hand, then put his hat back on. For what it was worth, the hat helped keep the sun out of his eyes.

He’d come up on this hill because it afforded him a better view of the surrounding terrain. The road below was flatter than his uncle’s voice had been when Sam had sung in the occasional choir, back in the day. To his and Jackson’s surprise, the man had been a big believer in going to church and he had made sure to usher the two of them in with him every Sunday.

Even now, he wasn’t sure if Sam had exactly been a man of faith, or just someone who believed in the healing power of having a place to go where you were forced to think outside of yourself. Church had perhaps been that place for Sam.

Maybe that wouldn’t have been good for some, but it certainly turned out to be good for Jackson and for him, Garrett thought now, still carefully scanning the road below. He would have hated to think where he and his brother would have wound up if it hadn’t been for Sam and his rather strict way of doing things.

One thing was for sure, if it hadn’t been for Sam, he wouldn’t be here right now, looking for a long-overdue magazine writer.

According to the phone call he’d taken from the main editor of the bimonthly magazine doing that story on the Healing Ranch, the writer he’d sent, a woman named Kimberly Lee, should have gotten to them by now. The man who’d called an hour ago said he’d tried to reach her cell phone and received the message that it was out of range—something that was all too familiar around here. The editor had decided to call the ranch.

“She might have gotten lost,” the man, a Stan Saunders, had told him. “I told her to get a car with a GPS, but even if she did, it’s still possible that she’s gotten lost. I called the airport rental agency and they said she rented a tan compact Toyota,” he’d added as an afterthought.

The editor had started to recite the license plate to him, but he’d stopped the man, saying it was enough that he had a description of the car. There weren’t exactly an abundance of compact Toyotas of any color in this part of Texas.

“People tend to drive Jeeps and trucks out here,” he’d told the man. “But to be on the safe side, maybe you could describe your writer to me.”

Saunders had immediately rattled off the pertinent details as if he was staring at a picture of the writer. “Kim’s five-two, twenty-eight years old, has really dark brown eyes, blue-black hair, straight, chin length, oh, and she’s Eurasian, if that helps any,” he said as if he’d just remembered the last detail.

“I’ll find her,” he’d promised the man, more than a little intrigued now by the mental picture he’d formed from Saunders’s description.

Before he left, he’d stopped to tell Jackson where he was going because this was the morning he was supposed to be overseeing some of the recent arrivals’ progress. Now, because of the missing writer, Jackson was going to have to double up and take his boys, as well as his own.

Not that his brother minded extra work when it came to the teens on the ranch. That was, after all,
the entire point of the ranch’s existence. But he could see that Jackson minded the reason for his being unavailable for a while.

Ordinarily easygoing and unflappable, Jackson had frowned at the prospect of his going out to hunt for the supposedly missing writer.

“If you hadn’t said yes to the story in the first place,” Jackson had pointed out, “you wouldn’t have to go running around, trying to track down the whereabouts of some displaced big-city tenderfoot who could just have gotten herself really lost out there.”

“It’ll all be worth it in the end,” he’d promised Jackson just before he’d gone off.

Of course, he hadn’t been all that sure about it at the moment.

And he still wasn’t any surer about finding her now. Granted that looking for a tan compact foreign car was somewhat better than looking for a needle in the haystack—but not by much. There was a lot of terrain to cover between Forever and Laredo, and if this woman was really as bad at following directions as that editor had said she was, he just might have to enlist Sheriff Santiago and his deputies to help him find her.

What kind of a Navajo brave are you?

He could almost hear his uncle growling the question at him in that hoarse, gravelly voice of his.

Unlike a great many residents in and around the reservation that was located ten miles outside of Forever, Sam White Eagle had been very proud of his heritage. Proud to be both a Navajo and an American, and it was because of Sam that both he and Jackson had their feelings of self-worth and their self-esteem intact.

It hadn’t always been that way, at least not for Jackson, who was only half Navajo. The mother who had deserted him had been Caucasian and from what his own mother had told him about the other woman, she had made Jackson feel that his Native American side was what dragged him down.

Jackson had had a lot going against him and to his credit—and Sam’s—he had come a long way, Garrett thought. That was part of what he wanted this writer’s article to reflect. That Jackson had been the first youthful offender who had been turned around by what he’d learned at the Healing Ranch—even if the ranch hadn’t been called that at the time. Back then it had just been a working ranch—and he and Jackson had been the ones doing the working—right alongside their uncle.

These days it was still a working ranch, but its purpose now was a little different from the one it had when Jackson was brought in to work there as a troubled teen.

Damn, how could this woman have gotten lost? Garrett wondered, slowly urging his horse on. The road was fairly straight from Laredo to here. All she had to do was stay on it.

There were no storms anywhere in that stretch of land to divert her, not even one brewing on the horizon, according to the latest weather report, so where the hell was she?

Garrett squinted as he stared out along the road below. Even from here, he should be able to see the dust the car was kicking up.

Okay, so the car was tan and that didn’t exactly stand out immediately in this area. If she’d rented a car that was a royal blue, the color that was still pretty popular in the glossy magazine ads he looked at on occasion, she would be easier to spot. But even in a tan car, he felt he could still find her. It was just harder.

But harder didn’t mean impossible. It just meant that—

Garrett abruptly stopped giving himself a pep talk and really stared down at the road below him. There was something pulled over to the side.
It was a tan compact car.

_Her_ car, he thought triumphantly. He’d found her, Garrett congratulated himself.

There was no cloud of dust, big or little, coming from around it. Now that he had finally spotted it, he saw that the vehicle wasn’t moving.

Why wasn’t it moving? he wondered in the next heartbeat. Had she run out of gas, or had the car just died?

And then an even worse thought suddenly occurred to Garrett.

Had the woman passed out for some reason?

With women like his late mother, Sylvia, Miss Joan, the tart-tongued woman with the heart of gold who owned the diner, and now Debi, the nurse who had married his brother, populating his life, he was accustomed to thinking of women as inherently strong. He was used to women like Debi who rolled up her sleeves, went out and got the job done, not women who fainted at the first sign of trouble.

From what he’d managed to gather from the editor he’d talked to, this woman from the magazine might very well fall into the latter group, not the former.

If that was the case, whether she was spooked or had fainted, he had better get down there to her pronto. There was no telling what sort of condition this woman was in—and how that might, ultimately, reflect on the Healing Ranch.

He knew that was a selfish thought, but when it came to Jackson, he could be as selfish as he had to be.

The fastest way from where he was to where she was down below was straight down the hillside. It was the fastest way, but definitely not the easiest.

“You up to this, boy?” he asked, patting his golden palomino’s neck.

There was no question that the stallion he had raised from a foal was sure-footed, but he had never actually put Wicked to the test, at least not for more than a couple of feet.

Garrett looked down, undecided. It was a lot more than a couple of feet between where he was and where the woman’s car was.

“This is going to be tricky,” he said.

The words were intended for him rather than for the horse he regarded as more than just an animal. Wicked and he had a strong bond, and the horse would push himself to the limit for him. That was just the way things were.

At the same time, he didn’t want to do anything that just might cause the stallion to injure himself.

“You’ve got to go nice and slow, a little bit at a time.” He spoke in a steady, firm cadence, encouraging the horse. “But you can do it.”

Garrett was completely aware that once they started, there was no turning back, no do-overs. They could only continue on the path they were on. But he felt he had no choice, he had to try it. The woman might be hurt, which was probably why she was pulled over like that and if she was hurt, then time was important and going the other roundabout route would take him at least three times as long.

Mentally crossing his fingers and all but holding his breath, Garrett gave Wicked the command to start down the side of the hill. The horse obeyed.

He held on to the reins as tightly as he dared, not wanting to pull the horse back too much because he was afraid that it might cause Wicked to either grow skittish or actually rear back, neither of which would end well for them.
What ultimately resulted was something that, to the casual observer, looked as if the horse was sliding down the hillside in slow motion, his front hooves going first, sending bits and pieces of dirt and a little grass raining down ahead of him. The same, a little less forcefully, was happening with the back hooves.

Progress was slow and careful, but after what felt like an eternity later to Garrett, he and Wicked were on flat ground at the bottom of the hill several feet away from the parked car.

The feeling of relief was almost dizzying. He couldn’t help wondering if Wicked felt the same way.

“Extra lumps of sugar for you today when we get back,” Garrett promised, leaning over slightly in the saddle in order to pat the horse’s neck. Both of them, he noticed, were sweating. He felt more connected to the palomino than ever.

“Hell, extra lumps of sugar for you for a week,” Garrett amended. “You could have sent me flying right over your head and breaking my fool neck with just one misstep,” he acknowledged with more than a little feeling. “Thanks for not doing that.” He took a breath, steadying what he realized was a ragged case of nerves. “Now let’s see what’s wrong with this tenderfoot,” he proposed to his four-footed companion.

Still not knowing what to expect, he guided Wicked closer to the car, then dismounted. With the reins held tightly in one hand, he approached the vehicle slowly, then peered into its interior.

Garrett was still about three feet away from the tan car when the driver’s door swung open and a petite woman in tight jeans and what looked like a suede, fringed jacket jumped out like a jack-in-the-box on a delayed timer.

Looking at her, he couldn’t decide whether she looked terrified and was attempting to hide it, or if she was braced for a fight but undecided as to how to defend herself.

Pressing her back against the opened driver’s side door, the woman shouted at him. “I don’t have any money on me!”

“That’s okay,” he told her, staying put for the moment even as he raised his free hand in a gesture to reassure her. “I wasn’t going to ask you for any—and why are you yelling?”

Maybe it was his imagination, but the woman—he had no idea that they made writers so sexy—looked a little chagrined, as well as leery. “So you can hear me.”

“I can hear you just fine even if you lowered your voice. As a matter of fact, maybe even better,” he amended, trying to get her to smile.

So far, it wasn’t working.

Because Kim had absolutely no idea how to defend herself in this sort of a situation, she was forced to make it up as she went along. Why hadn’t she thought to pack her can of mace? Did mace even work on a horse if he used the horse to attack her?

Even as she started to talk, it sounded lame to her ear. Despite the fact that she had lived her entire life in San Francisco, she had never been in a situation where she felt threatened. She’d had to come out here for that, she thought grudgingly. She was going to find a way to get even with Saunders if it was the last thing she ever did.

“I’m not alone. I’ve got people coming,” she announced, raising her voice again as if the increased volume would bring these “people” faster—either that or scare him away.

“Are you Kimberly?” he asked, even as he searched his brain for the last name that the editor had told him. The last name that was temporarily eluding him.

And then he remembered.
“Kimberly Lee?” he asked.
The woman’s eyes widened even more. He would have found it hypnotic under any other circumstances.

“How do you know my name?” she demanded nervously.
He couldn’t get over how adorable she looked. Spooked, most likely feisty if her stance was any indication, but definitely adorable. He began to relax. He could work with adorable. Adorable women were his specialty.

“Well, I could try to dazzle you with a few mysterious answers, tell you my ancestors were into reading minds—” and then he cracked a grin “—but the truth of it is, your editor told me.”

The woman eyed him suspiciously. “Miles?” she asked.
“No, that’s not the name he gave me. I think he said it was Stan—” Garrett searched his memory again—names were not his long suit. And, just like with her last name, he remembered. Belatedly.

“Stan Saunders, that’s it.”

How could he have forgotten that last name? he upbraided himself. It was the same as one of the boys Jackson had been personally working with. A dark-eyed, defiant kid who had taken more time to get through to than most of the rest.

He caught himself wondering if there was some sort of a connection between the kid and the editor, then decided probably not. Saunders wasn’t that unusual a name. Most likely it was just a coincidence. Unlike his brother, he believed that there was such a thing as coincidences and moreover, he believed that they happened more than just once in a while.

“You talked to Stan Saunders?” Kim asked, surprised.

Looking at the tall, dark-haired man for the first time—really looking at him, she realized that he might be the main man she was supposed to interview. And then again, she wouldn’t have been able to actually swear to it. It hadn’t been a very good picture, just something she’d managed to find in a local newspaper article.

“What about?” she asked, still suspicious.

“He got worried when he couldn’t reach you on your cell phone.” Garrett remained where he was. He had a feeling that if he tried to get closer, she just might run. Not that there was anywhere to run to, but he’d still have to catch her and it was too hot for that kind of exertion. “He asked me to find you.”

“You’re Jackson?” she asked, still a little on her guard but she had to admit that she was feeling less defensive than she’d been a minute ago.

“Garrett,” he corrected. “The other White Eagle,” he added with a touch of humor.

He had a nice smile, she thought. But then, she’d read somewhere that Ted Bundy had a nice smile. Still, she began to relax.

“Well, Garrett-the-other-White-Eagle, you have no cell reception out here,” she complained. And then to prove her point, she held up the phone that still wasn’t registering a signal.

Garrett nodded. “It’s been known to happen on occasion,” he acknowledged.

She was right. This was a hellhole. “How long an occasion?” she asked.

The shrug was quick and generally indifferent, as if there were far more important matters to tend to. “It varies.” He nodded at her compact. “What’s wrong with your car?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Nothing, I just didn’t want to drive it if I didn’t know where I was going.” A small pout accompanied the next accusation. “I lost the GPS signal.”

Garrett took that in stride. Nothing unusual about that either, he supposed, even though neither he
nor anyone he knew even had a GPS in their car. They relied far more on their own instincts and general familiarity with the area.

He did move just a little closer now. He saw that she was watching him, as if uncertain whether or not to trust him yet. He could see her side of it. After all, it was just the two of them out here and she only had his word for who he was.

“You can follow me, then,” he told her, then added with a smile that was intended to dazzle her—several of Miss Joan’s waitresses had told him his smile was one of his best features, “Consider me your guiding light.”

You’re cute, no doubt about that, but I’ll hold off on the whole guiding-light thing, if you don’t mind, Kim thought.

She stifled a sigh as she got in behind the wheel of her car. She knew she should have dug in and fought getting stuck with this assignment.
Chapter Three

Well, Kim thought wryly, following close behind Garrett, she had to admit that this was certainly different. She was definitely not accustomed to being treated to the rear view of a horse.

Granted, Garrett created a rather intriguing, captivating specimen of manhood, sitting atop his horse the way he was, but she hadn’t come here to stare at the back of some man, muscular and impressive though he might appear to be.

Garrett White Eagle—if that was who he really was and she had only his word for that—seemed nice enough, but for all she knew, that engaging smile of his could be hiding the soul of a sadist.

A sadist who lured trusting women off to some obscure hideaway where no one would ever find them—or her—until years later.

A hideaway in a hole-in-the-wall. Now there was irony for you. Maybe she should flee now while she still could.

Kim’s hands tightened on the steering wheel and she was all set to execute a U-turn and make her getaway when she saw it.

A ranch house in the distance.

So there really was a ranch out here. Maybe this was actually all on the level after all, which meant that Garrett White Eagle actually was Garrett White Eagle, just as he claimed to be.

Kim’s relief at spotting the ranch—civilization at last—was rather short-lived when she took a closer look at the actual structure she was driving toward.

Garrett turned around just then, as he had been doing every couple of minutes to make sure that she was still following him.

“Something wrong?” Garrett asked, pulling up on Wicked’s reins.

Even though he was leading the way and going so slowly he was afraid Wicked would fall asleep in midstep, the woman didn’t exactly fill him with confidence about her navigational skills.

He saw the stunned expression on Kim’s face. Her mouth had all but dropped open.

Now what?

When her eyes shifted toward him, he saw the confusion in them.

“Where’s the main house?” she asked, then said, “That’s the cook’s quarters, right?”

Garrett inclined his head, as if in agreement. “Uh-huh. The cook’s quarters, the main ranch hand’s quarters, Jackson’s quarters—along with his wife, Debi—and, oh yes, my quarters, too.”

“All of you live there?” she asked, as if the concept hadn’t quite sunk in.

“Uh-huh.” His eyes never left her face.

Kim’s eyes widened as her driving definitely slowed down to almost a crawl. It was as if her little car had gone on automatic pilot and was now driving itself.

She chewed on her lower lip before asking, “That’s the main house?” If she was trying to hide the appalled note in her voice, she was failing.

He had to admit, after having talked to her for a couple of minutes, her reaction didn’t come as much of a surprise.

Garrett laughed. “Let me guess, you were expecting South Fork.”

Her eyebrows knitted together, as she struggled to hide her disappointment over the building she saw. “South Fork?” she echoed. “What’s that?”
“Something obviously before your time,” he told her. Then, not wanting to seem old in her eyes, he added, “Before mine, too. Except that I like watching old, classic TV programs. To answer your question, South Fork was this big, sprawling fictional ranch just outside of Dallas that belonged to this really rich family whose members were always arguing and at each other’s throats all the time. But I’ve got to admit, the ranch house they had was a thing of beauty,” he told her. “This might not be South Fork,” he allowed, “but it’s all ours.”

There was no missing the pride in his voice.

To each his own, Kim thought, stifling the urge to shrug at his response. If that ranch house up ahead had been hers, she would have done whatever she needed to in order to make it look better in a hurry—and then she would have sold it as fast as she could before the buyer could think twice about the wisdom of getting stuck with a rundown house and a ranch that wasn’t producing much of anything except work.

As if reading her mind, Garrett leaned down from his horse and promised, “It’ll grow on you.”

She wasn’t going to be here long enough for that to happen, but for now, she kept that fact to herself.

Before she’d left, she had told Stan that she would write the best article she could on the Healing Ranch, but after seeing the place, she estimated it shouldn’t take her more than a day to whip up her article. Two if she deliberately stalled and didn’t get started for the first day.

And since she wanted to get out of Prairie Gulch as fast as she could, she would get started as fast as she could.

Kim prided herself on knowing how to put someone at ease so that they would confide in her. Looking at the house as she drew closer, she promised herself to “make nice” with the people out here, get her story—or rather Stan’s story since he was the one who was so keen on it, not her—and then get back home. If she were particularly diligent, she’d be back in time to hand Stan her copy and then go shopping at Barneys, the New York–based department store that had found a second home in San Francisco and had become one of her treasured stomping grounds of choice.

With that in mind, Kim turned up her smile several watts and told her guide in the sweetest voice possible, “I think it’s charming.”

Garrett laughed, not taken in for a second, although he had to admit she was the prettiest liar he’d ever had to deal with.

“No, you don’t,” he contradicted. “But that’s okay, it’s not supposed to be ‘charming.’ It’s supposed to be functional. And it is. This is where the ‘bad’ boys get sent in order to be turned into human beings, something that my brother, Jackson, does, time and again, very, very well.”

“And you? What do you do?” she asked. She’d stopped driving for a moment and was taking in the ranch in its entirety.

Did it get any less run-down from close up? She certainly hoped so. She was planning on taking a few photographs to go with her article and right now, she didn’t see a good angle to use for her shots of the ranch house’s exterior.

“Anything I have to,” Garrett said in response, his voice dropping by an octave or so. Enough to get her attention and have her wondering things that wouldn’t be finding their way into the article.

“Define ‘anything,’” she requested in a mildly intrigued voice.

“Just what it sounds like,” he replied, looking at her and punctuating his answer with a wink that seemed to flutter directly down into her stomach, causing just the slightest mini–tidal wave to take
place there.

Kim paused to take in a discreet breath before continuing. The breath was to help steady her unexpected reaction to this dusty cowboy who fancied himself a ladies’ man.

“I’ll pin you down for details later,” she told him. “Right now, I’d like to meet your brother before I go into town to see about my hotel reservation.” She glanced at her watch before continuing to drive toward the ranch house. “I’m already running late,” she realized. “How long will they hold a room at the hotel?”

Garrett had to struggle to keep the laugh from surfacing. The hotel wasn’t exactly beating off patrons with a stick.

“As long as it takes,” he finally replied. The corners of his mouth curved despite his best efforts to keep a straight, if not dour face.

She wondered if everyone in this quaint little dust bowl of a town talked in circles. Just what was he telling her about her hotel room? “I don’t think I understand.”

“We don’t exactly have a lot of tourists coming through Forever,” he told her. “There’s no danger of losing your room to someone else, not unless a twister suddenly comes through, taking down every building except for the hotel. That happens, then you might have to be concerned about losing your room to someone else if they get there first. But until then, I wouldn’t worry about it if I were you. You’re in the driver’s seat, trust me.”

That didn’t make any sense to her. “If that’s the case, how does the hotel stay in business?”

“Good question,” he acknowledged. Kim struggled not to feel resentful, as if she was being patronized. “The hotel belongs to this construction company that sees it as getting some sort of a toehold in the region,” he went on to explain. “The owner’s not in it for the money,” he confided. “The way matters had turned out, the general contractor wound up owning the building—and she’d married Finn Murphy, so her stake in building up the town has definitely gone up.”

“That doesn’t seem possible,” Kim told him, certain that Garrett was making this all up, trying to pull the wool over the outsider’s eyes with this tall tale. Who wasn’t in it for the money? If not that, then they were in it for the prestige, the way her parents were. And this was definitely not a place someone came in order to build up their reputation.

Just how naive did this man think she was?

Did she come across as naive? Kim caught herself suddenly wondering. That was not the image she was going for. Smart, sassy, capable, those were the buzz words she was after, not naive.

“A lot of things in Forever and the places around it don’t really seem possible,” Garrett informed her. “Forever isn’t exactly your run-of-the-mill kind of place.”

“Oh, God, just like Brigadoon,” Kim murmured under her breath before she could think better of it and stop herself.

Garrett had overheard her despite the fact that she had meant the comment only for herself, but the reference went right over his head.

“Like what?” he asked, looking at her quizzically.

A strapping he-man like Garrett White Eagle undoubtedly thought all musicals were products of stupid, self-involved minds. She wasn’t about to give him ammunition to use against her. This job was going to be hard enough as it was. She wanted to be taken seriously—even by this cowboy.

“Never mind,” Kim said dismissively. “It’s not a real place, anyway.”
Garrett had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, but he felt it wasn’t really polite to tell her that. So, at least for now, he just let Kim’s remark slide.

“Well, Forever’s real, all right,” he assured her. “It’s just different.”

She took a deep breath, more than a little relieved to be able to distance herself from the subject.

“I’m beginning to see that,” she replied.

She drove the rest of the short distance to the ranch house and got out of her car. Garrett dismounted almost parallel to her vehicle and let the palomino’s reins drop to the ground in front of him.

Walking away from Wicked, he stepped onto the front porch.

Kim looked at his horse uncertainly. She fully expected to be trampled any second if the horse got it into his head that she was standing in his way, blocking his access to something.

“Aren’t you going to tie him up?” she asked, shifting closer to Garrett. She was banking on him protecting her if the horse suddenly went rogue—or whatever it was called when horses charged at people for no reason.

“Wicked’s not into bondage,” Garrett told her with a grin.

The cowboy was making fun of her because she was clearly out of her element, she thought. Since she needed his help—at least for the moment—she did her best not to act offended.

Instead, she told herself to try harder to get on this cowboy’s good side. The faster she got this story down, the faster she’d be back in San Francisco, mistress of her own fate—with her rent paid.

“No, I mean won’t your horse take off if you don’t tie his reins to something?” she pointed out.

“Not unless you plan to scare him,” Garrett said with a laugh. And then he answered her question more seriously. “Wicked’s trained to stay wherever I put down his reins. He knows not to run off,” he told her. “That comes in handy when we’re out on the range and there’s nothing to tie him to.”

Kim glanced from the horse to his rider. She wouldn’t have known how to begin to train an animal for something like that—which was why, among other reasons, she’d never gotten a pet.

“That’s pretty clever,” she said honestly.

“Wicked’s pretty clever,” Garrett corrected, giving the animal he had trained the credit he felt the stallion deserved.

While he regarded animals to be smarter than a lot of people realized, he was aware that, like people, some animals were smarter than others. In his estimation, Wicked was exceedingly smart.

“Be right back,” Garrett told her, going inside the house.

“Okay,” Kim said cheerfully. The man was modest. Getting on his good side with flattery was going to be harder than she thought, but she was determined to do it. If she could get him to open up, she was confident that all the details she needed for this article would just come pouring out of him and the story would wind up writing itself.

Twenty-four hours and she was going to be out of here, she promised herself.

Thirty-six at the most.

Life with two overachieving parents and two overachieving sisters had taught her to hedge her bets—up to a point. Although, from what she could see, there wasn’t anything to write about here that could possibly keep her for even as long as a whole day, could it? she wondered. The brothers had a ranch, they worked with so-called troubled kids and they had some horses around. End of story. The challenge would be to flesh all that out to even a minimum length of words.

Kim frowned to herself. She doubted that anyone would want to read what she’d just outlined in her head. There had to be some kind of an angle she could use to at least make this article somewhat
interesting instead of the snooze-fest it was shaping up to be.

“Jackson’s not here,” Garrett told her as he came out of the house a couple of minutes after he’d gone in. “He’s probably at the corral, still working with the boys.”

“Okay.” Turning around on her heel, she left the porch and headed toward her vehicle again. Instead of following her, Garrett remained where he was—on the porch—and watched her. When he saw her opening the door on the driver’s side, he asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting into the car.”

“Why?”

Maybe she’d misjudged the man’s mental acuity. He certainly hadn’t struck her as being slow, but what other explanation could there be for his not understanding what she was telling him?

“So I can drive to the corral.” He wasn’t picking up his horse’s reins. Why? “You are going to lead the way on your horse, right?”

Instead of taking Wicked’s reins, he came around to her side of the vehicle.

“You don’t need the car,” he told her, shutting the door for her. “We’ll walk.”

“Walk?” Kim echoed in surprise, as if she was unable to fully grasp the concept.

“Walk,” he repeated gently, taking her hand in his and fully intending to coax her along if he had to.

“It’s what people do when they put one foot in front of the other.” He grinned. “You’d be amazed at how much ground you can cover that way.”

Kim was hardly listening to him. Instead, she looked around the immediate surrounding area. She didn’t see anything beside the ranch house.

“Just how far away is the corral?” she asked.

Amusement highlighted his eyes, but he managed to keep a straight face as he replied, “Close enough not to have to take a canteen with us.”

The straight face didn’t fool her for a second. This time, she called him on it. “You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he told her innocently, then added, “I might, however, be teasing you a little.” In the next breath, he apologized. “Sorry, I don’t get to have much fun. Working with Jackson and a bunch of boys can get pretty serious at times and I don’t get into town much.”

She sincerely doubted that. She might not know much about ranches and towns in the middle of nowhere, but she felt she was pretty good when it came to judging people, and Garrett White Eagle did not strike her as a man who was resigned to living some sort of a monastic life. He looked, instead, like a man who knew how to have a good time.

He also struck her as someone who knew how to read people and work an angle.

This ranch, it suddenly occurred to her now that she wasn’t distracted, cursing at defunct Wi-Fi signals and guidance systems that refused to guide, could be a perfect source of income. Parents were known to become desperate when it came to trying to save an offspring who was on the road to self-destruction. One that would bring them everlasting shame, not to mention huge lawyer fees and who knew what all else if those kids really got going. And then one day, they hear about this supposedly altruistic place that promises to heal their wayward liability, turn him into a pillar of society for what they were probably told would be a “reasonable” sum of money.

Who wouldn’t be sucked into taking a chance on that? Especially when rehabs were notorious for their rate of turning out repeat violators.

An article like that could almost write itself, she thought as she all but trotted next to Garrett, doing
her best to keep up.

But why bother when Garrett could practically write it for her? Or, at the very least, give her the lead she wanted to go with.

“Just how much can you and your brother pad the bills for these boys without arousing the parents’ suspicions?” she asked, almost sounding breathless as the question came out of her mouth.

Garrett stopped dead in his tracks just shy of the corral. Had he just heard what he thought he just heard? Because, if he had, the last thing he needed or wanted was for Jackson to get wind of this writer’s current mind-set.

He needed to change her mind, fast—or, barring that, he needed to send her on her way. Also fast.

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Chapter One

Pine trees don’t wear gloves.

Amelia Klondike, like any sensible person on God’s earth, knew that. She was out here in the woods to find pinecones for a Sunday school project, not accessories. She set down the last of the lemon bar and coffee she’d brought for breakfast—Amelia didn’t believe in sensible breakfasts, ever—and picked up the glove from its place among the scattered pinecones. Large, well made, worn to a comfortable softness, it was definitely a man’s glove—one that would be missed, so she should try to find its owner. She chuckled as her mind made the connection; a woman whose life’s work was a charity called Here to Help ought to be able to help one glove find the man who owned it.

Not that Amelia was looking to find a man—gloved or otherwise—these days. Just over a year out from a publicly broken engagement, Amelia was barely starting to feel as if talk had died down and she could be seen as Little Horn’s best helping hand, not its saddest broken heart.

She was tucking the glove in her pocket when she spotted its mate ten feet away. Then a boot... and a leg... until there, lying under the largest of the pine trees, Amelia spied the owner of those gloves.

She blinked a few times, startled to see a large, ruggedly dressed man sprawled in the wet needles under the boughs. “Sir?” The angle of his arms and legs wasn’t that of sleep, and last night’s storm certainly wasn’t conducive to camping out under the stars. Amelia dropped the gloves and her pack on the ground and walked over to shake the man’s shoulder. “Hey, sir, are you all right?”

He didn’t respond. Lord, help me, what do I do? she prayed as she looked around for any sign of companions or transportation. Short of Louie, her own horse, who stood inspecting a clump of grass behind her, Amelia was alone. She didn’t recognize the rather handsome man; he was clean-cut, well if casually dressed, but mud-smeared as if he’d been out here all night. As if he’d come to some kind of mishap. “Are you hurt? Sick? You don’t look like you should…”

Amelia swallowed her words as the man groaned and turned his head to reveal a grisly wound across his forehead. “Oh, mercy!” Amelia gasped, fumbling back to her backpack for her cell phone. She had to call 911. This man needed an ambulance.

The phone was no help—she should have known she’d get no cell service way out here. How was she going to get this poor soul to help? Amelia twisted a blond curl around her fingers in panicked consideration of her options. Sometimes text got through on almost no service and she was good friends with Lucy Benson, the sheriff. Would Lucy be nearby on a Saturday morning? She pulled up Lucy’s cell number and typed Emergency!

She shook the man gently, pulling the scarf from her neck to wipe the worst of the drying blood from his face. Someone—or something—had taken a good whack at his forehead. Accident? Fight? Bandit? Little Horn had been experiencing its own odd crime spree in recent weeks, so there was no telling if the attractive man on the ground before her was a good guy or a bad one. If the past year had taught her anything, it was that bad guys could come in good-looking packages.

Hero or villain, this was a hurt man in need of help, and right now she was the only help to be had. Carefully, she rolled him fully onto his back, which made him wince. “Sorry about this,” she offered as she rummaged through his pockets for a phone, wallet or, hopefully, car keys to a truck just out of sight.
The search came up empty. No keys, no wallet, no phone. "Looks like someone had it in for you, mister." Given all the robberies taking place in Little Horn of late, it wasn’t hard to think the criminals had expanded their cattle and equipment theft to face-to-face holdups. It took a special brand of mean to not only take a man’s valuables, but to dump him unconscious in the middle of nowhere. “Come on there, cowboy, wake up. This’d be a whole lot easier with you conscious.”

Her phone dinged an incoming text from Lucy. Hurt? Gramps?

It would be natural for Lucy to think any emergency of Amelia’s involved the elderly grandfather who lived with her, but not this time. Found injured man in woods just over ridge behind Palmer’s Creek. Call 9-1-1 for me?

I’m not too far from there. On my way.

Some days it paid well to be best friends with the local sheriff. “Help is on the way,” she told the unconscious man. Wasn’t it important to keep concussion victims awake? Why hadn’t she paid more attention when watching medical dramas? Try talking to him. She grasped one of his broad, solid shoulders and shook him a little harder. “Do you hurt anywhere? What’s your name?”

No response other than a groan, but he had moved his hand and Amelia spied a watch. “Why’d they leave your watch when they took everything else?” She began unbuckling the old, worn timepiece—it was a long shot, but maybe the watch could at least give her a name or initials if it was engraved.

It was. Finn: all my love, B. Mystery man had a name—and someone who missed him. “You’re no slouch to look at, Finn, B’s a lucky lady. And worried, I expect.” She’d spent enough time praying for her now-ex-fiancé, Rafe, to come off duty from the Texas Rangers safe and sound that her heart twisted in sympathy for the likely frantic B. It looked as if Finn had been out here all night, if not longer. “Wake up, Finn.” She leaned in closer to his fine features. “Finn! Finn, can you hear me?”

A hint of awareness washed over the man’s features. He dwarfed her—she guessed him to be over six feet tall and very fit. “Can you sit up?” She tried to pull his chest vertical, but he winced and his eyes shot wide open. They locked on to her for a second, a startling sky blue contrast to his glossy dark brown hair, before losing focus again as he fell back to the ground and murmured, “Ouch.”

“I guess you’re more hurt than you look.” Amelia pushed up the fleece he wore to see blood staining the shirt underneath. “Mercy, Finn, I don’t think you should move at all. Help is on the way, so you just sit still.”

His hand moved to his chest. “Ribs.” He said, the word slurring a bit.

“You might have cracked a few of those, and you’re definitely bleeding.” She took her scarf from behind his head and bunched it up against the red spot on his shirt. “Stay with me, Finn. Keep those eyes open.” She grabbed Finn’s hand, finding it alarmingly cold, and guided it to press against the scarf on his wound. His eyes found her again, the fear and confusion in his gaze going straight to the pit of her stomach.

“My name’s Amelia, and I’m getting you help.” She bit her lip. “You just stick with me, okay?”

Finn nodded his head. When he coughed, she could see the pain shoot through him even as he grabbed her hand. “Where am...?” Finn’s words fell off into a sharp hiss as he tried to rise again.

Amelia put a hand gently to his shoulder. “Oh, no, you don’t. You’d better stay still.”

Finn’s eyes wandered gently to his shoulder. “Oh, no, you don’t. You’d better stay still.”

Finn’s eyes wandered again, then returned to her as he let his head fall back against the ground. He looked at her as if she was the only person in his world—and right now, wasn’t she? “Where am I?” he asked in halting words.
“You’re in...well, the middle of nowhere, really.” She grabbed his free hand—the one where the watch had been—and held it, stroking his forearm in an effort to keep him calm. *Keep him talking to you.* “What on earth made you come up into the forest in last night’s storm? Or did someone just dump you here?”

“I...” Finn’s eyes rolled back and his lids fell shut. The hand Amelia was touching lost its tension and dropped to his chest. He’d lost consciousness again—that couldn’t be good news. “Lord,” Amelia prayed aloud, helplessness pushing her pulse higher, “I need to know what to do here. Don’t You let Finn die before help comes. Don’t You do that to him or to me.” She laid her hand against Finn’s chest, grateful to feel breath and a heartbeat.

Amelia checked her phone again, then used the edge of her jacket to blot the sheen of sweat now beading Finn’s forehead. “Finn? Finn, wake up. Show me those nice blue eyes.” She grabbed his hand again, shaking it a bit to rouse him. “I found your gloves.” That struck her as a ridiculous thing to say, but she didn’t have a lot of experience making conversation with men out cold. Gramps fell asleep nightly—okay, hourly—in his recliner, but that was different. “Come on, Finn, give a gal a break. Open your eyes. Groan a little. Let me know you’re still in there.”

Finn seemed to grow more still, even the tension in his rugged features going soft as if falling sleep. Was he dying? He was such a nice-looking guy—if she discounted the mud, leaves and blood. Far too dashing to meet his end out here in a pile of pine needles.

Her phone beeped again. Shout out the text from Lucy said. Amelia dropped Finn’s hand and stood to yell “Lucy!” at the top of her lungs. She heard the distant rumble of an engine and dashed over to the side of the ridge to see a little all-terrain vehicle scrambling up the hillside with Lucy’s white police SUV not far behind. Some distance back, Amelia could see the flashing lights of what had to be an ambulance.

“Here!” Amelia yelled again, jumping up and down and waving her arms as relief filled her chest. “Over here!”

When the ATV veered in her direction, Amelia dashed back to Finn, still motionless on the ground. “It’s okay, Finn,” she said, mopping his face again. “We’re gonna get you out of here.” She grabbed his hand, breathless and surprisingly near tears. “Help is here. You’re safe.”

* * *

“Hello there. Welcome back. I’m Dr. Searle.” A man in tortoiseshell glasses was peering at him as if he was a science experiment. The doctor’s warm tone felt suspiciously rehearsed. “Can you tell me your name?”

His name? His name seemed just out of reach. The combination of pain and confusion left him feeling weightless and heavy at the same time—as if he couldn’t tell up from down or left from right. He couldn’t answer.

The doctor adjusted his glasses. “Amelia found a watch on your wrist inscribed to Finn. Is that your name?”

“Sounds...right,” he said, mostly because he didn’t know what else to say. Amelia? Did he know that name?

“Well, let’s go with Finn for now. Tell me, can you see my face clearly?” Dr. Searle asked.
“Uh...I guess so.” Glory, even his teeth hurt. His tongue felt dry and sluggish. Where did this awful headache come from? Why did everything feel so out of place?

Dr. Searle switched on a small light and waved it back and forth. “Do you know where you are?”

“No.” Admitting that made the pounding in his head go double-time, a steady rhythm of not-good, not-good, not-good.

“You’re in the Little Horn Regional Medical Center. Amelia Klondike found you unconscious in the woods early this morning. Can you tell me how you got there?”

The pounding turned into a slam, with a sucker punch of fear to his gut. “No.” Hospital? In the woods? Out cold? Come to think of it, he couldn’t remember anything about anything except that this Amelia person sounded a bit familiar. The air turned thin and his head began to spin. “My head hurts. And my ribs.”

“I expect so. You’ve had a concussion, along with a few broken ribs and several nasty lacerations. Whatever hit you was big and mean. Took your wallet and your phone and left you out in the storm from the looks of it. Amelia said you had nothing on you but the watch.”

Amelia. He focused on the half-familiar name and remembered a vague impression of some very pretty blue eyes and a soft, soothing voice. Everything else was a blank.

“Well, Finn, it seems the knock on your head has rattled things around a bit. I’d try not to worry about it. It’s not that unusual for head-trauma patients to lose the hours around their injury at first.”

Finn didn’t like that he’d said “that unusual.” And he hadn’t just lost a few hours—right now it felt as if he’d lost everything. The spinning started again and he closed his eyes.

“I’m going to run some tests and give your description to the police. We might not be able to learn much over the weekend, but it’s worth a shot. Can you tell me if Finn is your first name, a last name or a nickname?”

Finn licked his dry, cracked lips. It hurt to think. For that matter, it hurt to breathe. “I don’t know.” He put his hand to his forehead, immediately regretting the sparks of pain it sent through the back of his eyes.

The doctor put a hand on Finn’s arm. “Try not to get all worked up. You must have friends or family looking for you. It won’t take long to sort things out.”

If Dr. Searle could have picked the one idea to make Finn feel worse... The haunting sense that no one was missing him or searching for him, that he was alone, was as deep as it was inexplicable. “I don’t remember anything, Doc.” It felt as if the admission swallowed him whole.

“It’ll likely come back to you in the next few hours. Are you up for a visitor? Amelia’s been out in the lobby waiting for you to wake up, and if you ask me, you could do with a distraction right about now.”

“Sure.” After all, this Amelia was the only thing he thought he remembered right now.

Dr. Searle gave him a half casual, half concerned smile as he moved to the door and opened it.

“Well, look at you, awake and everything.”

“Amelia” swept into the room with a bouquet of flowers and a bundle of plaid fabric. The particular turquoise of her eyes did feel vaguely familiar, as did her voice. In fact, her voice and eyes were the only memory he could pull up at all.

She deposited the flowers on his bedside table with a hopeful smile. As rescue squads went, she was pretty easy on the eyes with a tumble of blond hair and a petite, curvy figure. “Do you remember me? I found you early this morning.”
“A bit.” He had no idea what to say.

“Dr. Searle says you’ll recover just fine despite being pretty banged up. Gramps broke a rib once—I know it isn’t much fun.”

Should he know who Gramps was? “It’s not.” Finn stared at her, feeling as if he ought to know more about her but coming up short. All he remembered was the sound of her voice saying You’re safe and the blue of her eyes. And her hand. He remembered her holding his hand. He started to say You’re the only thing I remember, but changed his mind.

She mistook his silence for curiosity about the bundle, so she held up what turned out to be pajamas. “I think hospital gowns make you feel sicker than you already are. I figured you’d want to be comfortable, seeing as Doc Searle says you’ll be here over the weekend while they run a bunch of tests. You look to me like a blue plaid kind of guy.” She handed them to him, and when her fingers brushed his arm, the familiarity returned again. Something—anything familiar—made Finn fight the urge to grab her hand and hold it to see if the sensation would grow stronger.

Her face softened with concern. “So you don’t remember anything?”

“I remember your voice saying I’d be okay.”

That was the wrong thing to say—a flush pinked her cheeks and she looked away for an awkward moment. Finn felt foolish, lost and stumbling through this absurd situation.

“I’ve never met anyone with real, true amnesia before. I thought it only happened on soap operas.” Amnesia. The word made him cringe. He looked down at the pajamas rather than at her eyes, feeling more exposed than any hospital gown could achieve.

“You’ll be all right, you know. Little Horn is a nice town, filled with nice people who’ll lend a hand to anyone in a tight spot.” She was talking to fill the awkward silence, clearly trying to put him at ease. “You do know you’re in Texas, don’t you?”

Finn was grateful to have one question he could answer. “The accents made that easy to figure out, yes.” Amelia had that lilting, musical quality to her voice that made Texan women so easy to talk to. The sound of home...wherever in Texas that was for him. How could he not know something so simple as his name and address?

As if she heard his thoughts, Amelia said, “Well, you have to be from somewhere around here, too, given yours.”

“I suppose.”

“And you know it’s just after Thanksgiving?” She looked optimistic and hopeful, as if it would be a victory for both of them if he said yes.

Finn pointed to the “Happy Thanksgiving” decoration still up on his room wall. “I hope I ate well.” The near-joke surprised him. Her presence was the only thing that even came close to putting him at ease. Finn was thankful for her brightness against the black void he could feel lurking where his memory ought to have been.

“I’m sure this will all work itself out. Doc says your memory is likely to come back in bits and pieces over the next few days. I’ll do my best to make sure you’re comfortable while that happens and find your folks so they’re not out of their minds with worry. You just focus on resting and getting better.”

He really was injured, wasn’t he? The more he thought about it, the more he hurt. It felt as if someone had drained his body like a bathtub—Finn felt empty and fragile. At a loss physically, mentally and even emotionally. He put his hands up to cover his face for a moment, worried he
couldn’t hold all the emptiness in. He didn’t even know where to go once they let him out of here.

A hand touched his elbow—the familiar touch he so desperately needed. “Hey, hey there,” she said softly. “I know this has got to be hard but, Finn, you’re gonna be fine. We’ll all help you until you know what’s next, okay?”

“Thank you for helping me.” It came out with more emotion than he would have liked.

“Well, that’s me. I’m a professional helper.” The cheery smile lit up her face again. “But I have to say, you’re my first honest-to-goodness rescue.”

She seemed so proud of it. It made him feel just a little bit less freakish. She tugged on a curl in her hair and he remembered—he remembered—her doing that. The whole world before her was a complete blank, but at least he could remember small details about her. “No kidding,” he said, smiling himself.

They stared at each other for a moment, oddly connected and yet in reality complete strangers.

“Well,” she said, breaking the quiet, “I’ve got to run some errands for the Lone Star League—that’s our local community organization—and you’ve got some tests and paperwork to do, so how about I come back after supper to see how you’re holding up?” She stood up. “I don’t live very far away, so it’s no trouble.” She pointed at him, her brows furrowing in mock-seriousness. “I expect my rescuees to make a full recovery, so you’ve got your work cut out for you.”

Finally, someone who didn’t look at him as if he’d been damaged beyond repair. “Got it.”

“See you later, Finn.” Hearing her say it, his name did sound right. It wasn’t much, but it was a start.
Chapter Two

Amelia caught Dr. Tyler Grainger, the local pediatrician, in the hallway when she came back to the Medical Center a few hours later.

“I heard about your dramatic rescue,” Tyler said. “That’s got to be a first for Here to Help, isn’t it?”

“No one’s more surprised than I,” Amelia offered. “And speaking of surprises, word is you have one yourself.”

She could see Tyler hesitate. After such a public split from her own fiancé, it wasn’t hard to see why he might hold back his news. “So you heard I proposed to Eva?”

She made sure to give him a warm smile. “Good news travels almost as fast as gossip in Little Horn. Congratulations.” She really was happy for the good doctor, and Eva was becoming a close friend, but the news still stung. Their engagement came on the heels of that of League president Carson Thorn and another of Amelia’s friends Ruby Donnovan. Even Amelia’s sister, Lizzie, was recently engaged—Little Horn was having as much of a wedding boom as a crime spree lately. “Well, I’d best get in to visit my new project.”

Tyler looked at the package from Maggie’s, the local coffee shop, in Amelia’s hand. “The nurse told me you left some flowers in Ben Stillwater’s room, too. That’s a nice thing to do.” Ben Stillwater was a young man from Little Horn currently in a coma from a riding accident. “Does this man know how fortunate he is to be a project of yours?” the doctor teased.

“If he doesn’t, he will soon.” Amelia waved as she pushed the hospital room door open.

Finn looked better. Her heart still twisted at the lost look in his eyes, the way he searched places and faces as if desperate for any anchor. He looked at her as if hers was the only face that held any meaning for him. The half-eaten dinner beside him stirred her sympathy. Hospital food? If anyone needs the comfort of home cooking, it’s someone who can’t remember where home is.

He noticed her looking at the plate. “I remembered I don’t like peas.” The comment brought the faintest hint of a smile to his features. Finn’s mussed, lost-puppy charm kicked Amelia’s compulsion to help up a notch. That helpfulness was her special gift, but it occasionally proved her greatest weakness.

“I don’t care for myself, actually. My favorite food is pie. I’m extra partial to blueberry, but really, any pie will do.”

She’d hoped he’d say something like My favorite is apple, but he only shrugged and said, “Who doesn’t like pie?”

Amelia sat down, putting the bakery box on his bedside table. “I’m glad to hear you say that. I went for the basics—apple, cherry and, given the season, pumpkin.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, startled. “You brought me pie?”

What kind of life had he led that a simple kindness seemed so foreign to him? “I am of the opinion that pie makes most things better,” she explained as she retrieved a second box with her own slice of blueberry. “Actually,” she added, fishing two plastic forks out of the bag, “I haven’t met the situation that can’t be improved by a good slice of pie.” Amelia dismissed his bed tray to the other side of the room and replaced it with the selection of pie slices. “Anything look especially appealing?”
She watched as his startled expression warmed to a small smile. Small, a tiny bit forced, but enough to restore the striking quality of those light blue eyes. Against the white of his bandages and the brown-black gloss of his hair, his eyes drew her gaze, making her stare even though she knew better.

Picking up the fork, he scanned the selection. “I think I like pumpkin.”

“Only one way to find out,” Amelia cued as she picked up her own fork and dug in. Delicious. She hoped Finn thought so, too.

She watched in satisfaction as his face registered the gastronomic pleasure that was Maggie’s Coffee Shop pies. “Oh—” he sighed in just the way she’d hoped he would “—that’s good. Beats peas and whatever meat that was supposed to be.” He took another bite. “Thank you kindly.”

It was gratifying to see him even a little bit happy. “My pleasure.”

After a third bite, he paused to look at her, his head cocked sideways in analysis. “If you don’t mind my asking, why are you being so nice to a complete stranger?” The sad edge he gave those last two words poked Amelia under the ribs.

Amelia had trouble explaining her compulsion to help folks in need to good friends, much less to strangers like Finn. Only he wasn’t a stranger. He was someone she was supposed to help. Someone she didn’t find by accident, but by Providence. She recognized the pull toward his circumstances, the slow burn of burden in her heart that she’d come to know as her unique gift in God’s kingdom. While life had taken away important people—her parents, her grandmother, Rafe—life had given her lots of funds and a generous heart. “I make it a practice to be nice to everybody. And you’re not really a stranger anymore.”

He didn’t reply. Instead, he concentrated on a fourth bite of pie until his curiosity evidently got the better of him and he asked, “You’re really nice to everybody?”

“Well—” she dug her fork into the luscious pie again, feeling her face flush that he’d called her on such an exaggeration “—I admit it’s harder with some folks than others, but yes, I try to be.” It was doubly hard with folks like Byron McKay. Byron, the vice president of the Lone Star Cowboy League and so mean that everyone hoped President Carson Thorn never had to step aside, had laid into her but good this afternoon about some silly detail of League business. “Truth is, today I needed this pie as much as you.”

He sat back and looked at her a few heartbeats longer than he ought to have. “I can’t imagine anyone giving you a hard time.”

Amelia squeaked out a laugh, unsettled by his stare. “Oh, you’d be surprised.” She felt the words tumble out of her, rushing against the rise of warmth under the blue scarf she wore. She remembered wiping his face with the white one she’d worn this morning—now stained beyond repair. “Little Horn may be small by big-city standards—” she felt her words speeding up, filling the too-warm space between them “—but there’s no shortage of opinions and ornery personalities here. We’ve had tensions. We’ve got grumps and gossips. It’s been a rough patch these past two months. Try the apple.”

Finn did as requested, nodding his approval. “Tell me about Little Horn,” he asked, then evidently seeing the surprise on her face, added, “Maybe some little detail will spark a memory, and right now your voice is the only one that feels familiar.”

Amelia sat back in her chair. Finn’s admission that he found her voice comforting rose an insistent little hum in her stomach. “Little Horn’s the same as a hundred other small Texas towns, I guess,” she
started. He must be feeling the worst kind of lonely, to draw such a complete blank on his home and family and everything the way he had. She wanted to fill in as many details for him as she could, to take at least some of the shadows from the corners of his eyes. “Most folks are ranchers or the like, but—” and here she hoisted her slice of pie “—we’ve got some good cooks, a warm, welcoming church—and of course, very nice doctors. The sheriff, my friend Lucy? She says Little Horn is about as upright a place as can be—that is up until all the rustling that’s been going on. That has everyone on edge.”

“Cattle rustling?” His interest seemed to pick up on that. Amelia wasn’t sure if that should be an important sign of something.

She set down her fork. “Livestock and equipment started going missing from some of the more prosperous ranches around town. Byron McKay—that grouch is the reason for my pie today, if you really want to know—was hit first. Ten head of cattle and a whole bunch of fancy equipment just walked off his ranch. You don’t want to get on Byron’s bad side, let me tell you. He’s barely nice on a good day. Only it didn’t stop there.”

Finn started on the cherry pie. “The rustlers struck again?”

“They hit Carson Thorn’s ranch. He’s the head of our chapter of the Lone Star Cowboy League. That’s a service organization that helps ranchers in these parts. Carson’s as nice as they come, so then we knew it wasn’t just someone sore at Byron. There have been over ten thefts since September alone, all different kinds of things taken from different kinds of ranches. Even the Welcome to Little Horn sign disappeared. It’s got everyone more than a little spooked.”

“So your perpetrators weren’t all about personal retaliation.”

Amelia saw Finn register the same surprise she felt at his choice of words. The technical language he used was the same she’d heard over and over from Lucy and from her ex-fiancé, Rafe. Police language.

So Finn’s interest in the rustling likely wasn’t criminal, it was professional. Her instincts were right, he was a good man. The satisfaction at her insight warred with the residual sting she still carried over men with badges. If that wasn’t enough to warn her off the connection she felt with him—and it was—Finn’s watch had told her someone was waiting for him to come home. Should she mention that?

She decided on a different topic instead. “You talk like you’re with the law, Finn. Are you?”

His eyes squinted, trying the idea on for size. “Could be. Only wouldn’t the force be out looking for me if I was? Dr. Searle says no one has filed a missing-persons report for anyone matching my description.” He said the words with a weary acceptance that made Amelia’s throat tighten.

“Of course someone’s missing you. I’ve no doubt there’s a pretty lady plain out of her mind with worry right now.”

Finn put down his fork, the rest of the cherry pie uneaten. “I don’t think so. I don’t feel any sense that there’s anyone out there missing me.” His eyes lost all their warmth. Amelia had met plenty of people in tight spots but she couldn’t remember ever seeing the kind of lifeless resignation that currently filled Finn’s features. He looked as if it came as no surprise that no one missed him.

“Sure there is.” She said it as much to remind herself as to remind him. “There’s B.”

***
“B?” Amelia spoke as if the letter should mean something to him, and Finn had the vaguest sensation that it did.

“Doc Searle didn’t show you the watch?”

Finn looked at his left hand, noticing the now-faint tan line that showed where he wore his watch. Dr. Searle had mentioned an inscribed watch but hadn’t shown it to him. Somewhere from the back of his brain came the fact that where a man wore his watch usually indicated if he was left- or right-handed. It seemed an odd detail for a person to know with the certainty he did and backed up the theory that he was somehow connected with law or security—he seemed used to collecting details as clues. Only if that were true, where was the force that should be out looking for their missing officer? Why wasn’t someone posting departmental notices? APBs?

Finn went to reach for the small drawer in his bedside table, but the action sent jolts of pain through his chest. “Let me look,” Amelia said. “It’s in here.” She pulled out a square gold watch on a black leather band. A nice watch, the kind that got given as a gift. Amelia placed it facedown in Finn’s hand. He ran one finger over the words as he read the inscription.

Finn: all my love, B.

The sight of those words brought up a bittersweet emotion he couldn’t place. Sorrow? Regret? Loss? Anger? It wasn’t clear enough to name, but it was strong enough to tighten his throat.

“See?” Amelia’s soft, comforting voice came at his shoulder. “There’s at least one person out there who loves you and misses you.” She said it like a blessing, like something that should make him feel better. It didn’t, but he couldn’t explain why. His face must have shown the turmoil, for Amelia’s face lost its encouraging glow and she backed away. “I’m sorry. Maybe there was a reason Dr. Searle waited to show that to you.”

“No,” Finn countered, “I’m glad you did...sort of. Kind of helps to see solid evidence that I’m Finn.” He turned the watch over to stare at the face. It should look familiar, but it was just an object. “I was wearing this when you found me?” He knew plenty of men who’d stopped wearing watches now that cell phones were an easy way to keep track of time—the watch clearly had sentimental value to him.

“It’s all we had to go on. There was no wallet or cell phone or car keys or that sort of thing.”

“If it was a robbery, why not take the watch?” His brain was used to putting facts together like this—it made Finn more convinced he was in some kind of security field.

“That’s what I can’t figure out. Only, you were wearing gloves—I found the glove before I found you—so maybe they didn’t see the watch.” Amelia twisted a finger around one curl of her cascading blond hair, hesitating before asking, “So, no idea who B is?”

Finn took a deep breath, trying to focus his thoughts, to push them through the veil of murky nothingness. “Only that she’s important.” It surprised him—in a much-needed good way—that he knew B was a she. He felt like some strange emotional version of Hansel and Gretel, scanning the world for bits and pieces of a trail to lead him back home. He was Finn and he had—or once had—a B. It wasn’t nearly enough to go on, but other than his recollections of Amelia’s rescue, it was all he had.

He put the watch on, pleased to note it matched the faint tan line on his wrist. He had at least something of his life now. “Thanks for showing that to me. It helps. Really.” He smiled at her, pleased when she smiled back.

“There is more, you know,” Amelia said as she rose up off the chair to open the narrow closet on the far side of the room. “You were wearing these when I found you.” She held up a pair of jeans, a
plaid shirt and a heavy fleece—clothes that could have been attributed to half the men in Texas, and
certainly no big clues to his identity. “Nice boots,” Amelia offered as she hoisted a pair of worn
cowboy boots. She was digging for anything positive to bolster his spirits, and it touched him that she
was trying so hard.

“They look like mine,” he said, not sure how he could make the claim but wanting to go along with
her relentless hunt for affirmations. “Like something I think I’d wear, I mean.”

“Well,” she said, rehanging the clothes, “you know more now than you did this morning. Tomorrow
you’ll find out even more. That’s what Dr. Searle said, that you’d get things back as you went along.
Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if by this time tomorrow you know your name, your address and your
grandmother’s birthday.”

A knock on the door signaled Dr. Searle’s entry into the room. He nodded toward the watch on his
hand. “So you’ve seen that. Bring up anything?”

Nothing good, but Finn didn’t really want to admit that. “I don’t know who B is, if that’s what
you’re asking.”

“Only it’s a she, and she’s important,” Amelia added. “That’s good progress, don’t you think?”

Finn touched the watch again and thought about the tender inscription now against his skin. B
sounded like a wife, or a sister, or a love—so why didn’t he remember her, and why hadn’t she come
looking for him? Why was his response to the watch so dark? Nothing made any sense.

Pie? Dr. Searle noticed the three pieces sitting on the tray beside Finn’s bed.

“Amelia was fixing to convert me to her theory that pie makes everything better. And that knowing
which flavors I like was vital information.”

Dr. Searle laughed. “I could think of worse therapies.”

“I read that tastes and smells are among the most powerful memories. It seemed like an ideal way
to wake up Finn’s brain cells.”

Finn sat up. “You were researching amnesia?” He hated using that term to refer to whatever it was
that happened to him. It sounded so dramatic.

“Well, if you call looking things up on the internet on your smartphone while you’re waiting in line
at the pharmacy for Gramps’s prescriptions research, then yes. I mean, really, how many amnesia
patients does a person get to meet? It’s fascinating.”

Not so much from where I sit, Finn thought darkly. The feeling of everything being just slightly
beyond his control was too prickly for his liking. Exhaustion pulled on his composure, and he tried to
stifle a yawn.

“Speaking of Gramps, I’d better get home to him. He’s usually good about his evening medicines,
but not always. And he’s an absolute bear in the morning if he stays up too late watching television.”
She touched Finn’s arm again in that soft, kind way. “You must be worn-out—it’s been quite a day. I
expect rest is about the best gift you can give yourself right now, so see that you get lots of it. I’ll stop
back by tomorrow after church. And I’ve already added you to the prayer list, so you’re set there.”

“Pie, pajamas and prayer—what more can a man ask for?” Finn had to wonder if he was always
this bad at conversation or if his slumbering synapses just made him say stupid things. “Thank you,”
he offered, finding the words painfully inadequate for all Amelia Klondike had done.

Her blue eyes glowed, as if she understood all he’d failed to say. “You’re welcome. Rest up now,
and we’ll see what else comes back to you tomorrow.” Amelia collected her things and sent him one
last warm look before ducking out the door.
“Is she really that nice to everybody?” Finn asked Dr. Searle as they heard her heels clip down the hallway.

“Amelia? Sure thing. Helping people is what Amelia does. Ever since she and her sister came into her daddy’s money, she’s turned helping folks into a full-time thing. Me, I might have skedaddled to some tropical island with that kind of cash, but Amelia just turned her hobby into a nonstop kindness campaign. My wife says Amelia would just about up and die if she had to stop giving folks a hand up—it’s her gift.” He motioned for Finn’s wrist and took his pulse. “If I had to pick anyone in Little Horn to find me out cold in the woods, it’d be Amelia. God was watching out for you, son. You remember that when all this memory nonsense gets to you.”

“It’ll come back, won’t it, Doc?”

Dr. Searle sat down on the chair Amelia had vacated. “It should. The brain is the organ we know the least about—lots of it is still a mystery. But amnesia onset by head trauma is less rare than you think. You may never remember the accident, but the rest of it is likely to come back over the next few days.”

Finn fiddled with the thin hospital gown, suddenly eager to get into pajamas like a normal person instead of this ridiculous getup that made him feel like an invalid. “Do I have to stay in here until it does?”

“Your preliminary tests will be done by tomorrow afternoon, and then come back for an office visit Monday. So yes, you’ll be free to go tomorrow but, Finn, where would you go?”

If Finn was supposed to get rest, there wasn’t a less restful question in all the world.
Chapter Three

I should never have agreed to this. Finn stared at the holiday decorations that filled Amelia Klondike’s front porch late Sunday afternoon and fought the urge to bolt for the nearest hotel. As grateful as he was to get out of the hospital, their annoying holiday decorations paled in comparison to the blast of Christmas cheer that was Amelia’s house.

Why did anything Christmas bother him so? It was something else to heap onto the pile of unknowns. Dr. Searle had showed him a list of missing-persons reports, but none of them contained a Finn and he still couldn’t even say if Finn was a first, last or nickname. It made obscure recollections like his intense dislike of Christmas that much harder to bear. Finn knew he didn’t like any of it, but he still didn’t know why.

“You don’t need to put me up, Amelia. I don’t want to put you and your grandfather out.” The fact that he hadn’t seen anything even close to a motel on the short drive from the hospital just made it worse.

“Nonsense. Where else would you go with no wallet, no credit cards and no name other than Finn?”

Thanks, he thought, it sounds so much less desperate when you put it that way. He must not have hidden his scowl well. “Even if you knew your address—” Amelia backpedaled “—you’re not supposed to drive. You can’t possibly live nearby, so how would you come back for those tests Doc Searle wants? And to tell the truth—” she gave him one of her wide-eyed, I-can’t-help-myself-from-helping looks “—I just plain think you shouldn’t be left on your own.” She pulled her silver SUV into the garage. “Gramps loves a mystery and no one even uses the upstairs bedrooms anymore. Besides, even if there was a hotel in town, what if some traumatic accident memory comes back to you in the middle of the night? Who’d want that in some cold hotel room all alone? I couldn’t forgive myself if I let that happen.”

One fact had become relentlessly clear: trying to stop Amelia Klondike from lending a hand to a soul she thought in need was like trying to stop a buffalo stampede with a flyswatter. It couldn’t be done—not without getting trampled. It won’t be for long, Finn told himself. Things are coming back to you. It’d be rude to refuse, right? She’s been so nice. From out of nowhere, Finn got the sense that he hadn’t had much home comfort of late—a vague impression of microwave bachelor food and bare-bones furniture pushed its way into his consciousness. He shivered—as if his body remembered the cold of the place without his brain remembering where that place was.

“What was that?”

Finn blinked, pulling himself back from the—the what? Memory? Hunch?—to see Amelia staring at him with a startled concern in her eyes. “What was what?” he asked, knowing that would do nothing to stave off her questioning.

She cut the car’s ignition. “Your whole face changed just now. And you shivered. You remembered something, didn’t you?”

It bothered him that she could see it. He wanted the return of his memories to be private. He was a private person—that much he knew. “I’m not sure.” It was no lie—he wasn’t sure what that flash in his brain was. “Except I think I live alone. And...not very well.”
Her voice changed, going all soft and warm in a way that got under his skin. “What did you just remember?”

He didn’t want to tell her, but the image rattled so loudly in his head it had to come out. “When you said that about waking up alone in the dark upset. I’ve done that. Or used to do that. A lot.”

“Oh, Finn. Do you know why?” Her eyes were so bittersweet, as if she knew exactly how it felt to be alone in the dark missing someone.

**Missing someone?** Where had that come from? Was it B? Was B gone from his life, whomever she was? Was that why no one was looking for him?

He caught her eyes again, feeling unmoored and too much at the mercy of randomly returning memories. He shifted his eyes to his hands and willed his fingers to unclench from their white-knuckled curl. “I don’t think I was a very happy man.” He wanted to take back the words the moment they escaped. To not know so much but to know *that?* What kind of torture was it going to be like to have things trickle back like this? “I don’t like Christmas.” He needed her to know how hard this was right now. Everything was messed up—he wanted company and he needed to be alone. He needed to remember but didn’t like what was coming back to him.

She blinked at him, unable to accept the thought. “Everybody likes Christmas.”

“I didn’t. I don’t. I mean...” Finn blew out a breath, the exhaustion welling up over him again. “I don’t know what I mean.”

“I’m sure I can’t begin to imagine what you are going through. It’s got to be so hard. But if there’s anything I do know, Finn, it’s that hard things are harder alone.” The dark, hard edge showed in the corners of her eyes again, the way it had whenever they talked about the possibility of him being in law enforcement. He’d noticed that little detail like he’d noticed a dozen others—how she avoided talking about herself, how she curled a finger around her hair when she got nervous, how everyone spoke about her in tones of veiled “bless her heart” pity.

Maybe that was why he felt such an affinity for her; she’d been knocked down by something but was fighting to stay up. He wasn’t very good at that fight but she was; she hadn’t let whatever it was beat her down. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to let a bit of that optimism rub off on him.

A wedge of light spilled on the car, and Finn looked up to see an older man standing in the door that led to the house. He could see more Christmas decorations behind the man, even from here. The urge to run was as strong as the urge to go inside. Not knowing quite who he was seemed to push every emotion closer to the surface, and he was too tired to fight it.

“Come inside,” Amelia coaxed. “If you still want to leave in the morning, we’ll talk about it. It’s almost supper and you need food and rest.”

The scents of a home kitchen wafted through the garage as he hauled himself out of the car and Finn’s stomach growled. He winced as he grabbed the tiny “luggage” the hospital had given him—sad to note all his current possessions fit into the small plastic bag.

“Finn, is it?” called the old man, leaning on a cane. He had Amelia’s eyes and a head full of bushy gray hair.

“Yes, sir.”

The man waved the formality off. “Oh, don’t ‘sir’ me. Luther’ll be just fine.” He held out a hand with thick, wrinkled fingers and shook Finn’s with a strong grip. “Tough go you’ve had there, son. I could barely believe it when Amelia told me.” He hobbled into the kitchen, motioning for Finn to follow.
A holiday home decor tidal wave assaulted Finn’s eyes, bringing a surge of nauseated panic to clench at Finn’s throat.

“It gets worse every year,” Luther remarked, his expression telling Finn that he hadn’t hid his reaction well. “I feel like I’m living in a department store window some days.”

Pine boughs, candy canes and red ribbon seemed to erupt from every available surface. A miniature tree with tiny ornaments stood in the center of the kitchen table while lights twinkled from every window.

Amelia bustled in behind him, her face a mix of pride and embarrassment given the admission he’d just made in the car. “I admit,” she said with a raised eyebrow, “I enjoy the holidays.”

“I think we went past ‘enjoy’ four years ago.” Luther gave Amelia an indulgent kiss on the cheek. “Now it’s closer to ‘obsess.’ Gets it from her mother, God rest her soul.”

Amelia set another bakery box down on the counter—more experimental pie slices?—and shucked off her coat. “Gramps says all the Klondike men married women with the gift for ornamentation.”

The gift for ornamentation. That was one way to put it. Finn fished for some kind of well-mannered compliment to pay the display, but came up short. When the kitchen clock struck the hour by playing “Joy to the World,” he wanted to shut his eyes and run from the room. But what good would that do? The rest of the house would likely offer the same festive assault.

A series of snuffles and small barks came from another part of the house, and a fat dog with bulging eyes waddled into the room.

“Bug, say hello to our new friend Finn.”

Bug, who looked as if his face was permanently pushed up against some invisible glass window, sniffed noisily around Finn’s boots, a pig-curly tail twitching in curiosity. Finn reached down and let the dog sniff his hand. “Hi there, Bug.” Bug, of course, sported a red collar dotted with green Christmas trees and a shiny silver bell.

Bug’s interest in Finn lasted only until Amelia lifted the lid off a Crock-Pot on the counter, sending a spicy, beefy aroma into the air. That sent Bug to jumping at Amelia’s feet, hoping for a taste. Finn couldn’t blame the dog for his enthusiasm. Real food. Maybe he could put up with the Yuletide high tide if it came with good home cooking. He owed it to himself—and to Amelia—to at least try.

“Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. Gramps, why don’t you show Finn to his room and he can settle in.”

“Less decorations up there, I think,” Luther said as he headed for a banister wrapped in red and gold ribbon. “You’re upstairs at the end of the hall. I don’t do stairs anymore, so I’ll just point you in the right direction, if that’s okay.” He pointed to a door Finn could just see off the left of the staircase. “Take a moment to wash up and get your bearings, and we’ll see you back down here in just a bit.”

“Thanks, Luther.” Finn mounted the first stair, then found himself reaching for the banister. His side was throbbing, and he didn’t like the fact that he needed the support to climb the flight.

“Think nothing of it, son. Least we can do.”

Nobody has to do anything for me, Finn thought darkly. I’ve no friends here. That’s not true, a small voice argued with his darker nature. And that’s not bad.

***

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Amelia didn’t like the scowl Lucy Benson gave her as they took
Bug for his evening walk when Lucy stopped over after supper. “I know you can’t help helping,” Lucy
continued, “but we don’t know anything about him. For all we know he could be connected to the
thefts.”

Amelia buttoned up her coat against the evening chill. “He’s not a criminal, Lucy.”

“Amelia, you don’t know that. Seeing the good in everybody doesn’t mean you have to put them up
in your home. He could rob you blind while you sleep tonight and it’s not as if you and Gramps and
Bug could defend yourselves.”

Amelia stopped walking to stare at Lucy. “He’s not our rustler, Lucy. I’m sure of it.”

“Well, forgive me if I don’t put that much stock in those hunches of yours. Being sheriff means I
have to depend more on solid evidence than your famous intuition.”

Amelia chose a new topic. “Well, Madam Sheriff, what new have you learned about our cattle
thieves? Any closer to catching whoever is doing all this?” Little Horn had been experiencing a
strange brand of crime spree, with cattle disappearing from wealthy ranchers’ estates while gifts of
supplies and equipment had appeared to families in need. A cowboy version of Robin Hood.

“Some folks are downright scared, having their security violated and goods stolen. And they’ve a
right to be worried. I don’t mind telling you I’m getting a lot of pressure to solve this case. The
finger-pointing is going to get ugly if we don’t get a break soon.” Lucy pushed out a sigh, her breath a
white whisp in the clear night air. “Then there are the folks who’ve received gifts. They’re grateful,
but I know they can’t help thinking their gain might be at someone else’s expense. As to who’s doing
it? I wish I knew.” She gave Amelia a sideways glance. “And I can’t say your fellow isn’t involved,
Amelia. Have you thought about that he may be involved and not remember it? With this amnesia
thing, he could genuinely believe he was innocent and still be guilty.”

Amelia hadn’t thought of that. “I can see that all of his memories aren’t happy ones. There’s
something dark just beyond his reach—he’s even said as much—but it can’t be criminal. He uses
phrases you do, which makes me think he’s in law enforcement.”

Lucy stopped walking and halted Amelia with a hand on her shoulder. “All the more reason for you
to steer clear. I get that he’s handsome and in distress and all, but haven’t you sworn off us badge
types since Rafe?”

“I’m helping him, not dating him, Lucy.”

“And what if one turns into the other?”

“Believe me, I won’t let it.” Bug pulled on the leash, in no mood to stand still on such a chilly
night. “I trust the nudges I get to help somebody.” Amelia started walking again. “God’s never sent me
astray yet, and I don’t think He’s gonna start now. Finn needs a whopping load of grace and a safe
place to work everything through. I don’t think it’s any surprise to God that I’m the one who found him
—I’m the one who was supposed to find him. I can help, so I’m going to help.”

“I’m not saying don’t help him. I’m saying don’t take him in.”

“He needs taking in most of all. You said it yourself—there’s no one looking for him. Can you
imagine how that feels? He’s the worst kind of lonely. I can’t let him go through that in some hotel two
towns over, not when Gramps and I are here and we’ve got the room and I’m the one who found him.”

“Well, I’ve been your friend long enough to know you’re gonna do this no matter what I say.” This
wasn’t the first time Amelia had listened to a lecture from Lucy on overextending her helpful nature.
She reminded herself that a friend who spoke the truth in love was a good friend to have, even when it
felt exasperating. “Just promise me you’ll be careful, and you’ll listen if I have to come to you with
information you don’t like.”

“Fair enough. And if Finn remembers anything I think you should hear, I promise I’ll tell you. Even if it proves my hunch is wrong.” She narrowed an eye at Lucy. “But it never is.”

“Yet,” Lucy corrected, wagging a finger at Amelia.

“Yet,” Amelia conceded. She was glad to feel the tension leave the conversation. “But really, have you got any leads at all?”

Lucy squared her shoulders. “The League Rustling Investigation Team and I have a theory or two.”

“Any you can share?” Amelia tried to be sensitive to Lucy’s official capacity and the sensitive information that often went with it.

“There’s a ranch hand, someone with a sketchy past who worked at three of the big ranches that got hit. He’d know the layout enough to get in and pull off the burglaries.”

“That seems like a strong lead.” Amelia loved to watch Lucy work on a case. She was an amazing strategist, a talented puzzle-solver who could see connections others missed. Little Horn was blessed to have her.

“There’s more,” Lucy went on. “This same guy just won a handful in the state lottery. That would puff him up enough to dare taking revenge on any ranch that let him go.”

“And it would mean he’d have the funds to give gifts to the struggling ranchers,” Amelia added. “I know you were wondering how our thief was turning all that livestock and equipment into cash for those other purchases so quickly.” It wasn’t as if a saddle went missing from one ranch only to appear on another—the taken items seemed to disappear, while different gifted items showed up out of nowhere.

“Only, I can’t connect him to the folks who’ve gotten gifts yet, only the folks who were robbed.”

“You’ll find the connection. You always do. And you’ve got the ‘Posse’ helping you.”

Lucy rolled her eyes at the nickname some of the townspeople had given the Rustling Investigation Team. ‘Helping’ isn’t always helpful. I had to make Tom Horton give me his gun on our stakeout the other night—he’s a little too eager to play ‘cops and robbers’ if you ask me. I’m glad to have Doc Grainger and Carson join the team, but we’re still not getting anywhere solid. Byron’s demanding answers, and he’s not alone.”

Byron McKay had been the first and hardest hit, so he had cause to be concerned. Only, Byron was tough to like under even the best of circumstances. He’d been mean to everyone lately, so Amelia could just imagine the kind of grief Byron must be giving Lucy for the fact that the identity of Little Horn’s ranch brand of Robin Hood remained unsolved. “Byron making your life miserable?”

“More than usual, and that’s saying something.” Lucy let out a weary sigh. “If we don’t solve this soon it’s going to be a hard, mean Christmas in Little Horn.”

Her friend’s words brought the ice from Finn’s eyes back to Amelia’s memory. Had Finn known nothing but hard, mean Christmases? Surely Little Horn could change that. Surely she, of all people, could change that.

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CHAPTER ONE

The chute gate flew open and the big red bull erupted into the arena. Jake Cameron swayed forward in his third-row seat, reflexively matching his son’s moves on the bull’s back, counting the seconds from zero to eight. He surged to his feet when the horn sounded, yelling along with the sold-out crowd. The bull gave a final buck as Tom Cameron loosened his grip, slamming him hard to the dirt. Cheers turned to groans as a hoof came down on Tom’s thigh.

Jake pushed to the end of the aisle, muttering apologies and earning a sharp “Watch it, mister!” as he trod on a woman’s foot.

Tom had scrambled to his feet by the time the sports medicine team reached him. The announcer’s voice boomed over the applause. “He’s fine, folks, and his score’s going to make him feel even better. That’s ninety-two points and the event win for Tom Cameron!”

Jake climbed over the railing to the chute area in a rain of confetti and watched his son accept a silver buckle and a Stetson hatbox. Tom limped back to the exit gate and then let the two burly paramedics half carry him to the sports medicine room.

Jake followed. Yeah, that stomping would leave Tom lame for a bit, but he had left the arena upright, and winning thirty grand plus for the weekend would ease his pain considerably.

“The kid did all right.” Jake’s older son, Luke, caught up with him, pulling his electric-blue bullfighter’s jersey over his head. “Sorry we couldn’t get to him before Sidewinder did.”

“Could have been a lot worse,” Jake said. “He walked out—couldn’t have done that if he’d broken his leg again.”

They made their way to the locker room, past the organized confusion of dismantling pens and chutes. The bulls had already been herded back to the big cattle trucks waiting to haul them away for a few days’ rest before the next event.

“Just a bruise, Doc thinks,” Tom said, shifting the ice pack on his leg, “but he wants me to go for an X-ray. We’ll stay here in town overnight.”

“What a wuss!” Luke shrugged out of his protective vest. “I got butted half a dozen times and stomped twice, but you don’t see me running to the ER.”

“You would if Doc said to,” Tom said, throwing a towel at his brother’s head.

Jake chuckled. Their sparring meant no more than two colts play-fighting. Luke had been watching over his younger brother since Tom had taken his first steps, ridden in his first roundup, straddled his first bull. Stood to reason he would take up bullfighting when Tom got into serious competition.

“Well, dang!” Deke Harkins blew into the room with a cell phone clamped to his ear. “You snatched that win right out from under me, Tom, but I’ll take the next event for sure.” Catcalls went up from the cowboys changing out of jeans stained with arena dirt and bull slobber. Deke was a little hard to take just now, new to the big-time and pumped after a series of good rides. A string of buck-offs would settle him down to the gritty business of riding bulls for a living.

“Catch up with you later, sweet thing,” Deke said into the phone and stuffed it into his pocket. “Well, let’s party—I’m buying. You, too, Jake.”

“Can’t do it,” Jake said with a smile. “I’ve got a long drive ahead—my little girl’s waiting at home.”

“Hot stuff, I guess,” Deke said, elbowing him.
Tom slapped at Deke with his black felt hat. “Watch your mouth—he’s talking about my baby sister.” He turned to his father. “Why don’t you stay over? Tell Lucy to sleep at the Farleys’. You can bunk with Luke and me.”

Jake gave it a long thought, recalling the post-event rowdiness from his own rough stock days—war stories inflated by beer and testosterone and blown-off adrenaline.

“Guess I won’t,” he said, “but thanks. Tom, make sure you get that X-ray.”

The last cars and pickups were streaming out of the parking lot when Jake reached his silver Ram crew cab. The air had been springlike several hours earlier, but now the wind came out of the north and carried the scent of snow. He studied the deep-bellied purple clouds straddling his route northward—new snow over the high country for sure and maybe at lower elevations before he got home.

He pulled out his cell phone and punched his neighbor’s number. “Mike around?” he asked when Bob Farley answered.

“Out bringing the horses into the barn pasture,” Bob said. “Nothing happening yet, but it’s looking to snow like a sonofagun.”

“I figured that. I’m just leaving Albuquerque. Could Mike pick Lucy up at work? I dropped her off this morning because her Jeep’s laid up. Better than even money I won’t make it back before she gets off.”

“Course he will. I’ll send him down as soon as he gets in—could be she’ll get off early if it’s coming down hard. Just plan for her to stay with us unless you make better time than likely. Bed down here yourself if your road’s too bad.”

“Thanks, I might if I make it that far.”

Jake keyed off, grateful for his daughter’s boyfriend, although boyfriend seemed too feeble a word—best friend and confidante came closer. He just hoped Lucy appreciated Mike’s devotion and that Mike could hold her steady long enough to finish high school. She certainly had no use for anything her father said.

He squeezed his eyes shut. “Annie, I don’t know how to talk to her. Why’d you go and leave me?” He bowed his head against the steering wheel. “I didn’t mean it, girl—I know you hung on as long as you could.”

No pressure now to get on the road—he could go back inside but reckoned he wouldn’t. He’d seen too many dads hanging around behind the chutes acting like jerks, treating their sons like kids still riding in high school rodeos. Luke and Tom had done a man’s work on the ranch before they could shave. They didn’t need him riding herd on them.

And he wanted to go home. Not to the empty house, but to the ranch just north of the New Mexico border. The land sustained him like breath and blood.

His hand brushed the bottle in its brown paper bag when he stuck his phone in the center console. With Annie gone, sleep eluded him like a rope-wise old horse endlessly dodging a loop. He could generally drop off at a decent hour by timing sips of bourbon through the evening—better than pills, he supposed.

He’d bought two bottles in Albuquerque, cheaper than close to home. Jake had gone to school with the clerk at the local liquor store and didn’t need Alma gossiping about how much he bought in a month. The bag rustled seductively under his hand. A Bud with a plate of nachos had been hours ago—a little taste now couldn’t hurt, just to take the edge off the lonely drive.
He peered over his shoulder—no one watching. He broke the seal on the quart of Beam, admiring its warm amber translucency, anticipating its sweet fiery slide down his throat, and tipped the bottle to his lips. Before the first drop hit his tongue, he lowered it and screwed the cap on. Through all the heartache with Annie, he had developed a fanatical reverence for life, hard and painful as it might be. Be damned if he would take to the road liquored up, landing at the bottom of a canyon or drifting into oncoming traffic, maybe taking innocent lives with him. He thrust the bottle away and followed the last vehicles out of the parking lot.
Shelby Doucette’s dog leaped down from the cab of the Kenworth and she followed, dragging her backpack and the bag holding her saddle behind her. She slammed the door on the stream of curses, nothing original, and stepped well back off the breakdown lane. The rear of the trailer twitched toward the spot where she would have been standing, and then the big rig roared away with a spray of gravel and an insolent blast of the air horn.

She made a rude gesture at the retreating taillights. “Thanks for nothing!”

Shelby looked around. The late afternoon overcast flattened details of the ravines and low buttes and lent a sepia tint to the broken landscape. Clouds like dirty cotton batting half hid the mountain peaks to the north. Half a dozen white-faced steers stared over a barbed-wire fence, but she saw no sign of a ranch house and couldn’t recall how far back it might be to the last mailbox.

She dug a large Milk-Bone from her pack and broke it in half for the rough-coated dog standing waist-high at her side. “Sorry, Stranger,” she said, pocketing the other piece. “Gotta make these last.”

An empty cattle hauler roared past, headed south; otherwise the road stretched empty in both directions.

“Guess we’re on our own,” she said, slinging her pack over one shoulder and her saddle over the other. “Let’s keep moving.”

Her old car breaking down south of Albuquerque had been bad luck, but at least she’d found a mechanic willing to work on it. She knew she should swap the 1990 Town Car for something more reliable, but the vehicle was her last link to the part of her past she wanted to remember.

“Stop it!” she said with a shudder. The dog looked up at her. “It’s okay, boy. Just smacking myself upside the head.” She talked more to the dog and to the horses she trained than she did with humans. “You told me not to trust that guy, but we were due in Colorado yesterday.”

Her new boss had been sympathetic when she’d called this morning—sure, he could pick her up in Durango. Maybe he’d be willing to fetch her from... She looked around for some kind of landmark. From wherever they were.

She checked her cell phone—no signal, of course. Just as well—she hated asking favors. Which left her on foot somewhere north of Hind Shoe, New Mexico, with daylight fading fast and a veil of snow advancing on the wind.

She’d been comfortable in shirtsleeves when they’d set out from Albuquerque, but she’d felt a bite in the air at the last truck stop and had slipped on the good down jacket she’d bought for ten bucks at a Lubbock flea market. The wind picked up, sending occasional tumbleweeds bounding across the road and whipping the first snowflakes in her face. She zipped the jacket to her chin and pulled up the hood of her sweatshirt.

She started walking. If she didn’t catch a ride, she and Stranger could hunker down under the next bridge until the snow passed. Not bitter cold—the tiny thermometer dangling from her zipper pull read thirty-one degrees. Stranger generated a lot of heat, and she could wrap her saddle blanket around her feet and legs. With luck, she could find dry wood for a fire. They’d be okay.

Wet snow began clinging to the ragged bushes dotting the landscape, looking like the blossoms on the blackberry bushes back home. Stranger shook his rough coat from time to time, and Shelby brushed the dampness from her hood before it could soak through. In the distance a dark slash marked...
the whitening landscape; she hoped the gully would be deep enough to warrant a bridge. Intent on reaching shelter, she didn’t hear the big pickup until it whooshed past in the inch of slush already built up on the pavement. She dropped the saddle to wave her arms, but the taillights were already flashing. The driver was braking too hard. She began to run as the truck fishtailed in a slow-motion pirouette and crashed nose down in the shallow ditch.

She didn’t think the truck had hit hard enough to rupture the fuel line, but the engine was still running. Slipping in the snow, she yanked open the driver’s door. The whiskey fumes hit her when she reached in to turn off the ignition. An uncapped bottle rolled into the ditch.

Blood ran from the driver’s nose—idiot wasn’t wearing his seat belt—and he had a nasty scrape on one cheekbone. His hair shone silver as he fumbled off his brown felt hat and gave her a lopsided grin. “Howdy, miss—you need a lift?”

She caught him as he slumped toward her.
DARKNESS BROKEN BY glaring light, sleet like tiny burns on his face, then falling and wet and cold. A woman’s voice: “Work with me, cowboy.” Darkness again.

The woman’s voice roused him: “Jacob, can you hear me? Open your eyes.”

He must be dead! No one but Ma ever called him Jacob.

“Come on, open your eyes.” A Southern voice, not his mother’s. He gave a grunting gasp of relief and squinted into a bright light.

“Open ’em wide—good. How many fingers?”

He managed to count three fingers.

“You know what day it is?”

He wrinkled his forehead, rummaging for the right answer. “Yesterday?”

She laughed. “Fair enough. Okay, you can go back to sleep.”

* * *

JAKE OPENED HIS eyes to level sunlight throwing shadows across stained ceiling tiles. Where was he?

He thought he remembered a woman’s voice, a silhouette bending over him. A soft rustle to his right made him turn his head. The room spun, his stomach heaved. Closed his eyes, waited and then tried again. Someone in the next bed—he could see only a wild mane of dark hair.

“Annie?” He knew it couldn’t be Annie.

The woman threw back the covers and swung her denim-clad legs out of bed. She yawned widely and pushed her hair back from her face before crossing to where he lay.

“Welcome back,” she said. “How do you feel?”

Like he’d been trampled by a flock of dirty sheep. The left side of his face ached and so did his nose. He made a wordless sound of disgust.

“That good, huh? Could have been lots worse, with Jim Beam as your copilot.”

“What...?”

“You remember anything?”

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to order his thoughts. “Bull riding ended about four—I hung around maybe half an hour. I called home before I hit the road...” No, that didn’t sound right. “I called my neighbor.” And opened the bottle. Had he taken a drink? Pretty sure he hadn’t.

He opened his eyes. “You called me Jacob.”

“That’s your name, isn’t it? The picture on your license even looks like you.”

He grabbed for the region where his wallet should have been and discovered he wore only his briefs.

“I hung your clothes to dry,” she said, gesturing toward his shirt and Wranglers draped over a chair. “You slipped in the snow and got pretty wet, plus whiskey all over your jeans. Don’t worry, your wallet’s on the table, minus fifteen bucks for your half of the room.”

He jacked himself up on his elbows and promptly fell back, groaning. “I gotta tell you, miss, I don’t recall a thing except...” A bizarre image surfaced. “I could swear I saw someone leading a calf...”

She laughed. “You saw Stranger. Stranger, come.”
Jake found himself looking up into a grizzled brown face, pink tongue lolling between massive jaws. “Whoa, he’s bigger than a calf!”

“Maybe a little bigger—he’s a mastiff-wolfhound mix, the vet thought. Or deerhound and Great Dane. We were hoping for a ride. I thought you were going to stop, then you started to skid—”

Bile rose in his throat. “Did I wreck my rig?”

“Not to speak of, just nose-dived into the ditch. The rear wheels were still on hard gravel, so I got it back on the road—you had passed out.” She frowned. “Maybe I should have gotten you to an emergency room, but you didn’t seem much hurt, and you smelled like a distillery. I didn’t want you to have trouble with the cops or your insurance.”

She moved toward him. “Need some help sitting up? Let me—”

“No! I mean, no, thanks.” He heaved himself up against the vinyl-padded headboard and took a couple deep breaths. When his head cleared, he took his first good look at his rescuer.

Tall, probably close to his own five-ten, with arms and shoulders toned like a gymnast. Thick wavy hair, more black than brown, green eyes and amber skin over high cheekbones. Part Indian, he’d lay money, but he couldn’t guess which tribe. With the jeans she wore a black tank top. Maybe in her early thirties, but wariness in her eyes added years and reminded him of a she-coyote watching from just out of range.

“Guess I owe you for getting me out of the ditch last night,” he said.

She shrugged. “Maybe you wouldn’t have crashed if you hadn’t tried to stop for us. Call it even—Stranger and I didn’t have to spend the night under a bridge.”

Jake looked around—faded floral spreads on the beds, a blond bedside table scarred with cigarette burns and a single armchair upholstered in cracked pink vinyl. “Where did we spend the night?”

“I passed a sign that said Welcome to Cuba, wherever that is,” she said, “and pulled in at the first Vacancy sign—the Plainsman Motel.”

“Did the clerk offer you the hourly rate?”

Her face flamed. “You mean...”

“So I’ve heard—I wouldn’t know personally.”

“No wonder the guy looked at me funny when I asked for two beds.” Her chin came up. “Who cares? He’ll never see me again.”

“You know my name,” Jake said. He had a monster headache, but at least the room had stopped spinning. “What’s yours?”

“Shelby.”

Jake waited.

“Doucette,” she said.

“Cajun, am I right? I used to rodeo with a cowboy from Louisiana.” He stuck his hand out.

“Howdy, Shelby Doucette. Where you headed?”

“A ranch near Durango,” she said, touching his hand briefly. “A lady adopted a couple mustangs—her husband wants me to start them.”

“That’ll be Ross Norquist—I heard about those horses. He can’t say no to Liz, but he’s scared she’ll get herself killed. You any good at breaking horses?”

“I gentle horses. And I am good at it—I’ve been doing it for more than ten years.” She took a deep breath. “I hate to ask, but could I ride with you as far north as you’re going? I can ask Mr. Norquist to pick me up from wherever you drop me off.”
“Shoot, girl, my spread’s less than an hour west from his. I’ll drive you straight to his corral.” He
started to throw the covers back and then grinned. “If you’ll toss me my britches.”

He refused her offer of help into the bathroom—shaming enough she’d dragged him in here and
undressed him. He braced his hands on the sink before looking into the mirror and then swore.

“You okay in there?”

“Yeah, fine—just got a look at my face.”

He heard her chuckle. “Pretty scary.”

She had cleaned most of the blood off his face and fixed a strip of adhesive tape across the bridge
of his nose. He touched it gingerly—probably broken, not for the first time. Two black eyes and a
long scrape along his right cheek made him look like the loser in a bar brawl.

By the time he came out fully dressed, he felt closer to normal. Shelby had covered the tank top
with a blue plaid flannel shirt and had tamed her hair into a thick braid tied with red yarn.

The morning sun had already reduced last night’s snow to slushy puddles in the graveled parking
lot. Jake squinted up and down the row of concrete block units, relieved he didn’t see any familiar
vehicles. Bad enough he’d be answering questions about his face without explaining his rig parked
outside a hot-pillow joint.

“I threw the floor mat in the back last night,” Shelby said, “and left the windows open a crack to air
out the cab.”

Jake shook his head. “Must have been close to a quart of bourbon spilled—I guess I didn’t screw
the cap on tight.”

She held out his keys, but he waved them off. “You drive,” he said. “There’s a good little diner
about ten miles north—we’ll get breakfast there.”

A ROUND-CHEEKED WOMAN wearing a snowy apron bustled out to greet them when they entered
Rosie’s Kitchen. “Jake, I was so scared for your boy last night, when we watching on the TV. That
bull, stepping right on his leg!” She pinched his chin and turned his face right and left. “What, you’re
riding bulls, too? Crazy like Tom?”

“Nothing that exciting, Rosie,” he said, giving her a quick hug. “Smacked into my steering wheel.”

He nodded toward Shelby. “This lady came along and got my rig out of the ditch.”

“You’re one lucky hombre.” She swatted his chest with her order pad. “Coffee first, while I fix
your usual.” She took Shelby’s order for a cheese omelet and returned to the kitchen, yelling in
Spanish at a doleful-looking man at the grill—her husband, Martin, Jake told Shelby.

“You want some bacon or sausage with your omelet?” Jake asked.

“I’d love some,” Shelby said, “but I lay off meat for a few days before I start new horses,
especially ones that haven’t been around people much. Horses are prey animals. It’s better if I don’t
smell like I might want them for my next meal.”

“How’d you learn that? I never heard it before, but it makes sense.”

“From my granddaddy, and he heard it from his granddaddy. I don’t know if it matters, but what can
it hurt?”

“How’d you hear about Ross’s mustangs?”

“I keep a standing ad in Western Horseman,” she said, “but most of my jobs come by word of
mouth. The rancher I worked for last in Lubbock knew Mr. Norquist.”

By the time Jake had downed his first cup of coffee and most of his cheese and bean enchilada with green chili, the headache had retreated to a small zone behind his left eye. He slouched on the red leatherette and watched Shelby devour her omelet.

“You being afoot the backside of nowhere, I’m guessing your car broke down,” he said. “Where abouts?”

She grimaced. “Albuquerque. I had to leave it at the Lincoln dealership—they need to find a fuel filler tube for a ’90 Town Car.”

“What, girl! No telling how long that will take! Shouldn’t you have something easier to fix, traveling cross-country between jobs?”

“I expect I should,” she said with a sigh, “but it belonged to my granddaddy. It’s a good road car and big enough to sleep in if I need to. I caught a ride with a trucker who was going to be passing through Durango. The service manager vouched for him—his brother-in-law. Once we got off the Interstate, he changed his mind about the ride being free.” She tightened her lips. “I told him I’d sooner walk.”

“Miserable so-and-so, setting you down miles from nowhere!”

“My choice—better than what he had in mind. Stranger backed me up.”

Jake glanced out the window at the dog sunning himself in the bed of the truck. “Guess somebody with evil intentions might walk soft around a dog that size.”

“He’s meek as a mouse unless he gets worried about me,” she said. “Then, stand back.”

“Funny name for a dog.”

“From my mama’s favorite gospel song.” She sang in a husky contralto. “I’m just a poor wayfaring stranger a traveling through this world of woe.” I found him limping along I-30 in Arkansas just about starved and his paws worn bloody from running on pavement. Somebody must have dumped him off.

He couldn’t fathom anyone being so heartless, although he’d seen worse. “Some people just aren’t worth killing.”

He refused to let her pay for her breakfast and climbed back into the passenger seat. “I could drive,” he said, “but you’re doing fine. This road takes us all the way to Durango. I’ll give you directions to Norquist’s from there.”

He sipped coffee from his travel mug while Shelby maneuvered his rig out of the cramped parking lot and onto Route 550 headed north. The sun shone and he had a full belly; he hadn’t known such uncomplicated pleasure since just after his daughter’s birth, he reckoned, before the sky had started to fall in slow motion. He stretched his legs and leaned back.
SHELBY SETTLED BEHIND the wheel. Stranger gave a contented sigh and stretched out on the backseat to chew his red rubber KONG.

She sneaked a glance at Jake and then looked quickly back at the road. No wedding ring, but she could see a tanned-over mark where one had been. His hair had fooled her about his age. Once she had sponged the blood off his face, she pegged him as early forties, possibly good-looking once the bruising and swelling subsided. She’d come to think of his build as cowboy-cut, narrow-hipped and heavily muscled through the chest and shoulders from wrestling calves and bucking sixty-pound bales.

Not that she cared. She had left a man behind in Texas, a nice guy who had mistaken their shared love of horses for a prelude to wedding bells. The ugly scene she’d staged still made her cringe, but she’d made sure he wouldn’t come chasing after her with a ring in his pocket.

Shelby put Texas behind her. Not a cloud marred the morning sky, and last night’s snow lay on the red-gold buttes and bluffs like sugar icing on a layer cake. Silver peaks appeared teasingly to the north, only to disappear as the road dipped to cross a shallow wash or follow a winding valley. Her heart quickened with anticipation. She had crisscrossed the prairie states for more than a decade, with a couple of jobs in California, but somehow her wanderings had never brought her to the spine of the Rockies.

“So there stood Great-Great Grandpa Jacob, eyeball to eyeball with the grizzly and no weapon but his Navy Colt the Yankees let him keep. He got the bear, right through the mouth, but the bear got him, too—fell spang on him and half scalped him on the way down.”

Shelby realized Jake had been talking a blue streak—she’d seen that with concussions, sometimes drowsiness, sometimes running off at the mouth.

“I guess he survived,” she said.

“Only because some Ute girls picking berries found him the next day. My great-great grandma probably never saw a white man before, never mind a redheaded one—”

“You’re part Indian?” She glanced again at his face. Mighty light-skinned, but something about the tilt of his eyes and the shape of his mouth...

“I know I don’t look it,” he said. “I take after old Jacob, redheaded like him before my hair turned. Our ranch backs up to Ute land, so I grew up hunting and fishing and scrapping with my cousins on the rez. My boys have dark hair and brown eyes, but my daughter got the red hair. It looks a lot better on her than it did on me.”

“The lady at the diner said your sons are bull riders?”

“Tom rides bulls, and Luke’s a bullfighter with the Professional Bull Riders tour. I don’t know who takes more risk—Tom riding once, maybe twice a night, or Luke every time the gate opens. I can’t say much—I rode rough stock myself till my wife put her foot down. Of course, the prize money’s better nowadays.” He gave a wry laugh. “In between getting busted up.”

“So now your wife frets about them.”

He looked away. “Annie died coming on two years ago—complications of lupus.”

Before she could respond, they crested the next rise and she caught her breath. The peaks, pure with new snow, reared like a breaking wave frozen against the impossibly blue sky.

“Pretty, huh?” he said. “Always grabs me when I come home this way. Durango’s just ahead. You
need anything before we go on to Norquist’s?”

“Not for me, but I’ll need a sack of food for Stranger—I couldn’t carry but enough for a couple days.”

Entering a new town always excited her, like holding a lottery ticket. Maybe this would be the place where she could finally stop running. She never actually counted on winning the jackpot, but she still let herself dream about having a real address and shopping in stores where people would come to know her name.

They passed chain hotels and box stores on the strip before turning onto Main Avenue lined with Victorian storefronts. The shrill hoot of a train whistle startled her. Just off the main street, a steam locomotive chuffed beside a gingerbread station.

“Durango and Silverton Railroad,” Jake said. “That engine shows up in a lot of Western movies. It hauled silver ore down from the mines back in the 1880s and now tourists.”

He pointed out a red brick storefront sandwiched between a shop displaying leather vests and hats in the window and Burke’s Sundries with T-shirts and postcards in racks on the sidewalk. Ornate gold letters spelled out Silver Queen Saloon and Dance Emporium across the plate-glass window.

“My daughter works there weekends and after school some days. She’s stashing her paychecks for college. At least I hope that’s how she’ll use the money.”

“Isn’t she underage to work at a saloon? Sorry, none of my business.”

“The Queen stopped serving liquor during Prohibition, but folks around here would shoot anybody who tried to change the name. Margie serves the best food in town—in La Plata County, for that matter. Chicken-fried steak and liver with bacon and onions…” He rolled his eyes and smacked his lips.

“No sushi or veggie wraps, I’m guessing.”

Jake laughed. “Not hardly.” He checked his watch. “Too bad she isn’t serving lunch yet, but we could stop for a cup of coffee and a piece of pie. Margie makes a dried peach pie that’s been written up in the Denver Post—some food show even featured it.”

“I’d better get out to the Norquist ranch.” Spending the whole morning—and the night before—with Jake Cameron had become claustrophobic, too comfortable for her peace of mind.

“Maybe another time,” he said, and directed her to the Farm and Ranch Exchange on the outskirts of town. A rustic log structure anchored an ell, sided with pale shingles, and a steel shed with loading bays.

“Might as well pick up a few things myself,” he said, “as long as I’m here.” He climbed down from the truck.

She entered the store with Stranger at her side, breathing in the comforting smells of leather and molasses feed, saddle soap and new sisal. Hunting and fishing supplies filled the front room, with mounted heads of deer and elk and pronghorns staring sightlessly from the smoke-darkened walls. Garden supplies, hardware and pet products could be found in the next room, according to the sign over a wide archway. She found the proper dog food and followed Jake to the checkout.

A heavy-shouldered man, dark-skinned with a single long braid, stood behind a long counter. “Hey, cousin. Nice win for Tom, but you look like you did about three seconds on Bodacious.”

“Skidded off the road on my way home,” Jake said. “No real harm done.”

“June’s been asking about you.”

“I’m keeping pretty busy with the boys gone so much.” He looked away. “Calving season, you
He nodded toward Shelby. “Meet Shelby Doucette—she’s going to start those mustangs for Ross Norquist. I’m giving her a ride up to his place.”

“Oscar Buck,” the man said, reaching across the counter to shake her hand. “What tribe, sister?”
“Choctaw a long way back,” she said, “crossed with Cajun and a dash of runaway slave.”
“Don’t mind Oscar,” Jake said. “He’s nosy as a pup but not near as smart.”
Oscar grinned as if he’d heard the gibe before.

“Ross will sure be glad to see you,” Oscar said. “He’s caught between Liz wanting to treat those horses like pet ponies and his boy itching to play rodeo with them. Either way, somebody’s bound to get hurt.”

He peered over the counter. “Handsome dog you got there.”

“Stranger, sit,” Shelby said. “Paws.” Stranger sat and placed both front paws on the countertop beside the forty-pound bag of Science Diet Large Breed.

Oscar laughed and extended his hand for the dog to sniff. “Howdy, Stranger. Any friend of Cousin Jake’s is welcome.”

He turned back to Jake. “I stopped for coffee at the Queen yesterday,” he said. “Lucy sure is jacked up about some play she’s in.”

Jake rubbed his forehead. “Mike Farley and the high school drama teacher are all that’s keeping her in school—she’s still set on trying her luck in Hollywood or New York. I hate to think what’ll happen when Mike leaves for Boulder in the fall.” He scribbled a list on the back of an envelope fished from his pocket. “You want to get this up for me? Put the dog food on my account, too.”

“No, thanks!” Shelby dug a roll of bills from her jeans and laid down three twenties. “We pay our own way.”

Jake shrugged. Oscar took the bills and gave her change before tucking the bag under one arm.

“Meet you around back.”

“I’ll take it from here,” Jake said, climbing into the driver’s seat. “I don’t want Oscar spreading the tale I wasn’t fit to drive. He’s got a big heart and a bigger mouth.”

Shelby handed him the keys. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Shoot, I felt fine soon as I got some caffeine into my system. I’ve driven that road more times than I care to count, taking my wife down to the University Medical Center. I kind of enjoyed the chance to sit back and look around.”

Oscar heaved a final bag of cattle cake into the back of the truck beside several bales of straw. “I can’t give you a full keg of fence staples till the truck comes in tomorrow,” he said.

“No problem,” Jake replied. “I’ll send one of the boys to pick it up.”

Jake drove north on Route 550 a dozen miles before turning onto a narrow gravel road, climbing between sandstone walls until the canyon opened into a sheltered valley. Snow still lay along the lane, but new buds shone golden on the willows overhanging a brawling creek. Jake drove past a neat frame house to the cluster of barns and sheds beyond. He tapped his horn, and two men emerged from a long pole barn. The older man, his weathered face furrowed with puzzlement, strode to the truck as Jake ran down his window.

“Howdy, Jake. What brings you—”

“Saved you a trip, Ross. Here’s your horse tamer.”

Norquist bent and peered past Jake. “Shelby Doucette? Dang, girl—you’re mighty welcome here.
This yahoo—" he jerked his head at the younger man behind him "—he’s hot to break those horses the old-fashioned way."

"Reckon we’ll try your way first." A younger man, tight-muscled under a Blue Seal T-shirt, sauntered forward with his thumbs hooked in his belt. "Since Ma’s set on it. I’m Gary Norquist—just holler when you need help."

Shelby sighed inwardly—one of those. He would give her no respect as a woman or as a trainer. Jerks like the truck driver were less trouble. She could blow them off with Stranger’s help, but she needed to work around Gary Norquist.

She wished for the hundredth time she looked her age or, even better, as old as she felt. She played down her looks the best she could. Once, she had cut her hair boy-short, but it had grown out in a halo of soft dark curls, making her look maybe fifteen. Skinning it back in a braid at least looked businesslike. She stuck with relaxed jeans and shapeless shirts, rarely wore shorts and didn’t own a dress. Sometimes in her dreams she felt a skirt flutter around her knees and woke with her heart pounding, weeping tears she never shed in her waking hours.

"Thanks, but I work strictly with the horses’ owner. Stranger, to me," she said without turning her head. She heard a scramble of claws, and the dog sat at her side, ears pricked.

The smirk faded from Gary Norquist’s face.

"You must be Shelby." A lanky woman with gray-shot auburn hair haphazardly gathered into a bun had come up behind them. "I’m Liz Norquist," she said, wringing Shelby’s hand. "The boys keep saying horse-breaking is men’s work, but I reckon we’ll show them different. Come, see the horses."

She strode toward a fenced enclosure, her denim skirt flapping around her legs.

Her husband and son fell in behind her, Gary rolling his eyes and muttering. "Come along, Jake," Ross said. "See what we’ve let ourselves in for."

"We did like you told us," Liz said. "Water and good hay, otherwise we’ve let them be."

Three horses stood at the far end of a long corral. Two mares huddled together while a young stallion possibly two years old stamped and snorted at a little distance. Shelby studied the horses. One of the mares, a red roan, looked close to foaling but in decent shape for wintering on the open range. The younger bay mare clung close to the older horse’s side. The colt stood between the other horses and the humans by the fence.

Ross pointed at the colt in disgust. "I agreed to a couple of mares, and they show up with that! Guess he pushed into the trailer with the others and they couldn’t get him out. Last thing I need around here is a stud making trouble, but he might make a decent cow pony once he’s cut."

Shelby almost protested at the thought of gelding the colt. He looked like a throwback to Barb ancestors, rose-gray with his reddish baby coat already shading toward silver. His shaggy forelock couldn’t disguise the dished face and delicate ears of a classic Arabian. She sighed. Most owners wouldn’t chance a mare with a stud of undocumented lineage and no guarantee he’d breed true.

Liz jostled her elbow. "When do we start?"

Shelby checked the corral; ample hay lay scattered near the fence, and a stock tank brimmed with water. "Tomorrow morning," she said. "No more hay today—I want them a little hungry."

She turned to Norquist. "Can you put up a round pen? I won’t need it tomorrow, but soon."

"We figured you’d want one—got the sections ready."

"Guess you’re all set," Jake said. "I’ll get along home." He dug into his wallet and handed her a battered business card: Cameron’s Pride—Red Angus—Hesperus CO. "Call me if you need a ride to
get your car. I still owe you.”

She took the card. She had been at ease with Jake Cameron, almost a sense of homecoming and a quiver of something long forgotten or ruthlessly beaten down. Loneliness swept her as she watched him walk away. She shook it off and stuck his card in her pocket before turning back toward the corral.
CHAPTER FIVE

Jake pulled the sack of dog food from his truck and leaned it against the barn. He’d heard a thing or two about Gary Norquist, but Shelby should be safe enough with Stranger at her side. He looked once more at the group by the corral, sighed deeply and got behind the wheel. Maybe she’d call him; more likely Ross and Liz would drive her to Albuquerque and make a weekend of it.

He’d felt pretty decent riding up from Cuba and then driving from Durango. Now his head ached anew and the scrape on his cheekbone burned. He checked his watch—coming on to noon, plenty of time to reach the ranch before Lucy got home from school. At least his beat-up face would give them something to talk about for a minute or two before she left again or shut herself in her room.

Tom and Luke would be home by suppertime. Lucy got along fine with her brothers, using them as a buffer between herself and her father. They didn’t encourage her acting ambitions, but they understood her passion to chase a dream. Weekends were the worst, with the boys on the road, but Lucy’s drama club activities and her job kept her out of the house.

All said, Jake might as well not have a daughter. Somehow the sunny little girl who had been his and Annie’s delight had become a beautiful but sullen stranger who slept under his roof. She seemed to hold some secret grudge against him, but when he asked her outright to tell him what was wrong, she would say only, “You wouldn’t understand, and it’s too late anyway.” He’d hardly had a civil conversation with her since Annie died.

Tire tracks in the snow led from the main road to the log ranch house, the same vehicle in and out after the snow had stopped during the night. Mike must have brought her home in his rig this morning to pick up what she needed for school. Jake’s relief shamed him—hours before he would have to deal with her. Maybe he should just give in, let her drop out of school and see how she liked making her own way in Tinsel Town.

He gritted his teeth. She was going to graduate if he had to drive her to the high school every morning and pick her up in the afternoon. He only hoped Mike could persuade her to follow him to the University of Colorado after her senior year.

He had just backed up to the feed shed to unload when Luke and Tom arrived in Luke’s Explorer. Luke handed Tom a pair of crutches and held the kitchen door open for him to hobble through the back door.

A few minutes later Luke came out dressed in work clothes and rubber paddock boots. He grabbed a fifty-pound bag of cow cake from his father and slung it over his shoulder.

“Just a deep bruise, Doc thinks,” he told Jake. “He said Tom should skip next weekend if he’s got any sense.”

“Yeah, right.” Jake pulled another bag from the truck and turned to face Luke. “Before you ask, I put my rig in a ditch on the way home yesterday. Oscar asked if I drew Bodacious in the short round, but it looks worse than it is,” he said. “And I picked up a hitchhiker along the way—the lady horse trainer Ross Norquist ordered up for Liz’s mustangs. I dropped her off at their ranch.”

“Hitchhiking! In March? What the—”

“She got a ride from Albuquerque with a trucker who figured she should give him something extra for his trouble. She told him she’d rather walk.”

Luke whistled. “Hope she knows how to handle herself. One of these days Gary Norquist needs to
get the whuppin’ he deserves.”

“Best kind of defense—she’s got a dog size of a weanling calf.”

Luke pulled a bale of straw toward the tailgate. “What’s this for?”

“Mulch—I thought maybe we’d try to bring the vegetable garden back.” Jake’s eyes flicked toward a weed-choked patch just south of the house. Annie had delighted in her kitchen garden. He and the kids had kept it up even when she could do no more than sit in a lawn chair and supervise. “Maybe Lucy will take an interest.”

Luke slapped Jake’s shoulder. “Maybe, but me and Tom will keep after it if she doesn’t.” He stacked the bales beside the toolshed. “Let’s rustle up some lunch, then I’ll fix that stretch of fence past the creek. Last time I rode out that way it looked like a bull elk sat on it.”

They kicked off their muddy boots before entering the sunlit great room. Jake’s parents had knocked out interior walls to create a living space where the family spent most of their indoor time. A fridge and a massive gas range filled one corner, a round oak table dominated the center of the room, and a scuffed leather couch faced the wide fireplace. Plants Annie had tended lovingly sat along the ledge of a wide west-facing window—geraniums, aloes, a bay laurel and a huge flowering cactus Jake had given her as a tiny plant their first Christmas together. Scarlet blossoms still clung to the cascading stems; Jake harbored an unreasonable anger it should bloom so extravagantly with Annie dead.

Tom sat in the recliner with an ice pack draped across his left thigh. Annie had bought the chair for Jake after a cow, resentful of being separated from her calf, had landed him with five broken ribs. As she’d weakened, the chair had become her command post from which she coached Jake and the boys through simple meal prep. Now whoever needed it most used it, although Jake never sat there without sharing it with Annie’s ghost.

Luke set an iron skillet on the range and threw in half a pound of bacon while Jake pulled eggs from the fridge.

“Don’t scramble the eggs to rubber,” Tom said. “And toss me a fresh ice pack—this one’s thawed.”

Luke fetched the heavy ice pack from the freezer and dropped it in his brother’s lap. “Anything else? Champagne? Couple of buckle bunnies?”

“Hey, Doc said I should rest my leg,” Tom said. “Guess I won’t be able to stretch wire with you.”

“Aw, stop whining for sympathy.”

A thundering silence filled the room. Annie’s presence—or rather her absence—hung in the air. She’d have been exclaiming over Tom’s injury and whipping up his favorite lunch.

They had just finished eating when Mike Farley’s blue pickup pulled behind the house. A door slammed and Lucy Cameron blew into the kitchen, her red-gold hair flying. She skidded to a halt by Tom’s chair.

“Hey, big bro! Nice win—I watched at Mike’s last night. How’s the leg?”

“Just bruised—it won’t keep me from riding.” Tom jerked his chin toward Jake. “Get a load of the old man.”


“Skidded off the road coming home last night,” he said. “The driving was pretty bad—I’m glad you stayed at Mike’s.” He peered out the window. “You steal his rig?”

“I forgot my stupid uniform for work,” she said. “Mike’s got basketball practice, so I drove home to get it. I’ve got a rehearsal till five and then the Queen till closing. Mike will bring me home.”
She whirled toward the stairs but turned back with one foot on the step. “You’re sure you’re okay?” He smiled, although it hurt his scraped cheek. “I’m fine—you should see the other guy.” “That’s good.” She pounded up the stairs and galloped out the door moments later with her striped tunic flying behind her like a flag. “I think we just got brushed by Hurricane Lucy,” Tom said. “I don’t know how Mike puts up with her—she’d drive me nuts.”

* * *

LUKE DROVE OUT on Thursday with Tom riding shotgun, headed for the next event in Des Moines. Ordinarily they would have driven straight through to arrive for Friday night’s go-round but they had decided to stretch the trip over two days to pamper Tom’s leg.

“Maybe I’ll just watch,” Tom had said, but Jake knew he’d be straddling his bulls, hoping to land on his sound leg and hop to a safe getaway.

Jake headed for the barn after they left. He and Luke had mended the downed fence, but he still needed to check on the line camp at the far edge of their spread. The boys took turns sleeping in the old cabin during the summer break in the bull-riding schedule, keeping an eye on the cow and calf pairs grazing there. Great pasture, but sometimes a cat would come in from the backcountry for a feed of fresh veal. He needed to hire another hand, but it was hard to compete with the better wages and easier hours in the gas fields around Farmington.

He couldn’t find the hammer he might need for repairs on the cabin; maybe it was in his rig. When he rummaged under the driver’s seat, he found a well-chewed rubber dog toy. Must belong to Shelby Doucette’s dog; he’d heard Stranger working at something while they drove. Shelby had no transportation into town for a replacement. He pulled keys from his pocket. The cabin could wait.

When he reached Durango, he stopped at the Farm and Ranch Exchange before heading north to the Norquist ranch. Forty pounds of food wouldn’t last long for a dog Stranger’s size; he’d pick up another bag, just to be neighborly.

Oscar studied him from across the counter at the Exchange. “You don’t look quite so much like you been kicked in the face,” he said. “You here for those fence staples?” “Yeah, and I’ll take some of that dog food we stopped for on Monday.” He hoped Oscar would remember what Shelby had bought. “Could be Norquist’s trainer is running short for her big mutt.” “You’re a day late—Gary bought a bag yesterday. Guess he figures to bribe his way into her jeans.”

Jake’s fist balled on the counter. “I knew he’d be trouble.”

“He tried getting cute with my sister’s youngest girl,” Oscar said. “While she was working evenings at Denny’s. Kept coming by around quitting time, sweet-talking about how pretty she is and how he could show her a good time after work.” “That’s Lorrie? The one who joined the Air Force?” “That’s her. She’s way too smart to fall for a line like that,” Oscar said, “but he had her spooked. She started asking me or her dad to pick her up after work. One night business was slow and her boss told her to punch out early.” “So no ride waiting.”

A grin lit Oscar’s face. “I got there just about the time Gary tried to force her into his rig. I lit up
the parking lot like Mile High Stadium and leaned on my horn. The manager and half a dozen customers came running out and heard him call her a dirty squaw just before he took a swing at me.”

Oscar inspected his knuckles. “I had to defend myself. One of us ended up needing dental work.”

“No, I’d guess.” Jake pulled the dog toy out of his pocket. “Just sell me another one of these. Her dog left it in my rig—they probably get lost pretty easy.”

“Whatever happened to flowers and candy?” Oscar held up a hand. “Just saying, brother.”

Jake shrugged and paid for the rubber KONG. Oscar pulled a sample package of Greenies dog chews from under the counter. “Take these too, pard.”

Jake didn’t try to protest—Oscar knew him too well. They had been best buds since the day they’d fought to a standstill at age nine over a mustang that had eluded both of them.

His speed dropped as he approached the turnoff to Norquist’s spread. He must be nuts, trailing after Shelby Doucette like a lovesick teenager. What did he know about her except she was an able horse trainer?

Okay, she was beautiful and smart about horses, but he’d be stupid to get involved—he had enough headaches with Lucy. How would she react? With anger, seeing her father interested in any woman after her mother? Too much to hope she’d be glad for him—she’d sulked and refused to come along the couple of times he’d taken June Buck and her kids out for a movie and pizza.

He turned in at the ranch road and parked by the barn. Shelby stood outside the steel-pole round pen watching Liz Norquist work the bay mare on a long line. Stranger lay in the sun nearby, chewing on a curl of hoof paring.

Jake closed his door softly, not wanting to spook the horse. Stranger lifted his head and stood with a soft woof. Shelby turned, and he thought he caught a flash of welcome, even gladness on her face. Just as quickly it faded, replaced by a polite smile.

He pulled the old toy from his pocket. “Your buddy left this in my rig.”

“You shouldn’t have driven all this way to bring it,” she said. “Mr. Norquist trimmed up the roan mare’s feet, so Stranger’s got plenty to chew on. But thanks.” She turned to the dog. “Thank Mr. Cameron, Stranger.”

Jake hunkered down and presented the toy. “You can call me Jake, Stranger.”

The dog took the KONG from Jake’s hand and offered a paw.

“I thought about picking up more dog food,” Jake said, straightening, “but Oscar said you already had plenty.”

Shelby’s expression turned blank. “Someone from the ranch bought another bag yesterday.” She turned toward the pen. “Come see how the bay is doing.”

The mare’s hide gleamed like mahogany in the spring sunshine; the unkempt mane and forelock had been combed and plucked. “Looks like a different horse,” Jake said. “You’ve got her shed out and trimmed up nice. You starting the roan next?”

Shelby laughed. “No need—she’s just a stray. She’s got what looks like an old rope burn on her off-rear fetlock and a healed fistula on her withers. We’ll handle her just enough to get her used to people again. Liz won’t have any trouble getting her under saddle after she drops her foal.”

Jake peered into the corral where the pregnant mare stood nosing the hay piled beside the fence. “That horse looks familiar. Any idea where she’s from?”

“Some national parkland near here—I forget the name.” She snapped her fingers. “Mesa Verde, I think.”
Jake laughed. “Now I know her. She’s an escape artist from the Ute Reservation—six or seven owners, including Oscar. I helped him doctor that fistula. I doubt he’ll want her back—she’s more trouble than she’s worth. Make sure the gate has a good latch and then chain it, or she’ll take off cross-country with Ross’s whole string behind her.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” Shelby said with a rueful laugh. “I hope Liz can hang on to her long enough to get her foal weaned. The bay’s coming right along—we’ll have a saddle on her in a couple more days. Then I’ll start the colt.” She sighed. “Mr. Norquist is right. He’ll need to be gelded, but I’d wait if he were mine. He’s on the smallish side—I’d like to see him get a little more growth.”

“Why don’t you offer to buy him? Ross didn’t want him in the first place.”

“And do what with him? I can’t keep a horse at a post office box.” She turned away. “Stranger and I travel light.”

Jake took a deep breath. “Maybe I could—”

“Well, howdy, Mr. Cameron.” Gary Norquist’s voice made them both jump. “Here to check on the little lady?” He moved closer to Shelby, and she sidestepped toward the fence.

“Pick her up to a lope,” she said to Liz. “Don’t let her cut in on you.”

Liz nodded and flicked the loose end of the rope. The horse flowed around the circular enclosure in a smooth rocking-horse gait, throwing in a flourish of her heels as she passed the observers.

“She tries that under saddle,” Gary said, “I’ll straighten her out pretty quick.”

“Your mom won’t need your help,” Shelby said without turning her head. “She’s doing just fine.”

Jake heard Gary mutter a curse, echoed by a soft growl from Stranger, and resisted the impulse to backhand him. Shelby gave no sign she’d heard him.

“Give her a few more circuits at a walk, Liz, then we’ll quit while she’s still having fun.” Shelby turned back to Jake. “Thanks again for bringing Stranger’s KONG, Mr. Cameron.” He heard dismissal in her voice.

“I picked up an extra at the Exchange,” Jake said, “and Oscar thought Stranger might like these.” He handed her the new toy and the dog treats.

He got a warmer smile, and Stranger put both paws on Jake’s shoulders, almost staggering him and treating him to a wet swipe of the tongue.

“Glad he’s friendly,” Jake said, rumpling the dog’s ears. “I’d hate to have him coming at me in a bad mood.”

“Down, Stranger!” Shelby grasped the dog’s collar. “He knows who he likes.” She didn’t look at Gary.

Jake turned to go, his boots dragging, but he had no excuse to hang around. “Remember, you’ve got a ride coming when your car’s ready,” he said over his shoulder. “Just give me a call.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll keep that in mind.” The gate clanged as she let herself into the round pen with Liz and the bay mare.
SHELBY DIDN’T TURN around until she heard Jake’s truck start up. She’d made a rule long ago never to allow anyone to come too close, just as she never formed an attachment to the horses she trained. Occasionally she ran across one that tempted her, like the gray colt, but she always reminded herself how owning a horse would slow her down when she had to move on.

She opened the gate for Liz to lead the bay into the pen with the roan, slipping Liz a chunk of apple to give the mare. She didn’t hold with handing out treats every time a horse did something right, but training stuck longer with food rewards. The bay had decent lines and no bad habits from previous poor handling; she’d make Liz a good mount.

“I saw you talking to Jake Cameron,” Liz said, hitching the mare to a fence post. “He have some business with Ross?”

Shelby explained Jake’s errand—it sounded pretty lame.

“Maybe he’s got a green horse and wanted to see how you work. Although he’s a pretty fair hand with horses himself from what I’ve heard—breaks them gentle.”

“Old guy like him can’t ride rough stock,” Gary said, leaning his elbows on the fence and peering between the rails. “His son’s my age—me and Tom were the same year in high school.”

“Except Tom graduated,” his mother said with a snort, “unlike some.” She bore down with the currycomb so the mare shifted sideways. “Sorry, sugar.”

“Jake’s a good man,” she said to Shelby. “He went through hell with his wife sick so long and then lost her in spite of everything he could do. His boys were grown and handled it pretty good, but his daughter—”

“Stuck-up little—”

“Take a hitch in it, Gary,” his mother said over her shoulder. “Don’t you even think about Lucy Cameron. Jake’s wearing the boots that can still kick your butt.”

“I ain’t scared of him,” Gary said, “but she’s just a baby. I fancy a real woman.” He turned and swaggered toward the barn.

Liz sighed deeply and resumed her grooming. “He’s my son,” she said, “and I love him, but I don’t much like him. You let me know if he’s bothering you.”

Shelby couldn’t think of anything kind to say. She’d known from the moment her boots hit the ground Gary would be a problem. With luck she could stay out of his way and be gone before he got up the nerve to make his move. Liz and Ross Norquist were good folks; she couldn’t think what they’d done to deserve such a son.

***

THREE DAYS LATER, Shelby sat on a bale in the center of the round pen pulling loose handfuls of alfalfa and strewing them around her feet. She didn’t look directly at the gray colt but tracked his movements from the corner of her eye. He’d done a lot of snorting and pawing when she had first entered the pen two hours earlier. Finally he inched closer, ears sharply pricked and nostrils distended.

She gathered hay from the ground and rubbed it between her palms to release its fragrance. The colt extended his neck...
“Want me to drop a loop on him? You’re never gonna catch him that way.”

At the sound of Gary’s voice, the horse snorted and bolted to the far side of the pen. Shelby controlled the urge to leap to her feet swearing.

“No rope.” She managed to keep her voice soft. “Where’s your mother?” She had stationed Liz just inside the stable door to head off any such intrusion.

“Gone into town for a tractor part,” Gary said. “I figured I’d hang around in case you needed some help. Stud colt, you can’t never tell.”

She wanted to tell him he could help by taking himself to the next county or maybe the next state. Stranger would have warned her of Gary’s approach, but she’d locked him in the tack room so he wouldn’t distract the colt. She stood and slipped through the gate, working her way around the pen at an unhurried pace but never turning her back on Gary.

“I been in the shed working on the tractor,” Gary said. He took a step in her direction.

She willed anger to overshadow fear. A predator like Gary would sense fear—it probably turned him on. She crossed to the barn and picked up the hose to wash the mud from her boots, ready to turn it on him if she had to.

Gary watched from a safe distance, his hat cocked back and his thumbs hooked in his belt. “Guess you don’t need no help today,” he said with a smirk. “Maybe later.”

“I don’t think so.” She kept the hose running until he swaggered out of sight toward the shed.
JAKE STOOD KNEE-DEEP in icy runoff, clearing brush clogging the main irrigation ditch. The weather had turned springlike after the late March snowfall; a few more warm days and the snowmelt would begin in earnest. When his cell phone rang, he staggered to the bank and dragged off one soaked glove to dig it from his pocket.

Ross Norquist’s voice, high-pitched in agitation, assaulted his ear before he could even say hello. “Jake, you better get over here quick and pick up this girl before more blood gets shed.”

“What?” He spoke as he ran to his truck and flung the shovel into the bed with a clang.

“Whose blood?” He spoke as he ran to his truck and flung the shovel into the bed with a clang.

“Gary’s. Shelby set her hound on him. Liz and me headed into town, but we had to come back for something she forgot. We found Gary trying to load the shotgun, bleeding like a pig with his arm all tore up. Liz is driving him to the emergency room. She said to call you.”

“What about Shelby?” Rage blurred his vision. “I don’t know. Gary was yelling how he’d blow her dog’s head off. She’s locked herself in the tack room. I been banging on the door, but it’s dead quiet in there. Get her out of here before Liz gets back with Gary.”

“I’m on my way.” Jake leaped into the driver’s seat without waiting for an answer and sent the pickup jouncing across the hayfield, leaving muddy ruts in its wake. Phone, gloves, a pair of pliers, and a half-empty two-liter Coke bounced around on the front seat and shot to the floor as he slewed to a halt beside the barn. Begrudging precious minutes, he backed his truck to his two-horse trailer and dropped the hitch onto the ball. When he picked up Shelby, he’d buy the gray colt and bring him along, too.

The road into Durango seemed endless, and a creeping hay truck dropped Jake’s speed to a foot pace up one long grade. Passing the big rig at last, he roared into town with the empty trailer swaying behind him and turned north. When he arrived at the Norquist ranch, he breathed a sigh of relief to see no sign of Liz’s Jeep Cherokee. He ran toward the barn where Ross waited.

“Man, I thought you’d never get here,” Ross said. “The tack room door’s bolted from the inside, and she won’t answer me. See if she’ll speak up for you.”

Jake took a deep breath to ease his pounding heart. “Shelby,” he said, “it’s Jake. Can I come in?”

Silence.

He tapped on the door. “Shelby?”

No response, no barking.

He turned to Ross. “You sure she’s in there?”

Ross tugged on the door. “Where else could she be?”

Jake sprinted around to the side of the barn. A window stood open; boot and paw prints in the mud led toward the corral.

Ross came up behind him and stopped short. “She’s gone? On foot? Where does she think—?”

Jake followed the tracks at a run. “What horses were in the corral?”

“The three mustangs. No, just the roan mare—the bay’s in the barn. The colt’s in the round pen. Our string is out at pasture.”

They skidded to a halt. The gates to the corral and the round pen stood open.

“Saddle me a horse,” Jake said. “You stay here and try to find out what happened.”

Ten minutes later Jake rode out on a sturdy chestnut gelding. A confusion of hoof prints laced the
thawed ground around the corral and barn, but he picked out new tracks made by the dog and two unshod horses.

He cast a worried glance at the sky and swore. The Norquist ranch lay higher than Cameron’s Pride, closer to the Continental Divide. Sunny here in the valley, but leaden clouds were piling up behind the San Juan’s promised snow. He’d seen blizzards swoop down out of the high country as late as May. Shelby had maybe an hour’s start, but she wouldn’t push the pregnant mare. He clapped his heels into the chestnut’s sides.

The soft ground made tracking easy. A path of sorts, blurred by last year’s grass, led toward a draw climbing into the hills. Sure enough, a range gate sagging askew broke the fence line. Either Shelby didn’t know how to fasten the cranky post-and-loop device or hadn’t been able to manage it while hanging on to two horses.

Clouds hid the sun. A single icy drop struck the back of his hand, and he snapped up his fleece-lined jacket. The steep trail crossed and recrossed a narrow creek running bank-high with snowmelt. No need to track, the walls of the draw had grown higher and more rugged. A horse could scramble out, but he doubted Shelby would ask it of the mare. If the draw turned into a box canyon, he would come up on her soon. If it opened into national forest land... He pushed harder, encouraging the gelding with heels and reins.

The trail leveled out in a high meadow. Jake saw no sign of Shelby until the chestnut pricked his ears. A flicker of movement caught his eye: the gray colt disappearing among the aspens at the far edge of the clearing. He picked the gelding up to a fast jog. She couldn’t move quickly through the dense woods. He could stop her even if he had to drop a loop on the roan mare.

“Shelby!” He raised his voice over the rising wind. “Wait up!”

Her shoulders slumped as she reined in. “What are you doing here?”

“Liz told Ross to call me.” He couldn’t see her face, hidden under a shapeless felt hat pulled low against the first snowflakes. “What happened?”

She raised her head, and he drew back on the reins, making the gelding dance in place. A thin line of blood still seeped from her cut lower lip and raw scratches on the side of her neck showed above her collar.

“That...!” He bit back a detailed description of Gary Norquist.

She bowed her head. “I’m not going back—he aims to shoot Stranger and then take out his meanness on the colt.”

“I won’t let him.” Jake caught the mare’s rein as Shelby tried to ride away. “I promise, I won’t let him hurt Stranger or the colt. Or you. Please, believe me.”

He released the mare’s rein. “Can you get the colt into my trailer?” He stretched the truth a little. “I just bought him.”

Her head came up. “I can load him.”

“Good. Look, you can’t keep riding into this weather. You’re headed into the national forest—there’s no shelter for miles.”

She looked into his face for a long moment while he held his breath. He would drag her back by force if he had to, to save her life, but that might do as much harm as Gary’s attack. He guessed she would never ask for help and hated accepting it.

He leaned forward and patted the mare’s neck. “Don’t want this lady dropping her foal in a blizzard, do we?”
Her eyes fell and she sighed. “I guess not.” She reined the mare around and rode back across the whitening meadow with Stranger on one side and the colt on the other.

They made better time downhill with the wind at their backs. Jake stopped at the range gate. “I want you to wait here while I ride in alone,” he said. “You need to tell me what happened. All Ross knows is what Gary said, that you set Stranger on him.”

She looked away; for a second he thought she might turn back into the mountains. “He’s been trying to catch me alone ever since I got here,” she said in a husky voice. “He rode out early to check fence on the far side of the ranch—Liz put up a lunch for him, then she and Ross went into town. I planned to work the bay mare...” She swallowed. “I heard a door slam, and then Stranger started baying, but muffled, like he’d been locked in somewhere.”

“Look, you don’t have to—”

“Gary came into the barn,” she said as if she hadn’t heard him. “He said he watched his folks leave and then doubled back so we could have some fun with no one around. I told him forget it, but he grabbed me...” Her words came faster, tumbling over each other, her voice rising so the colt snorted in alarm. “I yelled for Stranger, and Gary hit me. And then Stranger was just there—he must have gone through a window. He knocked Gary down and grabbed his arm. I dragged Stranger into the tack room and barred the door.”

Jake wanted to swear, to hit something, to hold her. He was afraid to move.

She wet her lips. “Gary started screaming how he’d get me, soon as he took care of Stranger with a shotgun. He kicked the door a couple times, then I heard him running. I was afraid to come out, so I threw my saddle out the window along with the mare’s bridle and a lead rope. I boosted Stranger through the window and climbed out after him.”

The wind had picked up, the snow thicker, already clinging to the horses’ rough coats and Stranger’s fur. Jake hated leaving Shelby here; he didn’t trust her not to bolt again.

“Look,” he said, “this weather’s blowing in hard.” He offered his watch. “Wait fifteen minutes and then follow me. I’ll talk to Ross and have the trailer ready to load the colt. Okay?”

She hesitated and then took the watch, shivering so hard she almost dropped it. “Okay,” she said. “Fifteen minutes.”

“Sooner if the tracks start to fill in. I’ve known folks to die a hundred yards from shelter, going in circles.” Although the mare would head straight to the barn for shelter.

He forced himself to ride away but then looked over his shoulder. Already the little group was only a dark blur in the swirling whiteness.

“Fifteen minutes,” he yelled, and she raised a hand as if to show him the watch. He turned and kicked the gelding into a run.

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PROPOSAL AT
THE WINTER BALL

Jessica Gilmore
CHAPTER ONE

‘A GLASS OF white wine and make it a large one.’ Flora sank onto the low leather seat and slumped forward, banging her forehead against the distressed oak table a couple of times. She sat back up and slouched back in her chair. ‘Please,’ she added, catching a quizzical gleam in Alex’s eyes.

‘Bad day?’ He held up a hand and just like that the waiter glided effortlessly through the crowds of office-Christmas-party escapees and Friday-night drinkers towards their table, tucked away in the corner as far from the excited pre-Christmas hubbub as they could manage. Flora could have waved in the waiter’s general direction for an hour and he would have ignored her the whole time but Alex had the knack of procuring service with just a lift of a brow; taxis, waiters, upgrades on flights. It was most unfair.

What was it about Alex that made people—especially women—look twice? His messy curls were more russet than brown, his eyes undecided between green and grey and freckles liberally splattered his slightly crooked nose. And yet the parts added up to a whole that went a long way beyond plain attractive.

But then Alex was charmed—while Flora’s fairy godmother must have been down with the flu on the day her gifts were handed out. Flora waited not too patiently, ready to finish her tale of woe, while Alex ordered their drinks. A humiliation shared was a humiliation halved, right?

Finally the waiter turned away and she could launch back in. ‘Bad day I could cope with but it’s been a bad wee k. I think I’m actually cursed. Monday was the office manager’s birthday and she brought in doughnuts. I bit into mine and splat. Raspberry jam right down the front of my blouse. Of course it was my nicest white silk,’ she added bitterly.

‘Poor Flora.’ His mouth tilted with amusement and she glared at him. He was still in his work suit and yet looked completely fresh. Yep, unfairly charmed in ways that were completely wasted on a male. Flora’s seasonally green wool dress was stain free today but she still had that slightly sticky, crumpled, straight-from-work feel and was pretty sure it showed...

‘And then yesterday I left work with my skirt tucked into my knickers. No, don’t laugh.’ She reached across the table and prodded him, his chest firm under her fingers. ‘I didn’t realise for at least five minutes and...’ this was the worst part; her voice sank in shame ‘...I wasn’t even wearing nice knickers. Thank goodness for fifteen-denier tights.’

Alex visibly struggled to keep a straight face. ‘Maybe nobody noticed. It’s winter, surely you had a coat on?’

‘I was wearing a jacket. A short jacket. And judging by the sniggering the whole of Holborn noticed. But even that was better...’ Flora stopped short and buried her face in her hands, shame washing over her as she mentally relived the horror of just an hour ago.

‘Better than?’ Alex leaned back as the waiter returned carrying a silver circular tray, smiling his thanks as the man put a pint in front of him and a large glass of wine in front of Flora. She picked up the glass, gratefully taking a much-needed gulp, the cold tartness a welcome relief.

‘Better than tonight. I didn’t mean to...’ The old phrase tripped off her tongue. Flora’s mother always said that they would be her last words, carved onto her grave.

Here lies Flora Prosperine Buckingham.
She didn’t mean to.

‘I was just so relieved to see a seat I all out ran for it only I threw myself in a little too vigorously, misjudged and I ended up... I ended up sitting on a strange man’s knee.’

She glared at Alex as he choked on his pint. ‘It’s not funny! The whole carriage just stared at me and the man said...’ She stumbled over the words, her cheeks heating at the memory. ‘He said, “Make yourself comfortable, pet. I like a girl with plenty to grab hold of.”’

She took another gulp, ignoring the guffaws of laughter opposite. The words had stung more than she cared to admit. So she was tall with hips and a bosom that her mother called generous and her kinder friends described as curvy? In the nineteen fifties she would have been bang on trend but right now in the twenty-first century she just felt that bit too tall, that bit too wide, that bit too conspicuous.

Of course, sitting on a strange man’s lap in a crowded Tube carriage hadn’t helped her blend in. There had probably been people from her office in that very carriage on that very train, witnesses to her humiliation. Thank goodness her contract ended next week, although the thought of even one week of whispers and sniggers was bad enough; if only she could get a convenient dose of flu and call in sick. A week of rest, recuperation and isolation was exactly what she needed.

Though sick days meant no pay. Flora sighed. It was no fun temping.

Alex finally stopped laughing. ‘That was very friendly of you. So you’ve made a new friend?’

‘No!’ She shuddered, still feeling an itch in the exact spots where the large hands had clasped her. ‘The worst thing was I just had to sit there and pretend nothing had happened. No, not on his lap, idiot! On the seat next to him. I’m surprised I didn’t spontaneously combust with mortification.’

How she would ever get back onto that Tube, onto that line, even onto the entire underground network again she had no idea. Maybe she could walk to work? It would only take a couple of hours—each way.

‘Will you go back there after Christmas?’ It was as if he had read her mind. Alex was far too good at that.

Flora shook her head. ‘No, I was covering unexpected sick leave and she should be back after the holidays. Luckily January is always a good time for temps. All those people who decide to carpe diem on New Year’s Eve or do something outrageous at the Christmas party.’

‘Come on, Flora, is that your grand plan? Another year temping? Isn’t it time you carpe diem yourself? Look, it’s been two years since you were made redundant. I know it stung but shouldn’t you be back in the saddle by now?’

Flora put her glass firmly on the table, blinking back the sudden and very unwanted tears. ‘It’s not that easy to find design work and at least this way I’m paying the bills. And no...’ she put up her hand as he opened his mouth ‘... I am not moving in with you and I am not moving back home. I don’t need charity. I can do this on my own.’

Besides, it wasn’t as if she wasn’t trying. Since she had been made redundant from her job at a large but struggling pub chain she had sent out her portfolio to dozens of designers, retail head offices and agencies. She had also looked for freelance work, all too aware how hard it was to land an in-house position.

Most hadn’t even bothered to reply.

Alex regarded her levelly. ‘I’m not planning on offering you charity. I’m actually planning to offer you a job.’
Again. Flora swallowed, a lump roughly the size of the Titanic lodging itself in her throat. Just great. It wasn’t that she envied Alex his incredible success; she didn’t spend too much time comparing the in-demand, hotshot team of architects he headed up with her own continuing search for work. She tried not to dwell on the contrast between his gorgeous Primrose Hill Georgian terrace, bought and renovated to his exact design, and her rented room a little further out in the far ends of North London.

But she wished he wouldn’t try and help her. She didn’t need his pity. She needed him to believe in her.

‘Look,’ she said, trying to stop her voice from wobbling. ‘I do appreciate you offering me work, just like I appreciate Mum needing a runner or Dad an assistant every time I’m between contracts. But if I learned anything from the three years I was with Village Inns it’s that mingling the personal and the professional only leads to disaster.’

It could have been a coincidence that she was made redundant shortly after breaking up with the owner’s son and heir apparent but she doubted it.

And yes, right now life was a struggle. And it was more than tempting to give in and accept the helping hands her family and best friend kept holding out to her. But if she did then she would just confirm their belief that she couldn’t manage on her own.

At least a series of humiliating, weird or dull temp jobs kept her focused on getting out and getting on.

‘I’m not offering you a role out of pity. I actually really need you. I need your help.’ His mouth quirked into a half-smile.

Flora gaped at him. Had she heard right? The cheesy blend of Christmas tunes was already pretty loud and amplified even more by the group at the bar who were singing along a little too enthusiastically. ‘You need me?’

That potentially changed everything.

‘You know the hotel I designed in Austria?’

Did she know about the high-profile, high-concept boutique hotel Alex had designed for the über-successful, über-exclusive Lusso Group? ‘You might have mentioned it once or twice.’

‘I’ve been offered an exclusive contract to design their next three. They pick stunning natural locations, like everything to be as eco-friendly and locally sourced as possible and each resort has an entirely unique look and vibe. It’s a fantastic project to work on. Only the designer I used for Austria has just accepted a job with a rival hotel brand and can’t continue working with me.’

This was a lot bigger than the small jobs he had been pushing her way for the last two years. It was too big to be a pity offering; his own reputation was at stake as well. Hope mingled with pride and for the first time in a long, long time Flora felt a smidgen of optimism for her future.

Only to be instantly deflated by Alex’s next words. ‘I’m flying out tomorrow for the launch of the Austrian hotel and while I’m there I plan to present my initial concepts for the Bali hotel complete with the interiors and overall look. I thought Lola had at least made a start on it but when I called her today to ask her to fax her scheme over she told me cool as anything that, not only hadn’t she started, but thanks to her new job she wasn’t intending to.’ He blew out a long breath, frustration clear on his face. ‘This job better work out for her because there’s no way I’ll be recommending her again, no matter how insanely gifted she is.’

Ouch, ouch and ouch again. Flora’s fingers tightened on her glass stem. So it wasn’t her talent he
was after, it was her availability?

But maybe it was time to swallow her pride. A job like this would propel her into the next league. She leaned forward, fixing an interested smile onto her face. ‘So what do you want me to do? Study your plans and email my ideas over?’ Her tiny box room of a bedroom, already crammed with material, her sewing machine and easel, wasn’t the most inspiring surroundings but she could manage. Or she could travel back to her parents a week early and work from there—at least she would be warm and fed if not guaranteed any peace and quiet or, indeed, any privacy.

‘Email? Oh, no, I need you to come to Austria with me. That way you’ll get a real feel for their taste.’ He fixed her with a firm gaze. ‘You need to follow the brief, Flora. There’s no room for your whimsy.’

Her whimsy? Just because her private designs were a little fantastical didn’t mean she carried her taste into her professional work. She knew the difference between indulging her creativity in her personal work and meeting a client’s brand expectations, no matter how dull they might seem. She narrowed her eyes at him. ‘Of course, I am a professional.’

Alex held her gaze for a long second before nodding. ‘Good. I’ll talk you through my plans on the flight to Innsbruck’

The reality of his words hit her. A trip abroad. She hadn’t been on a plane since her redundancy. ‘Tomorrow? But I have another week of my temp job to go.’

‘Can’t you get out of it?’

‘Well, yes. Although my agency won’t be best pleased.’

‘It’s a temping agency. I’m sure they will be able to replace you.’

‘Yes. Of course.’ A fizz of excitement began to bubble through her. No more Tube trains and oppressive offices. No, she would be spending the next week in a gorgeous hotel. No more spreadsheets or audio typing or trying to put salespeople off, she would be flexing her creative muscles instead.

‘It’s a shame it isn’t Bali. I could do with some winter sun.’ Flora shivered despite the almost oppressive heat in the overcrowded wine bar. Her last holiday had been a tent in the Cornish countryside. It had all sounded idyllic on the website, which had deliriously described the golden beaches and beautiful scenery. The reality had been freak storms and torrential rain. She didn’t think she’d been truly warm since.

Alex set down his pint. ‘This isn’t a holiday, Flora.’

‘I know.’ She leaned forward and grabbed his hand. ‘I was teasing you. I’d go to the Antarctic for a chance like this. What do I need to do?’

His fingers curled around hers, warm and strong, and Flora’s heart gave the all too familiar and all too painful thump at his touch. ‘Be ready tomorrow morning, early. Pack for snow and some glamorous events, you know the kind of thing.’

No, she didn’t. Not recently but there was no way she was going to tell him that. ‘Warm yet dressy. Got it.’ A thought struck her as the group by the bar began to roar the chorus of yet another overplayed Christmas classic. ‘When are we due back? Mum and Dad are expecting both of us home on Christmas Eve. They’d be gutted if you don’t turn up. Horatio is on duty at the hospital so it’ll just be Minerva, her perfect spouse and her perfect twins.’

She could hear the bitter note in her voice, feel it coat her tongue and took another sip to wash it down. What she meant was she couldn’t cope with Minerva and her Stepford family without Alex.
‘No Horry?’ Alex raised his eyebrow. ‘That’s a shame. I do like watching your mum trying to fix him up with the local eligibles. He’s so beautifully oblivious.’

‘I think it’s a defence mechanism.’ Flora eyed Alex speculatively. ‘Anyway, you should be glad he never takes the bait. If Mum wasn’t worrying about her permanent bachelor son she might turn her matchmaking skills onto you.’

‘You’re her youngest child,’ he countered sweetly. ‘I wouldn’t worry about me, Flora. It’ll be you she’ll be launching forth next.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ But she wasn’t as sure as she sounded. Now thirty was just a year away there had been ominous rumbles about settling down along with the usual thinly veiled hints about getting a proper job, buying her own house and why couldn’t she be more like her elder siblings?

‘You’re one of the family. Better. The Golden Boy. You know they think you can do no wrong.’

Alex had spent every single Christmas with the Buckinghams after the year his father and new stepmother had chosen to spend the festive season in St Bart’s leaving eleven-year-old Alex at home in the housekeeper’s charge. The next Christmas Flora and her family had taken it for granted he would join them, a stocking with his name on the chimney breast, a place set at the table.

Five years later he had packed his bags and left his father’s house for good, taking up permanent residence in the attic bedroom next to Flora’s own. He’d never told her just what had led up to his bitter estrangement from his father and Flora had never pried.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll be back for Christmas. There’s no way I’m missing out on your father’s Christmas dinner. He’s promising goose this year. I watched him prepare it on a video on the Internet. Nothing is keeping me away.’

‘That’s all right, then.’ She took a deep breath of relief. One day surely even Alex would manage more than six months with one of his identikit, well-bred girlfriends and would have to spend the holiday season with her family, not the Buckinghams. Each year they managed to hold onto him was a bonus.

She stared at her empty glass regretfully. ‘If I need to pack, find my passport and be ready before the crack of dawn I’d better get going. What time shall I meet you?’

‘Oh, no.’ Alex pushed his chair back and stood up, extending a hand to Flora to help her out of her seat. ‘I’m not risking your timekeeping, Flora Buckingham. I’ll send a car for you. Five a.m. sharp. Be ready.’

* * *

Alex looked down at his tablet and sighed. So much for briefing Flora on the flight—although to be fair he should have known better. It was a gift he envied in her. No matter where they were, what the time was, she would fall asleep at the first sign of motion. She’d slumbered as the taxi took them through the dark, wintry pre-dawn streets of London to the airport, waking long enough to consume an enthusiastic breakfast once they had passed through passport control, only to fall back asleep the second the plane began to taxi down the runway.

And now she was snoozing once again. She would definitely give Sleeping Beauty a run for her money. He elbowed her. ‘Flora, wake up. I want you to take a look at this.’

‘Mmm?’ She stretched. ‘I wasn’t asleep, just dozing. Oh! Look at that.’ She gazed, awestruck, out of
the car windows at the snow-covered mountains, surrounding them in every direction. ‘It’s just like a Christmas card.’

‘What do you think—is it as pretty as you imagined?’

She turned to him, mouth open in indignation, and he stifled a smile. She was far too easy to wind up. ‘Pretty? It’s so much more than mere prettiness. And look, there are actual chalets. Everywhere!’

‘Well observed, Sherlock.’

She didn’t react to his sardonic tone. ‘I didn’t realise Austrian people actually lived in them. I thought it was like thatched cottages. You know, people assume England is all half-timber and cottage gardens but in reality you’re far more likely to live in some identikit house on a suburban estate. Oh, I wish I lived in a chalet. They are utterly beautiful.’

‘I hope you feel the same way about the hotel.’ It was the moment of truth. She had a keen eye, could always see straight through to the heart of his ideas. Would she appreciate the stark simplicity of the hotel, or think it too modern, anachronistic in this natural paradise?

‘I always love your designs but this one sounds even more exciting than usual; I have to admit I am really looking forward to seeing it in all its finished glory.’

The car had been steadily taking them along the busy roads that led towards the Tyrolean capital, Innsbruck, but now it veered away to follow a smaller road that wound ahead, climbing into the footholds of the Alps. The snow lay inches upon inches deep on the sides of the roads.

‘Just look at it, look at the light.’ Flora’s fingers flexed. ‘Oh, why didn’t I pack my sketchbook? Not that I could really capture it, not the way the sun plays on the snow. Not that light—it’s like a kaleidoscope.’

A knot unravelled in the pit of Alex’s stomach. She saw what he saw. The interchange between light and the snow. She would get the hotel.

‘I have never seen so much snow in my life, not if I took every winter and added them together.’ Yep, she was fully awake now, her dark eyes huge as she stared out at the mountains. ‘How come England grinds to a halt at just the hint of snow and yet everything here is running normally despite tonnes of the stuff?’

‘Because this stuff is what keeps the local economy ticking over. You can’t market yourself as a winter wonderland without the cold white stuff.’

‘It’s like Narnia.’ Flora leaned back and stared with enraptured eyes as the car took them higher and higher. On one side the mountains soared high above them, on the other the town was spread out like a child’s toy village, the river cutting through the middle like an icily silver scarf. ‘How much further? I thought the hotel was in Innsbruck itself.’

‘No, it’s above the town, close to the ski lifts. The guests are transported in and out at will so they get the best of both worlds. That’s the idea anyway, nothing too much effort for them.’

‘They are paying enough for it,’ Flora pointed out. ‘I cannot believe I get to stay somewhere this luxurious. Even the staff quarters are probably one up on a tent in the rain.’

‘You’re not in the staff quarters. Could you really see Lola in anywhere but a suite? You’re doing her job, you get her room. Tomorrow is the soft opening so nobody who stays at the hotel this week is an actual paying guest. We’ll be helping to wow travel journalists, bloggers and some influential winter sports enthusiasts.’

He paused, searching for the right words. He knew how awkward she felt in crowds and amongst strangers. ‘Flora, it’s crucial that they all leave at the end of the week completely bowled over. And
it’s equally crucial that I leave with fully approved designs. You can manage, can’t you? I can’t emphasise enough what a big deal this week is. For me, for my firm as well as for Lusso Hotels.’

‘Really? How good of you to warn me. I might have put my foot in it otherwise.’

Warning bells tolled through Alex’s mind. She sounded frostier than the branches on the trees outside. It was the same tone she’d used the day he’d told her that one day she would grow out of boy bands, the tone she’d used the day he had told her that her first boyfriend wasn’t good enough. The same tone she’d used the never to be forgotten day she’d chopped her hair into a pixie cut and he had agreed that, yes, she did look more like a marine than like Audrey Hepburn.

‘I only meant...’

‘I know what you mean: be professional, don’t mess this up. Well, I won’t. I need this too, Alex. I might not have founded a “Top Ten Up and Coming Business” while in my twenties, I might not be the bright young thing in my profession. Not yet. I have a lot to prove and this is my big chance. So don’t worry about me. I’ve got this covered.’

Alex opened his mouth to point out that she hid in the kitchen at every single party she attended and would rather face a den full of lions than make small talk but he shut it again. He needed to warn her just how much networking lay ahead of her but not now. He’d wait until she was a little mellower.

Luckily the car turned down a single-track road, cut into the side of the mountain, a dramatic drop on one side showcasing the valley spread out below. ‘We’re here,’ he said instead with some relief. The car slid to a stop and Alex unbuckled his seat belt. ‘This is Der Steinadler—The Golden Eagle. What do you think?’

She had been looking at him intently, forcing her point home, but at his words she turned and looked out of the window. Her mouth fell open. ‘Holy cow. You did this? This is it?’

‘Yep, what do you think?’

‘I...’ She didn’t answer, clambering out of the car instead, muttering as her trainer-clad foot sank into the snow and pulling her quilted jacket more closely around her as the sharp chill of the wintry mountain air hit. She turned to him as he joined her. ‘All that time spent playing with building blocks as a kid wasn’t wasted, huh?’

The hotel was built on the narrow Alpine shelf and looked as if it were suspended above Innsbruck spread out in the valley below, the mountains opposite a living, breathing picture framed through the dramatic windows. Alex had eschewed the traditional chalet design; instead he had used the locally sourced golden wood as a frame for great sheets of glass. The hotel should have looked out of place, too industrial for the tranquil setting, and yet somehow it blended in, the trees and mountains reflecting back from the many panes of glass.

Every time he saw it, it was like being punched in the chest. He couldn’t believe he had made his ambitious vision a reality. ‘You like?’

Her cheeks were glowing and her large, full mouth curved into a smile. ‘I love it. Alex, it’s wonderful.’

Relief flooded through him. He wasn’t sure why her opinion mattered so much. It wasn’t just that she was his oldest friend. No, he trusted her taste. If she didn’t get it then he wouldn’t have communicated his vision properly. ‘Come on, then. Let’s go inside. I think you might combust when you see the swimming pool.’
‘SHOW ME AROUND, ALEX! It’s not every day a girl gets the architect providing the grand tour.’
‘Don’t you want to see your room and freshen up first?’
She shook her head. ‘No, I’m quite fresh, thank you, and you can conclude the tour at my room.’
Flora watched the bellboy pile her bags and coat onto his trolley and sighed happily. ‘This is a lot
better than lugging a tent over three fields—and then having to go back for the beds. Besides, you
want me to get an idea of what the client wants? The best way is for me to take a detailed look
around.’
Her first impression was of luxurious comfort rather than cold, chic elegance. The whole interior
of the hotel was the same mix of glass and wood as the outside but softened with warm colours and
plenty of plants, abstract prints and comfy-looking cushions and sofas to mellow the potentially stark
effect.
Alex shrugged off his designer ski jacket, a coat that had probably cost more than Flora’s entire
suitcase of clothes, and gestured. ‘Where do you want to start?’
‘Bottom and work our way up?’
‘Okay, then, get ready to combust. We’re heading down to the pool.’
If Flora didn’t actually burst into excitable flames when she saw the swimming pool it was a close-
run thing. Housed a floor below the hotel entrance in a space carved out of the alpine shelf, the high-
ceilinged pool was enclosed by a dramatic wall of glass. Swimming up to the edge of the pool must
feel like swimming to the very edge of the mountain itself, she thought, staring out at the white peaks,
as if you might plunge over the side, dive down to the valley below.
The lights were low and intimately flattering, padded sofas were dotted around in discreet corners,
and whirlpools, saunas and steam rooms were hidden away behind glazed sliding doors. Tables held
jugs of iced water and inviting platters of fruit; thick fluffy towels were piled up on wooden shelves.
‘Oh.’ She pivoted, taking in every single detail. ‘I just want to grab a magazine from that beautifully
overstuffed bookshelf, pull on a robe and move into this room for ever. May I? Please?’
But Alex ignored her. ‘Come on, next stop the lounge and then I’ll take you to your room.’
By the time they reached her room Flora had scribbled down plenty of notes and photographed
enough details to give her a good place to start. Obviously the designs she came up with for the Bali
hotel would need to be unique, to marry with Alex’s vision and the setting, but it was good for her to
have an idea of the owner’s tastes. She could see why Lola had used the palate she had; it was
warming, sumptuous and complemented the natural materials prevalent throughout the building. The
soft furnishings and décor were all shades of soft cream, gold, bronze and orange, whether it was the
bronze and orange stripes on the cushions or the subtle champagne of the robes and the towels, the
same colour in the crisp blouses and shirts worn by the staff.
It was clear that whatever look she designed for the Bali hotel would have to flow through every
single detail, no matter how tiny.
‘Okay.’ Alex stopped at a cream door and gestured. ‘This is you.’
Flora held her breath as she slid her keycard into the slot and turned the handle. Yes, she was here
to work but there was no reason why she shouldn’t enjoy it and after a few long years of penny-
pinching and worrying it was rather splendid to be in such indulgent surroundings.
She stepped in and stopped, awestruck. 'Wow. Oh, Alex.'

At one end was the ubiquitous wall of glass and the ubiquitous stunning winter-wonderland view—not that it was getting old. Flora thought she could live here for ever and it would still be as breathtaking as the very first heart-stopping glimpse. The ceiling was high, arched and beamed, the walls a pale gold. The bed, a floating platform, was made up in white linen accented with a bronze silk throw and matching cushions.

Her suitcase had been placed on a low chest at the foot of the huge bed, the cheap, battered case more than a little incongruous in the spacious, luxurious suite. A reminder that this luxury was borrowed, that she had to earn her place here. Now she was here the jeans, jumpers and one good dress she had packed didn’t seem enough. Not for the weather or for the hotel itself.

‘You like it?’ Alex stepped into the room, a smile playing on his lips as he watched her dart around, peering into every door.

‘Like it? Do you realise that this walk-in wardrobe is bigger than my bedroom? In fact this suite is bigger than the house I live in—and I’m including the garden!’

She stopped by the glass screen that separated her bed from the small seating area and stared at the other screen, which stood between her bed and the bath, a huge tub affair perched on a dais right in the centre of the room.

‘Thank goodness the toilet’s in its proper place and not on show, otherwise this would feel more like an oddly luxurious prison cell than a hotel room!’

‘It’s looking good.’ Alex took a few steps further in and turned slowly. ‘I haven’t seen most of the suites since they were decorated and the fixtures installed.’ He stopped by the bath and ran one finger along the bronze trim. ‘At least you’ll be clean while you’re staying here. It can be so difficult to drag oneself away from the bed to the bathroom, don’t you find?’

Flora tested out the sofa, wincing as the rigidity of the cushions rejected her attempt to relax. It looked good but she wasn’t sure she would want to actually sit on it for any length of time. ‘Was the bath in the centre of the room your idea, Mr Fitzgerald? Have you been watching Splash again because I don’t think there are many mermaids in the Austrian Alps.’

He grinned. ‘Nope, not guilty, the fixtures are all Lola’s vision. Apparently this particular suite is the epitome of romantic.’

‘That’s where I’ve been going wrong, all that old-fashioned bathing in private nonsense. Although it could be just a leetle awkward if I was sharing a room with a friend, not a romantic interest. Is this...erm...motif in all the rooms?’

‘Not at all,’ he assured her. ‘In most of them the baths are tucked away respectfully in the room for which they were intended. Okay, If you are ready, they are laying out Kaffee und Kuchen for us. I thought we could go and look through my design ideas in the lounge while we have a snack.’

‘Kaffee and Kuchen? Coffee and cake?’ Flora jumped to her feet. ‘Never did words so gladden a girl’s heart. I’m ready. Lead on, Macduff. Take me to cake.’

* * *

The coffee and cakes were laid out in the lounge, the social heart of the hotel, situated on the ground floor at the very front of the building to ensure it took full advantage of the stunning views. Once again Flora stood by the huge floor-to-ceiling windows and her stomach fell away at the terrifying illusion
that there was nothing between her and the edge of the mountain.

Clusters of comfy bronze and red velvet sofas and chairs surrounded small tables, bookshelves full of books, games and magazines filled one wall and a huge wood-burning stove was suspended in the middle of the room. Somehow the lounge managed to feel cosy despite its vast size, easily capable of seating the sixty people the boutique hotel was designed to hold.

‘Right.’ Alex seated himself on one of the sofas and laid out his sketch pad in front of him. It would, she knew, be filled with exquisite pen-and-ink drawings. This was just the first phase, the visionary one. From here he would proceed to blueprints, to computer models, to hundreds of measurements and costings and attention to a million tiny little details that would transfer his vision from the page to reality.

But she knew this, the initial concept, was his favourite part. In many ways neither of them had changed that much from the children they had once been, designing their dream houses, palaces, castles, tree houses, igloos, ships in absorbed companionship.

But in other ways... She ran her eyes hungrily over him, allowing herself one long guilty look at the bent tousled head, at the long, lean body. In other ways they had both changed beyond recognition—not that Alex had noticed that.

No, in his eyes she was still the dirty-faced, scabby-kneed little girl he had met the first time he had run away from home. He’d only made it half a mile along the lane before bumping into Flora and together they’d built him a den to stay in. Planned for Flora to bring him bread and milk and a blanket.

He loved her, she knew that. And there weren’t very many people who could claim that. Outside Flora’s own family probably none.

He just wasn’t *in* love with her. There had been a time, way back when, she had wondered. But her one attempt to move things up a level had ended messily.

Flora curled her fingers into fists, trying to block out the memory. Block out the way he had put his hands on her shoulders, not to pull her in closer but to push her away. Block out the look of utter horror in his eyes.

He had kissed a lot of girls that summer and subsequent springs, summers, autumns and winters. But not Flora; never Flora.

And here she was, all these years later, still hoping. Pathetic. One day she’d stop being in love with him. She just had to try a little harder, that was all.

* * *

Neither of them noticed the light outside fading, replaced by the gradual glow of the low, intimate hotel lighting. It wasn’t until the huge Christmas tree dominating the far corner of the lounge sprang into brightly lit colour that Alex sat back, took off his work glasses and rubbed his eyes.

‘So, what do you think?’

Flora chewed on her lip. ‘I think I really need to take a trip out there to fully get your vision,’ she said solemnly. ‘At least three weeks, all-expenses-paid.’

‘Play your cards right, convince Camilla Lusso that you can do this and you will do,’ he pointed out. ‘I told you that part of the brand promise is ensuring each hotel is both unique and part of its environment—and to leave as small a carbon footprint as possible. You’ll need to source as much from local suppliers as possible.’
‘Very worthy.’ Flora pulled the pencil out of her hair and allowed the dark brown locks to fall onto her shoulders. ‘Will the guests arrive in a canoe, paddled only by their own strokes with the help of a friendly wind?’

He bit back a grin. Trust Flora to see the big glaring hole in the whole eco-resort argument. ‘Unlikely. But it’s a start, don’t knock it.’

‘If I get to travel to Bali I promise not to give it as much as a second thought. Do you think they’ll go for it? The glass-bottomed hotel?’

‘I don’t know. They’ve already decided to set the hotel in the rainforest—which is a pretty interesting decision. After all, most people expect a sea view in a place like Bali, so I really want to still have that water element. And although it would be nice to build out over the sea the local laws won’t allow it—and the whole “surrounded by the sea” concept is a little “honeymoon in the Maldives” obviously.’

‘Obviously.’ Flora sounded wistful and he nudged her. ‘Come on, work with me here. If I can’t convince you I’m doomed. I actually think this might be even more breathtaking. Not just building over the lagoon but using glass floors to make the lagoon part of the hotel—the water as one of the design materials.’

‘And I can bring that detail to bear inside. The lovely local dark woods and the natural blues and greens. Yes.’ She nodded. ‘I can work with that. Thanks, Alex.’

Alex pushed himself to his feet and walked over to the bar, a long piece of polished oak on the other side of the room. ‘Glass of wine or a stein of Austrian beer?’

‘I’m not sure what a stein is. A glass of white wine please.’

Alex ordered their drinks from the barmaid who was hovering discreetly at the far end. He carried their drinks over and handed her the wine, taking a long appreciative gulp of his own cold beer, a heavy weight in the traditional stein glass. ‘Cheers, or should I say prost?’

She raised her glass to his. ‘Cheers. You were right. A job like this is just what I need.’

Alex paused. He knew it wasn’t easy for her, younger sister to such high-achieving siblings, daughter of well-known experts in their fields. He knew her mother’s well-intentioned comments on everything from Flora’s hair to her clothes cut her to the quick. He knew how self-conscious she was, how she hated her conspicuous height, her even more conspicuous figure, her dramatically wide mouth and showy Snow White colouring. She really truly didn’t know how stunning she was—when she wasn’t hunching herself inside one of the sacklike dresses or tunics she habitually wore.

But she was twenty-nine now. It was time she believed in herself. ‘You could have had work before,’ he pointed out. ‘How many times have I asked you to freelance for me? You were just too proud to accept—or too afraid.’

Her mouth shut again, her lips compressed into a tight, hurt line. ‘There’s nothing wrong with wanting to stand on my own two feet.’

‘No, there isn’t.’ He fought the urge to backtrack; he’d always hated upsetting her in any way. ‘But there’s nothing wrong with accepting a helping hand either. Sometimes I think you’re so determined to prove yourself you actually hold yourself back.’

Her eyes blazed. ‘I can’t win, can I? Once you accused me of not knowing my own mind, now you’re telling me I’m too stubborn.’

‘If you mean I told you not to apply to vet school then I stand by that. Just like I stand by telling you not to take that job at Village Inns. I still don’t know why you did.’
Flora set her wine down on the table and glared at him. ‘Why were you so set against it? No one lands the perfect job straight from college. It made sense to get some experience.’

‘No, but your heart was never in that job, just like it wasn’t in veterinary medicine. You applied for that to please your mum.’

Flora jumped to her feet and walked over to the window, staring out at the dark before turning to face him. ‘So you were right that I wasn’t vet material. Right that I couldn’t hack it. So it took me a while to work things out. Excuse me for not being driven, focused on the goal like you, Mr Super Architect of the Year.’

He ignored the dig. So he was driven. Wasn’t that the point? It was why they were here after all. ‘Art school was far more you—but then you took the first safe job you could find even though designing those trendy pubs and twee restaurants drove you crazy. And when that didn’t work out you went into lockdown mode. Took it personally, as if you had failed.’

‘No, I didn’t!’ She paused, looked down at the floor. ‘Well, maybe a little.’

‘Look, Flora. You know the last thing I want to do is hurt you. In any way.’ It was truer than she knew. Alex didn’t know where he would have ended up, what he would have been without Flora’s friendship. It was why he had never been able to confide in her, not fully. He had never wanted to see the warmth in her eyes darken and chill. To be judged by her and found wanting.

God knew he judged himself enough for both of them.

‘Thank goodness.’ She looked at him directly then, her blue eyes shadowed. ‘I’d hate to hear what you would say if you wanted to hurt me.’

‘I just want you to follow your dreams. Yours, not your mother’s or mine or trying to beat your sister at her own game. I want you to go for what you want. Do what makes you happy. Not hang back for fear it doesn’t work out or in case you get knocked down again. Take each rejection as a challenge, get back up and try again. Harder each time. Here is your chance. Seize it.’

‘I was trying to before my temporary boss and arrogant best friend decided to have a go at me.’ But the anger had drained out of her voice. ‘I’m not so good at the seizing, Alex. We didn’t all get the Masters of the Universe education, you know.’

Alex had hated every single day at his elite boarding school. The only thing in its favour was that every day he had spent there was a day not at home. ‘I dropped out of sixth form to slum it at college with you so I missed the Advanced World Domination course. But I tell you what I do know, Flora. We’re all mostly faking it. Tell yourself you can do it, tell yourself you deserve it and make yourself go for it. That’s the secret. Now, I don’t know about you but those cakes seem like hours ago and I know the kitchen is hoping to do a last trial run on us before the guests arrive tomorrow. Let’s go eat.’

* * *

‘That was amazing. Although I don’t feel I can ever eat again.’ Flora patted her stomach happily and curled up on the velvet sofa.

‘Not that cosy though, just the two of us in a room set for sixty.’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ It had felt a bit incongruous at first, the two of them waited on alone in a vast room, but a couple of glasses of the delicious wine had soon set her at her ease and when Alex suggested they went back into the lounge for one last look at the plans and a digestif her original plans for a bath and an early night were forgotten.
She had only drunk schnapps once before and it hadn’t been pretty. But it was the national drink, after all; it would be rude not to sample it.

Alex was leaning back in his chair, his glass held loosely in his hand. Flora was usually so very careful about how she looked at him. If he ever caught her staring. If he ever guessed how she felt...

Alex was her oldest and best friend. His was the shoulder she cried on after break-ups and heartbreaks. He was her go-to person for advice. He knew all her vices and nearly all her secrets. But there were two things that lay between them. Two secrets; a chasm that could never be bridged.

He had never confided in her why he had left home, and why he was so against any kind of reconciliation with his father.

And she had never told him that she loved him.

Not as a friend, as a confidant, but in every way it was possible for a woman to love a man. Sometimes Flora thought she had fallen for him that very first day, that skinny red-headed boy with a look of determination on his face—and desolation in the stormy eyes. The hair had long since darkened to a deep auburn, his body had filled out in all the right places, but he was still determined.

And he hid it well, but at heart he was still as alone as he had been then. Not one of his girlfriends had ever got through to him. Was that why she had never told him how she felt? He was right, she was afraid.

Afraid of not being good enough for him. Afraid he would turn away in disgust and horror, just as he had all those years ago. Afraid that this time she would lose him for ever.

Flora downed the schnapps in one satisfying gulp, choking a little as the pungent, sharp liquor hit the back of her throat. Hmm, not as bad as she’d thought. In fact, that warm feeling at the pit of her stomach was really quite pleasant. She refilled her glass.

She gazed into the amber depths as his words rolled round and round her mind. ‘Get back up and try again. Tell yourself you deserve it.’ He was right. She never had. She took every rejection as a final blow whether it was work or her heart. It was easier not to put herself out there. Easier to lock herself away and hope.

Hope that somebody would see her Internet site and say, ‘Hey, you amazing talent, come work for me!’

Hope that Alex would turn round, look into her eyes and realise, just like that, she was the only girl for him.

Hope that her parents would tell her that she made them proud.

She just sat back and let life pass her by. Hoping.

Flora raised her glass and downed the schnapps. It wasn’t quite as fierce this time. Not as hot. More...mellow. She had definitely underrated schnapps.

She reached out and closed her hand around the bottle, wondering why it took a few goes to clasp it properly, and pulled it towards her.

‘Another one?’ Alex’s eyebrows rose. ‘We had quite a lot of wine at dinner. Are you sure?’

‘Yes, Dad.’ She grinned at him. ‘I like your hair like that.’

Alex touched his head, staring at her in confusion. ‘My hair?’

Flora put her head to one side. ‘It’s all glowy with the Christmas lights behind you. Like a halo. Angel Alex.’

She didn’t see him move but the next thing she knew he was by her side, one firm hand on hers, removing the bottle from her grasp.
'If you’re talking about angels then you have definitely had enough. Come along.’ He slid the bottle out of her reach and pulled at her hand, helping her rise to her feet. Flora swayed and caught his shoulder and he grimaced. ‘Bed time for you. I forgot you and schnapps don’t mix.’

‘We mix just fine.’ Flora regained her footing and stopped still, her hand still on his shoulder. She loved that Alex was taller than her. She looked up at him, his dearly familiar face so close to hers. The greeny-grey of his changeable eyes, the long lashes, the faded freckles on his nose, the curve of his cheekbones. The curve of his mouth. So close. Kissing distance. Her stomach clenched, the old exquisite pain. And yet all she had to do was stand on her tiptoes, just a little, and move in.

His words ran through her mind. *Try again. Harder each time.*

Maybe that was all she had to do. Try again. Maybe Alex was waiting for her to step forward, to make the move. Maybe it had always been within her power to change things but she had just never dared.

Maybe...

Before she knew it the words were tumbling out, words she had spent the last thirteen years keeping locked up deep, deep inside, more plaintive than demanding. ‘Why didn’t you kiss me back?’

‘What?’ His eyes widened in alarm and he took a step back. She moved with him, still holding on as if he were all that kept her anchored. He was lean, almost rangy, but there was a solidity when she touched him, the feel of a man who was fighting fit. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘All those years ago. Why did you push me away? Have you never wondered what would have happened if you hadn’t?’

‘It’s never crossed my mind.’ But his eyes shifted to her mouth as he spoke.

*He’s lying.* Her throat dried as she realised what that meant.

He *had* thought about it. And that changed everything. Almost unconsciously she licked her lips; his throat tightened as he watched the tip of her tongue dip onto her top lip and, at the gesture, her heart began to beat faster.

Emboldened, Flora carried on, her voice low and persuasive. ‘All those nights we stayed up talking till dawn. When we visited each other at uni we slept in the same bed, for goodness’ sake. The tents we’ve shared... Have you never wondered, not even once? What it would be like? What we’d be like?’

‘I...’ His eyes were on hers, intent, a heat she had never seen before beginning to burn bright, melting her. ‘Maybe once or twice.’ His voice was hoarse. ‘But we’re not like that, Flora. We’re more than that.’

Flora was dimly aware that there was something important in his words, something fundamental that she should understand, but she didn’t want to stop, not now as the heat in his eyes intensified, his gaze locking on hers. If she pushed it now, he would follow. She knew it; she knew it as she knew him.

She also knew that whatever happened the consequences would be immense. There would be repercussions. Last time they had pretended it had never happened. It was unlikely that would happen again; their friendship would be altered for ever. Could she live with that?

Could she live without trying? Laugh it off as lack of sleep and too much schnapps? Now she had come so far...

No, not when he was looking at her like that. Heat and questions and desire mingling in his eyes, just as she had always dreamed. *I want you to go for what you want.* That was what he’d told her.
She wanted him.
‘Kiss me, Alex,’ she said softly. And before he could reply or pull away Flora stepped in, put her other hand on his shoulder and, raising herself on her tiptoes, she pressed her mouth to his.

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**CHAPTER FOUR**

The Earth laughs in flowers.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

*WHAT THE HELL just happened?* Daniel followed his father and Nathan out of Fitzgerald House. Pop had never talked about him taking point on the restoration. The announcement had floored him. He’d tried not to show his shock in front of their clients, even if they were friends. And a woman he’d slept with—twice.

This sucked. He and Bess had to work together. Didn’t the sisters know how reckless Bess was? He could spout example after example. How could they trust her with such a massive project?

He’d have to be extravagilant to keep everything on track. But first he had to find out why Pop had dropped this project on him.

“Why am I managing Carleton House?” Daniel spit out. “What’s going on?”

“I’m wondering the same thing.” Nathan crossed his arms.

Pop leaned against his truck. “Doc’s trying to figure out why I’m so tired.”

“You’re sick?” Nathan’s voice squeaked as if he was going through puberty.

“Your mom made me go in. Doc Kramer drew a couple of gallons of blood and is running tests.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Daniel, you’re great at managing big projects. Better than me.”

Nathan shot Daniel a cutting glance. His brother hated when he received any praise from Mom and Pop.

“I don’t mind managing the project.” Other than the fact he’d have to work with Bess. “It’s learning about it in the meeting.”

“Sorry. I came straight from the doctor’s office. Your mom made me promise to take things easy until we know what’s up.”

“What does Doc Kramer think is wrong?” Daniel asked.


“I will.” Although keeping Bess happy would require jumping in the Wilmington with an anchor chained to his foot.

Nathan left with their father.

Daniel slumped against his truck. Pop was just tired. They’d been busy and Pop had made a big push to get Fitzgerald House done before Mamie’s wedding.

Daniel scrubbed his hand over his face. He had work to do. Then he’d design a system to manage the projects filling his plate.

Pulling out his phone, he checked the day’s tasks. He ran his finger through *Meet at Fitzgerald House*, striking through the text. Done. He skipped ahead two days and added *Contact Bess re: Final Drawings CH*.

Time to work on the carriage house. Later he would swing by a couple of projects and check in with the job leads.

With the blueprints and his tool belt in hand, he headed to the gate between Fitzgerald and Carleton.
Houses. As he entered the carriage house, the calming scent of fresh-cut wood greeted him. A saw screeched as Quint trimmed a stud.

The renovation was coming together. He let out a breath. This was his area of expertise, repurposing old buildings to be useful again.

Quint pushed his safety glasses to the top of his head and shut off the saw. “Meeting done?”

“Yup.”

“When do we start on the main house?”

Daniel moved with Quint, nailing the stud into the framing. “Hopefully, next week.” If Bess got back to him with her changes.

He strapped on his tool belt and began framing in the stairs to the second floor, tricky because Gray and Abby had chosen a curved central stairway. If he’d designed the staircase, everything would have been clean right angles, but he wasn’t the client.

He worked until his phone buzzed. Time to check on the Tybee crew. He stood by his car, unstrapping his tool belt.

The gate between the two properties jangled. The sisters came through, their fiery heads tucked together. Abby elbowed Dolley. Bess tipped back her head and laughed, a clear, sweet sound.

Seeing Bess made his mouth water. He could still taste her kisses—champagne and cake. Her breasts bounced as she walked toward him, and his fingers flexed. He’d had his hands and mouth all over her silky skin.

These thoughts had to stop. They had to work together.

His tool belt clanged as he tossed it in the truck bed.

Bess’s head popped up. Her grin withered on her face.

“Been touring Carleton House?” he asked, hands on his hips.

“Yes.” Bess stopped in the parking area. Abby and Dolley waved and headed into the kitchen. “I’ll get the changes back to you tomorrow.”

He opened his door. “What time?”

“Oh. Um.”

He pulled out his phone. “Ten suit you?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll meet you at the house.”

“Good.”

A couple of B and B guests wandered into the courtyard. By the fountain, the man pulled the woman into an intense kiss. Daniel turned his back on the pair.

Bess cleared her throat. Her cheeks were flushed. “Did you...know your father wanted you to manage Carleton House?”

“Why?” He moved to a table shaded by a palm.

“Your expression. It went...well, let’s say they could have chiseled your face on Mount Rushmore.”

“That obvious, huh?”

She sat. “So you didn’t know.”

What should he tell her? “Apparently, Pop hasn’t been feeling well.”

“Oh, no.” She touched his arm. “What’s wrong?”

He wished he knew. “He’s tired.”

“He’ll be fine.” She chewed on her bottom lip.
Heat shot through his groin. He’d nibbled on that lip. “Yeah.”
She stared at her hand on his arm and snatched it away. “Can we do this?”
He rested his fists on the table. “Work together?”
She raised an eyebrow.
“We’ve got the same goal,” he said.
She nodded, her ponytail bouncing. “Opening Carleton House by the beginning of February.”
“I’ll make it happen. I don’t want Pop worrying.” He took a deep breath. “I need you to—behave. I
don’t have time for any of your shenanigans.”
Her head snapped up. “Behave? Shenanigans?”
“You know what I mean.” He waved a hand at her.
“I don’t.” Flashing green eyes glared at him.
“The stupid pranks you pull.”
“I’m not a teen. I’m a professional.” She straightened. “I outgrew pranks years ago.”
He didn’t believe her. “Then how did we end up in bed together?”
Her eyes went wide. “You think that was my fault?”
He shrugged. “If you hadn’t hopped into the fountain, I wouldn’t have carried you home.” And been
turned on by all her curves and hair and legs.
“You are delusional.” She started to leave and stopped. Her chest moved up and down in a big
sigh. “Let me know if there is anything my sisters and I can do to help your dad.”
“Keeping on top of the Carleton House timelines would be a good start.”
“I’ll do my part.” She grabbed her blueprints and bag. “You do yours and maybe we’ll get through
this.”
She headed to Fitzgerald House. Her body was long, muscled and gorgeous. He ripped his gaze
away and headed to his truck. Ogling Bess wouldn’t get his work done. Admiring Bess’s strong body
wasn’t the problem. It was the out-of-control feelings that went along with her craziness.
A childhood spent waiting for Nathan’s next catastrophe had taught him to stay away from
situations he couldn’t control. Bess was one of those situations.
He rubbed his hand on his neck. Only for Pop and Forester Construction would he work the next
five months with Bess.

*B * *

Bess whipped her hair into a ponytail, grabbed another binder and wrapped the mass into a bun. She
was ten minutes early for her meeting with Daniel. The ass. Thinking she would pull pranks. She
wasn’t a lovesick teen anymore. She wasn’t trying to get his attention—at all.
The Carleton House kitchen door slammed. Bess straightened. She could do this. She could work
with Daniel. All it would take was a lobotomy. Or maybe Daniel could get a personality transplant.
“Hey.” Daniel nodded. His brown eyes did a hit-and-run with hers.
Right. Hard to believe they’d ever gotten naked with each other.
Bess got down to business. “How do you want me to walk through our changes?”
Daniel blinked. “Show me what you want.”
She led the way to the dining room. “We’d like a pass-through between the butler’s pantry and the
dining room.”
Daniel knocked on the wall and checked out the room from the pantry. He came back. “Okay.”
He made notes on his copy of blueprints.
“Here are the notes I worked up.” Bess held out a copy.
“This will help.” He moved closer.
She caught a whiff of his woody aftershave. Like Pavlov’s dog, her body flashed with unwelcome heat. Thrusting the paper at him, she hurried to the library.
His footsteps echoed behind hers.

At the exterior wall that looked out on the backyard, she waved her hands at a tall window. “We’d like double French doors here.”

Daniel moved around the room. He shook his head. “That’s a lot of structure work. Why not change this window—” he pointed “—and this into single doors? We’d make the doors as tall as the current windows, and the lines from outside will match.”

She frowned. “Double doors would be elegant.” And it would bring the garden into the room.
“But you’ll change the lines from the outside. You want the height of the windows and doors to stay the same and keep the room’s symmetry inside and out.”
She chewed on her thumbnail. “Could each window be changed into a door?”

He examined all four windows.
“For balance I’d suggest two doors.” He pointed. “One on each side of the room.”
Bess pulled out another set of sketches and set them on a library shelf.
He leaned close. His breath made the hair escaping her bun dance on her neck. “Did someone else do architectural sketches?”

“These are my garden plans.” She’d sketched the combined Fitzgerald and Carleton House courtyards. “You’d recommend the doors be here—” she drew a circle “—and here?”

He took her pencil, his golden head dipping next to hers. “Is this to scale?”

She nodded, clenching her fingers to keep from brushing the silky hair that slipped across his forehead.
He measured the windows and drew in the doors on her layout. His shoulder bumped hers, and another flash of heat zipped through her. “There.”

“Good.” She rolled up her work, planning to escape.
“Can I get copies of those?” he asked.
“Why?” The gardens were her concern.
“I like a complete picture of everything happening on my projects.”
“So you have total control?” she asked. “You really do have a control hang-up, don’t you?”
“I anticipate problems.” A lethal smile broke across his face. “And that requires absolute control.”
“I’ll send you copies, but these are preliminary sketches.” Sometimes the land didn’t conform to her drawings. She pointed at him. “I have absolute control of the patios and gardens.”
“Sure.” He laughed. “Anything else in this room?”
She checked her list, avoiding his eyes. “All doors need card readers.”
“That’s the plan.”
“We can head upstairs.”

They moved to the main staircase. Bess stared at his butt. The work of art was right in front of her as they climbed. The two times she’d seen him naked, she hadn’t truly appreciated it. She regretted that almost as much as sleeping with him.
At the top of the stairs, she pointed to the first bedroom. “We’d like to open this bedroom to adjoin with the old music room.”

He flipped between the pages. “You’ve got a furnace run between these rooms.”

“Is it in right now?”

“If the plans are right, it’s already there.”

“Can you work around it?” She chewed on her thumb.

He tapped at her hand.

Her eyes flared open. “What?”

“You were gnawing on your thumb.” His words rasped out. His eyes locked on her mouth.

“Bad habit.” She tucked her hand into her back pocket.

He turned, but not before she caught the flicker of heat in his gaze.

“Is there a way to put a connecting door in?” she asked, trying to stay on task.

He assessed the plans. “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

She frowned. “We’ve got a couple more adjoining-room requests.”

Daniel determined only one was possible. Then they looked at the tub and shower placement changes Bess and her sisters wanted.

In the master bedroom, she asked, “Can you create a larger balcony here?”

He opened the door. They peered out at the rickety wood floor.

“When we tear off the old balcony, we’ll assess whether there’s enough support to expand.”

“Good.” She brought her thumb near her mouth.

He shook his head.

“You’re as bad as my sisters.” She frowned. “We want French doors and balconies on all the courtyard bedrooms.”

Daniel smiled again. “This project will keep our staff and subs busy. I’ll check with the architect and engineer.”

Would it cost more money? “Thanks.”

On the stairs, Daniel set his hand under her elbow. “I don’t trust the railing.”

She didn’t know what was more dangerous to her health, a loose railing or Daniel. If he kept touching her, she might burst into flames and burn the place down.

“So how’s the job search?” he asked as they headed down the next flight of stairs.

She shrugged. “Nothing yet.”

“Did you do something impulsive like quit?” he blurted out.

“I loved that job!” Why couldn’t he see that she’d changed?

He raised one eyebrow. “Then what happened?”

“I was laid off.” Her face grew warm. “Mid-August. Not the optimum time to be searching for a job in my field.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, kid.”

“Kid?” She wanted to poke him, but he held her elbow.

“If you need to delay your rent payment, let me know,” he said.

“I’m fine.” Now her face was on fire. She hated Daniel’s sympathy. “I need to work on a wedding consult.”

“I thought you didn’t have a job?”

“I have a supply agreement with Cade.”
“You’re kidding.”
“No.”
“He fired you.”
“Laid me off. And I worked for him for almost five years,” Bess said.
“He betrayed any loyalty you owed him.”
She headed to the door. “Don’t you lay off crew members?”
“Not if I can help it.”
“But you do,” she pressed.
“Yeah.”
“And do they feel betrayed?”
Daniel ran his fingers through his cap of golden hair. “That’s different.”
“I’m not burning any bridges with Cade.” She tipped her head at him. “Are we done?”
He nodded.
She stepped outside, finally able to take a breath without catching a whiff of Daniel’s aftershave.
Two days down of working with Daniel. Only five months more. It had to get easier.

* * *

“OVER HERE,” DANIEL CALLED.
Gray moved from the entrance of Kevin Barry’s pub. “How’s it going?”
“Good.” Daniel didn’t plan to tell Gray about his father’s health or his problem with working side by side with Bess.
For the walk-through, she’d worn her normal working uniform of hiking shorts and a tank top. His body didn’t know what was good for him. All he could think about was how good she looked naked. When she’d put her thumb to her mouth, he’d gotten hard. He couldn’t tell Gray about that.
He wished Gray would take an active role in Carleton House and keep Bess out of it. They’d worked well together on Gray’s condos here in Savannah.
A server swung by and they ordered beers.
“Here’s the condo build-out estimate.” Daniel handed Gray a folder. Forester Construction handled all the build-outs on the condos Gray owned in Savannah. Daniel walked him through the numbers.
“That was fast.” Gray tipped his beer at the estimate. “I’ll let the couple know, but this is in their price range. They’re hoping to be in by the end of October.”
Daniel made a note on his phone. He’d have to rework the crew schedules. “The only challenge will be getting the Brazilian cherry flooring they want. I’ll make some calls.”
“Let’s lock this down before I head back to Boston.”
“How’s your renovation progressing in Boston?” Daniel grinned. “As smooth as your Savannah rehab?”
“I wish you could work on that project.” Gray shuddered. “I trust you.”
It was nice to hear. While working together, he and Gray had become friends. “I’m a Georgia boy. Plus, we’ve got enough going on with Carleton House.” And whatever was happening with Pop.
Gray bounced his project issues off Daniel. It was great to talk with someone as an equal. Talking to Bess had been—difficult. She had a vision, but it didn’t allow for structural limitations.
When Gray stopped asking his opinion on his Boston problems, Daniel asked, “How do you want
Carleton House to work?”

Gray frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Bess doesn’t have your knowledge, but she’s spending your money. I’m hoping you’ll stay active in the project.”

Life would be simpler working with Gray. Unlike Bess, Gray would never pull some prank. And Daniel wouldn’t fantasize about kissing him. He rolled his shoulders.

“I’ll be too tied up in Boston.” Gray raised an eyebrow. “Are there problems?”

“Let me show you the changes Bess requested.” Daniel unrolled the blueprints and walked through Bess’s list. “I suggested they use single French doors in the library, but the doors will still be custom.”

“Good idea,” Gray said.

“And they want balconies on all the courtyard rooms.”

“That works.” Gray tipped back his beer. “Want another?”

“Sure.” Daniel had work to finish tonight, but he needed to know how to keep Gray in the loop. Gray flagged the server and they ordered beers and food.

“I like the idea of adding more balconies.” Gray pored over the exterior prints. “You’re sticking with the black wrought iron, right?”

“That’s what Bess wants. And Pop would have my head if we didn’t.”

“What’s with your dad?” Gray asked. “Everyone assumed he would run this project.”

“Something’s...off.” He didn’t want to tell his friend he was as shocked as everyone else. “Mom made him go to the doctor. I assume they’ll figure out what’s wrong and he’ll be back on the job soon.”

“Good.” Gray nodded. “So back to Carleton House. This will be the Fitzgeralds’ B and B. Bess is in charge. I’ll be in Boston on a pretty set schedule. Let me know whenever the changes total two percent.”

Two percent. Daniel did the math. “We might be there with the balconies. The wrought-iron bids will be high.”

“Let me know what the total cost will be. After these changes—go with the two percent.” Gray raised his eyebrows. “Are you worried about working with Bess?”

Not that he would tell Gray. “You know construction.”

“And she’s a landscape architect. There has to be crossover.”

“I don’t need help with the drainage and what bushes to plant where.”

Gray tipped his head and didn’t say anything. The server dropped off their food. While Daniel dug into his grilled shrimp, Gray stared at him as if he’d stepped in something.

“Yeah, yeah, Bess is good with flowers,” Daniel admitted.

“She’s smart, too. And hardworking. And the sisters know what works for a B and B. They all lived through the Fitzgerald House restoration.” Gray aimed a finger at him. “Don’t be dissing my future sister-in-law.”

Daniel swallowed. “I won’t.”

“Bess has authority to sign change orders for Carleton House.”

“Good to know.” Daniel wanted to scream that this was not a good idea. She was an accident waiting to happen.

But that wasn’t the real problem. Bess was basically his boss.
He needed to stop thinking about her naked.
“BOUQUETS ARE DONE.” Bess flexed her fingers before wheeling her cart back into the King’s Gardens’ coolers.

“I’ve got one more table arrangement.” Molly leaned close. “Are you uncomfortable working here?”

“Cade and I have a good agreement.” Bess was uncomfortable, but she’d survive. “Plus, he lets me use his delivery van.”

“He should. Done,” Molly said, stretching out her back. “Do you have time for lunch?”

“Sure.” Then she was heading over to Carleton House to pin Daniel down on when she could start in the gardens.

After cleaning up, they met at Lenny’s Diner and grabbed their usual booth.

Molly asked, “Any job prospects?”

Bess was tired of answering this question. She drew pictures in the sweat on her glass. “A nursery up in Beaumont called. They like my résumé but don’t have any openings.”

“That sucks.” Molly grimaced. “Plus, I don’t want you to move. I love working with you.” She sighed. “My hours are way down, and working with Cade’s son—not good. He needs seasoning.”

Bess laughed. “You make him sound like a slab of steak. He’s not that bad.”

Molly rolled her eyes. “He’s not you.”

“Thanks.” Bess patted her friend’s hand. “I don’t want to move, either. Plus, I’m responsible for Carleton House.”

“How’s that going?”

“We’re finalizing the architectural designs.” Bess wiggled. “I can’t wait to tear down the flagstone wall. You’ll work with me, right?”

“Absolutely.” Molly nodded. “What are you planning in the courtyard?”

Bess talked and sketched on her place mat until their salads arrived.

“I love your ideas.” Molly took a bite. “Let me know when you’re ready to work.”

“I’m toying right now. Once the wall is down, I’ll have a better sense of the space.”

“Any offers on your apartment?” Molly asked.

“No, thank goodness.”

Molly pointed with her fork. “If you need a place to stay, you can crash at my apartment.”

“You only have one bedroom.” Bess tried to keep the shock from her voice.

“We’d figure something out.”

“Thanks for the offer.” It would be as bad as living with Abby and Gray. “I hope my apartment takes forever to sell.”

After they finished eating, Bess headed to Fitzgerald House. Daniel’s silver truck was parked next to the Carleton carriage house. Good. She could pin him down on when she could get into the gardens.
The carriage-house doors hung open. A power saw filled the entrance. As she headed through the doorway, the changes amazed her.

The skeleton of a curving stairway rose from the center of the space. Pillars and walls defined the rooms. She explored, finding a bathroom and guest bedroom. She’d helped Abby and Gray as they’d worked on the layout, but it was different seeing it in real life.

Footsteps echoed on the floor above. Boots slapped on the stairs. Whoever it was moved fast. A nail gun’s rhythmic beat continued above her head.

Long legs came into view first. She knew those lean, muscled thighs and the hips that emerged. She’d held on to those hips as tight as the tool belt strapped there.

She gritted her teeth. Sure, he made her heart beat triple time. He also kissed like a dream and melted her insides, but he didn’t really see her. He thought she was still irresponsible.

His boots hit the main level. “Bess.”

“I saw your truck.” She crossed her arms, lining up her arguments. “I’m wondering when I can get the wall down. I want a date.”

He rubbed his neck. “You can start next week.”

“Oh.” She let her hands drop. “Okay. Good.”

He snickered. “You thought I’d put you off.”

“I...” Yes.

“You keep forgetting, we have the same goals.” He closed the distance between them. The smell of freshly cut wood drilled into her core.

She took a step back, hating her body’s reaction to him. “Anything new on the Carleton House changes we requested?”

“I’m waiting on one more answer.” He checked his phone. “The engineer promised to call today.”

“Well, good.” She backed toward the door, needing to escape his intoxicating scent. “Let me know what you hear.”

“Will do.” He frowned at her. “Are you working in the Fitzgerald House gardens this afternoon?”

“No. The ballroom.” She escaped out the door. “Text me.”

She jogged to the Fitzgerald carriage house, where she stored her decorating supplies. Might as well vent her sexual frustration on work. She grabbed a cart and dug out the box of pale green tulle and bows. Carefully, she added glittery white tree branches to the pile along with boxes of fairy lights.

This bride wanted her large double white arbor. She started to move the arbor, but the wood gave a groan. “Shoot.”

She called Nigel, a B and B employee. “Any chance you could help move an arbor?”

“Can you wait forty-five minutes? I’m picking up guests at the airport.”

“Oh. I’ll find someone else.” There were strong men working at the carriage house, but she didn’t want to ask Daniel.

She’d start with this load. The cart rattled as she pushed it across the flagstones. She went in through the service door, wedged the cart into the elevator and headed to the ballroom on the top floor. The last wedding held here had been Mama’s.

Daniel had looked hot that night. Heat rushed over her face. Who was she kidding? Daniel always looked hot. Ten years ago he’d broken her teenage heart. This latest rejection had only bruised her ego.
Bess needed to stop thinking about him. He didn’t respect who she’d become. She needed to be stronger and smarter than this...this lust bubbling inside her.

Back in the carriage house, she wiggled and shifted, finally loading the arbor on the cart. Hanging on to a leg, she pulled the cart around the curving garden paths. The wood groaned whenever the cart wobbled.

She bit her lip. Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.

“What are you doing?” Daniel’s deep voice boomed across the courtyard.

Her shoulders stiffened. “Moving an arbor.”

His boots were heavy and quick on the garden path stones. “Where to?”

“The ballroom.”

Daniel laughed. He actually laughed.

She jerked the cart back into motion, hoping to run over his toes.

“Wait.” He grabbed the cart’s back handle. “You’ll never fit through the door.”

“I know.” She’d planned to get Abby or maybe housekeeping staff to help.

Grabbing the center of the arbor, he stood it up, setting it across the path.

She winced. “Watch out for my roses.”

He raised an eyebrow. Pushing straight up with his arms, he carried the arbor, barely keeping it from scraping the ground. His muscles bulged. “Get the doors.”

She tore her gaze away his fascinating arms. “We have to take it up the outside stairs.”

“I should have guessed,” he mumbled.

She slipped under the arbor, brushing against Daniel’s body. Inhaling, she caught his addictive scent. “This way.”

“Did my dad make this?” he grunted.

“He sure did.” She patted the wood. “Said it would last.”

“I can tell. It weighs a ton.” Daniel sidestepped up the large stone steps. “I need your help.”

She slithered by his hard, fantastic-smelling body one more time. Was he doing this to taunt her?

He tipped the frame on its side.

She steadied the leg and lifted. Working together, they inched up the stone steps.

“The third floor?” Daniel set the arbor on its side on the second-floor landing. “Who usually helps you move this?”

“I’ve only used it in the courtyard.”

He took a deep breath. “Ready?”

“Ready.” She hefted the heavy leg. She had tears in her eyes by the time they reached the landing. “Break,” he called, laying the arbor down.

She shook out her aching arms.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Never better,” she gasped.

He grabbed the wood. “Okay, last flight.”

She got under the leg and let the edge rest on her shoulder. The wood ate into her skin, but it took more weight off Daniel.

“Finally,” he called from the landing. He stood the arbor up, raised his arms and rested them against the frame. “Where do you want it?”

Lifting the arbor, he followed her into the ballroom.
“Right here.” The bride wanted the feel of an outdoor wedding without worrying about her makeup melting in the heat.

He set it down.

She pushed and pulled until it was in the perfect spot. “Thanks for your help.”

“No problem.” He touched her shoulder and his finger came away bloody. “What happened?”

“Ow.” The wood had sliced a line in her skin. “The arbor.”

“This needs to be cleaned,” he said.

His fingers moving on her skin had her stomach doing cartwheels.

He pulled her to the women’s bathroom. Grabbing paper towels, he soaked them in hot water and hand soap. “This might sting.” His tone was serious.

She jerked. “I can clean this myself.”

“I’ve got it.” He brushed down her tank top and bra strap.

“Hey!”

“Oh, stop.” He gently cleaned the cut. His hair brushed her cheek as he inspected the wound. “I’ve seen you naked.”

“It won’t happen again,” she mumbled.

“Hmm.”

Darn it. It was different seeing Daniel worried about something other than his work.

“Do you have Band-Aids?” His fingers stroked her shoulder.

She shivered from his touch. “I don’t think so.”

Carefully folding a paper towel, he used her bra strap to anchor the makeshift bandage. “That ought to hold.”

“Thanks.” Her voice shook.

“How does it feel?” He cupped her shoulders.

Feel? She only felt his hands. Her stupid heart pounded and it wasn’t from hauling the arbor up the stairs. “I’m fine.”

His gaze darkened.

She held her breath. She wanted him to step closer. He might kiss and reject, but the need to feel his lips on hers was almost painful.

“Bess.” He stared at her mouth.

The door banged open.

Daniel shook his head, as if he’d awakened from a dream.

Cheryl, a B and B employee, pushed a cleaning cart into the bathroom. “Oh!”

“Hi, Cheryl.” Bess wadded up the bloody paper towels and tossed them in the garbage with shaking hands. “Daniel was cleaning my cut.”

“I’ll come back.” Cheryl pointed out the door.

“No.” Bess’s face had to be bright red. She risked looking at Daniel.

He stared at the floor. “We’re done.”

She and Daniel filed out of the bathroom together.

“Thank you,” she murmured as they walked into the ballroom.

“No problem.” He almost ran to the French doors, but stopped, shaking his head. “The engineer called. We’ve figured out how to add the balconies.”

“Fantastic.”
He stared anywhere but at her face. “So I’ll...I’ll let you know when the architect gets the blueprints back.”

“Great.”

“’Bye.” He hurried away, his boots clattering down the stairs. He sure was hell-bent on getting away from her.

* * *

Daniel pounded the steering wheel. He’d stroked Bess’s soft skin. Her earthy, flowery scent had wrapped around him, almost luring him to kiss her.

He was smarter than this. She wasn’t good for him. Hell, he’d planned to check on the work over at the Landing on Skidaway Island, but he’d forgotten because of Bess. This was what happened when he was around her. He forgot his priorities.

At least he hadn’t forgotten Mom’s invite to dinner. They could eat and have a pleasant evening. Maybe Pop had good news from his doctor.

Parking in front of his parents’ house, he released a deep breath. If Pop was better, everything could go back to normal. His dad could manage Carleton House—and Bess.

Daniel wouldn’t have to worry about not kissing her anymore.

As he locked his truck, Nathan’s truck pulled in behind him. Shoot. More aggravation.

“Hey, little bro.” Nathan bounded up the steps ahead of him.

Daniel’s shoulders tensed, and his fingers curled into fists. “What are you doing here?”

Nathan opened the door. “Mom wanted me here for dinner.”

Daniel paused in the hallway. Why make Nathan drive from Atlanta?

“Dinner’s ready,” their mother called from the kitchen.

Pop dozed in his recliner.

Nathan grabbed a beer from the fridge. He wiggled the bottle at Daniel. “Want one?”

“No.”


The recliner snapped upright with a thud. Pop came to the table. Was he dragging more? Were the purple bruises under his eyes darker than last week?

Daniel took his place at the scarred wooden table. Mom had pulled out the brightly colored place mats she’d bought on a Bahamas cruise. Her “happy” place mats, she called them. Cold fingers gripped the base of his spine.

“Sit,” she called in a too-cheerful voice. “Abby gave me her chicken piccata and mushrooms recipe.”

Setting out the platter, she waved. “Dig in.”

Mom’s tone reminded him of when Nathan had cut classes or been suspended in high school—she always lighten up the tense dinner conversation with chatter.

The food circled the table. Daniel’s stomach twisted. When he only took a small piece of chicken, Mom frowned.

“Is Abby feeding you, too?” she asked.

“Pop’s not around.” He forced a grin on his face. “Someone has to eat what she bakes.”

“Humph.” But she stared at Pop with sorrow-filled eyes.
“Thanks for coming.” Pop patted Nathan’s shoulder. “I know it’s a drive.”
“I didn’t come for you, old man.” Nathan held up his fork. “I came for Mom’s cooking.”
Pop laughed. Mom bit her lip. And as usual, Nathan was oblivious.
Daniel nudged his brother’s boot under the table.
Nathan glared at him.
He couldn’t pretend nothing was wrong. “What did the doctor say?” Daniel’s voice was as harsh as a ripsaw.
“We’ll eat first.” Mom’s eyes narrowed.
“I can’t.” Daniel’s silverware clattered on the table. “I can’t make small talk and joke around if something’s wrong.”
“You can’t do that when nothing’s wrong, either,” Nathan muttered.
“Enough. It’s not doom and gloom.” Pop set his fork down. “Doc Kramer has taken a boatload of blood and other...items I will not mention at your mother’s dinner table. I’m definitely anemic.”
“Anemia’s curable, right?” Daniel asked.
Pop shrugged. “Apparently mine’s severe. They’re still trying to figure me out.”
“I told the nursing staff they’d never figure him out.” Mom’s smile didn’t reach her eyes.
“So why are we here?” Daniel waved his hand around the table, but what he meant was, Why is Nathan home? His twin had screwed up all his life. He’d even messed up working for the family business. It was why he worked in Atlanta now. Nathan had lost his place at the proverbial table.
“I...I can’t get everything done.” Pop ran his hand through his hair. “I need help.”
Daniel’s stomach churned. “I’ll do whatever you need.”
“We know. You always do.” Mom patted his hand. “But we have too much going on to put it all on your shoulders.”
Daniel stared at Pop, but his dad was staring at Nathan.
No.
“Can you come home?” Pop grasped Nathan’s hand. “I know there were...problems before. But I need you here.”
Pop shook his head. “No.”
“Nathan slept with a client’s wife. He showed up to work drunk.” Daniel pushed his chair away from the table, the scrape as sharp as nails on a chalkboard. “We don’t need Nathan.”
“I’ve changed.” Nathan stood, too. “I won’t make the same mistakes.”
“What new ones will you make?” Daniel snapped back.
They both planted their fists on the table, leaning over the cooling food.
“Sit!” Their mother ordered.
Daniel glared at Nathan, but sat for his mother.
“Your father and I have discussed this.” She pointed at Nathan. “You’ve proven yourself in Atlanta. Can you come home and manage some of the projects? Be a leader and an example to the crews?”
“Absolutely.” Nathan’s glare was like knives ripping through Daniel’s chest. “My boss relies on me, even though I’m not the chosen one.”
“At least I never stepped out of line,” Daniel shot back. “The cops never came to the door because of me.”
“Why would they? You were perfect.” Nathan turned to their father. “I’ll give notice in Atlanta and
“Come home as soon as I can. You can count on me.”

“Count on you for what? To drive our business into the ground?” Daniel’s voice was shrill.

“I’m not twenty anymore.” The china and silverware clanked as Nathan pushed his plate away.

“Can’t you give me a chance?”

“You had a million chances and never changed.”

“Stop,” Pop barked.

The fridge compressor kicked on.

Pop sank back into his chair, exhaustion and disappointment creasing his face.

“I’m sorry.” Daniel wasn’t sorry for expressing his displeasure, but he was sorry he’d worn out his father.

Pop waved a hand.

“It’s your company.” Daniel pushed away from the table. “You do what you want.”

Mom followed him to the door. “Wait.”

He shook his head. “I’ve got to place a window order.”

He’d thought working with Bess was bad? Now he had to deal with his brother.
BESS FINISHED THE Mexican egg strata Abby had served for breakfast. “That was great.”
“I was feeling spicy this morning.” Abby sambaed across the room.
“Isn’t Gray leaving today?” Shouldn’t her sister be sad?
Abby pulled a tray of muffins from the oven, testing them with her finger. “Yeah, but we had a
lovely goodbye last night.”
Bess envied their closeness. Her bad luck with men squashed any hope of ever finding that.
She tucked her dirty dishes in the dishwasher. “Hi ho, hi ho. I’m taking down the wall today,” she
sang.
“Have fun.” Abby pulled another batch of muffins from the oven.

Because it was in the sixties, Bess shrugged a shirt on over her tank top. Early September would
do that for Savannah. But the temperature was heading to the nineties, so she’d worn shorts.
“Let’s have lunch.” Abby handed her a commuter cup of coffee.
Bess bumped Abby’s shoulder. “Will do.”

Grabbing her clippers, she cut back the overgrown leatherleaf viburnum hedge. It pained her to
waste time trimming. She wanted to get at the wall, but a good garden required preparation.
Birds twittered as she cleared out the jungle. A truck she didn’t recognize parked next to the
 carriage house.
“You’re up early,” a deep voice called out.
She turned. “Nathan?”
His voice had more gravel in it than Daniel’s, as though he’d stayed up late smoking and drinking.
But Nathan looked like his twin—both had the same deep planes on their faces and the same shock of
golden-blond hair.
She pushed Daniel out of her thoughts.
Setting her clippers down, she gave Nathan a hug. “What are you doing here?”
“Pop asked for help.” He tapped the brim of his Forester Construction cap. “I’m back for a while.”
First Samuel wasn’t working on Carleton House and now he’d asked Nathan to come back? She
touched his arm. “Is he all right?”
“Doc Kramer’s trying to figure out what’s wrong.” Nathan pushed back his cap and ran his hand
through his hair.
She’d watched Daniel do the same thing twice an hour since they’d started working together on
Carleton House. When Daniel did it, she wanted to sweep the hair off his forehead. With Nathan—
nothing. No zings. Wasn’t that odd?
“How long are you staying?” she asked.
He settled his cap on his head. “As long as Pop needs me.”
“Wonderful.” She loved working with her family.
“Yeah. Maybe.”
Trucks rumbled into the parking area. Daniel pulled in next to the carriage house.

“Except Daniel’s...” Nathan’s face went blank. “Never mind.”

She understood. “Daniel hates having his plans disturbed.”

Nathan stared at his brother. “Right.”

Daniel slammed his cab door, hard. He unlocked the side case on his truck and pulled out his belt, strapping it on. He stalked over to where she and Nathan stood. “Taking down the wall?”

She nodded.

“Jackhammer might do it.” Daniel’s expression was as hard as granite.

“No!” She flung her arms out, protecting the wall. “These are perfectly good flagstones. Once the caps are off, I’ll reuse the material.”

Daniel shook his head. “It’ll take more time.”

“Not your concern. I’m salvaging the hedge, too.”

Daniel stared at the overgrown bushes. “Do you need help?”

“No yet.” Knowing how precious his task lists were to him, she added, “I’m working alone right now. I’ll let you know if I need help.”

“Okay. Let’s work, Nathan.” Daniel headed off.

Nathan grimaced. “Good morning to you,” he yelled after him.

Daniel waved dismissively.

“Jerk,” Nathan muttered.

Bess put a hand on his arm. “Let him adjust.”

“He thinks I can’t change.” Nathan’s brown eyes, so like Daniel’s, narrowed.

She shook her head. “I swear he thinks I’m seventeen still.” And foolish.

“He’s stuck in the past.” Nathan grimaced. “I want us to get along, but I don’t know why I try.”

What was more important than family? “You try for your parents.”

“Yeah.” Nathan sauntered away. “Got to get to it.”

While she cleared and trimmed the hedge, she worried about Daniel and Nathan. They’d never gotten along. Daniel was serious; Nathan had been a troublemaker. In high school, Nathan and his friends had sponsored keggers on Tybee. According to rumors, Nathan had been able to get any drugs a student wanted.

Was that why Daniel hated chaos?

She should stop worrying about the Forester twins. She hauled the last of the branches and twigs to her compost pile. Stopping in the kitchen, she refilled her coffee mug. It was time for some fun.

The ladder rattled as she set it against the wall. Her boots thunked on the metal steps. The seven-foot wall of flagstone had four-foot cement caps. Under the cap, the flagstones had been stacked without mortar—she hoped.

She set the chisel into a hole in the cement and swung the mallet. Metallic clangs rang out as she chipped away mortar.

The concrete crumbled. Slowly. When she completed one side, she grabbed another ladder and set it on the Fitzgerald House side of the wall, careful not to damage any of her established bushes and plants.

She shucked off her shirt. Sweat stuck her tank top to her back. She switched from coffee to water and poured some down her neck. This would take time.

“Hey, Bess.” Dolley aimed her camera, the shutter clicking away.
“Stop.” Bess held her gloved hand in front of her face. “I’m a mess.”
“You look gorgeous.” Dolley took a few more pictures. “I’m blogging about the Carleton House restoration. I hope it will attract more guests.”
“Great idea.” Bess swiped her arm over her sweaty forehead. “But I don’t need to be in your pictures.”
“Sure you do.” Dolley clicked a few more. “I’m heading to the carriage house. Then I’ll take Carleton House ‘before’ pics.” Her sister raised her eyebrows. “Let’s mooch dinner off Abby tonight. You in?”
“Sounds good.” Bess rolled her aching shoulders. Too bad Daniel and Nathan didn’t enjoy being with each other. She loved hanging out with her sisters. They were her best friends.
“I’ll let her know.” Dolley headed to the gate.
After an hour of chipping between the cap and the stones, she’d cleared all the mortar she could. Dropping her tools, she tried to shift the cap. Her muscles strained; her teeth ground together. How much does this weigh?
Climbing down, she brushed at the hair sticking to her face. She didn’t want to ask for help, but she headed to the carriage house.
Nathan was attaching boards to the curving staircase. Upstairs, hammers beat in unison. She waited until he looked up.
A quick grin covered his face.
“Could I get you to help me lift?” she asked.
“Sure.” Nathan flexed his biceps. “I’m always available to help a pretty woman.”
“Come on.” Bess rolled her eyes.
With their fingers under the edge, she and Nathan tried to move the cap. It shifted a little.
“There’s more mortar here,” he said.
She handed him the mallet and chisel, and he chipped at a corner.
“Let’s try again,” he said.
Bess gripped the edge. “Go.”
It moved.
Her fingers cramped. She tried to get a better grip, but there wasn’t enough room.
Nathan pulled his hands up. “Sorry, kid, you’re not strong enough.”
She pounded on the cap. “I want this to work.”
Nathan clattered down the ladder. “I’ll be back.”
He disappeared into the carriage house. The hammering stopped and boots stomped down the stairs.
“Hey, Bess.” Quint grinned. “Heard you needed a real man.”
“Let’s get this done.” Daniel headed up the ladder and assessed the situation. “Grab another ladder, Quint. You, too, Nathan. And bring wood blocks.”
Bess let Daniel take the lead, and so did Nathan and Quint. Interesting.
“Everyone, grab blocks and have them ready.” Daniel pointed.
She slipped on her gloves, and they all lifted. The side she held came up.
“Set a couple blocks in there,” Daniel grunted. He and Nathan held most of the weight.
Bess and Quint jammed blocks in on their side.
“What’s hanging this up?” Nathan peered underneath. “There.”
They chiseled and added blocks until the cap came clear.

“Should we come over on that side?” Bess asked.

Nathan and Daniel looked at each other.

“Naw.” The brothers nodded, grabbed the slab and lifted.

Bess winced as their muscles bulged.


“On the ground.” She hurried to the gate. Coming around the wall, she yelled, “Don’t smash the bushes.”


The concrete slid sideways into the hedge.

She puffed out a sigh.

“Sorry.” Nathan scrambled down the ladder and flipped the cap so it wasn’t crushing the hedge.

“Bess asked us not to ruin the plants,” Daniel complained.

“It’s fine.” She didn’t want them fighting. “Don’t worry.”

“Sorry.” Nathan put an arm around her shoulders.

Daniel glared at them.

She shrugged off Nathan’s arm, but he caught her hand.

Daniel grabbed her other hand.

“Hey.” She pulled free. She wasn’t a wishbone the two brothers could pull apart.

“So, after that disaster, how do you want to get this wall down?” Daniel asked.

Bess climbed the ladder and checked the wall. “This is great. They stacked the flagstones.” She leaned down. “I’ll chip out the mortar. Can your team help lift off the caps?”

Daniel nodded. “I’ll get you a longer chisel.”

As the men hauled the concrete to the Dumpster, she heard Daniel and Nathan sniping at each other.

She worked on her wall. Family was important. Maybe she could help the brothers. It would be her way of helping Samuel and Debbie.

* * *

**Daniel shot a** final nail into the two-by-fours framing the master bedroom en suite. The carriage house’s second-floor rooms were taking shape. He walked through the double walk-in closets and the sitting area to get to the bedroom. Gray and Abby would have plenty of space. Down the hall, two additional bedrooms had a Jack and Jill bathroom between them.

With the framing complete, the electrical and plumbing subs could start tomorrow.

“Looks good,” Nathan said from the hallway.

“And we’re on schedule.” Daniel checked his phone. He needed to stop at Gray’s River Street condos and see how the flooring turned out.

“I’m out of here.” Nathan unstrapped his tool belt and headed down the stairs.

Daniel frowned. “Aren’t you checking on Oglethorpe?”

“It’s quitting time.” Nathan grabbed his water bottle. “I’ll stop by tomorrow.”

“Today.” Daniel grabbed Nathan’s shoulder.

Nathan jerked away from him. “I make my own schedule.”

“Just because you put in eight hours doesn’t mean our work is done.” Daniel jabbed a finger in his
brother’s face. “Pop and the crews are depending on you.”

“Not everyone organizes every minute of the day.” Nathan pointed to Daniel’s phone. “God, you’d think the world would collapse if you didn’t have it scheduled out.”

Daniel invaded Nathan’s space. “We’re responsible for making sure our crews don’t make mistakes and have the supplies they need. You need to—”

Boots pounded up the stairs. Daniel bit his tongue, unwilling to let the crew see him and Nathan argue.

“Oh, good,” Bess said.

His shoulders tightened.

“Hey. Can I buy you a beer for dropping concrete on your hedge?” Nathan moved to the doorway.

Daniel’s stomach twisted. The idea of Bess and Nathan drinking together felt—wrong.

“No, thanks. I’m having dinner with my sisters.” Bess looked between the two of them. “I’ve removed all the mortar. Do you think your crew could help get the caps off tomorrow?”

Daniel checked his lists, scrolling through his projects. “I’ll get— the caps were heavy “—Quint, Sullivan and Eddie to stop here in the morning.”

“Might be easier to have four people lifting them,” Nathan suggested. “I can swing by.”

“You’re needed at Oglethorpe,” he snapped. “I’ll be here around seven.”

He made notes and shifted tasks around. Nathan and Bess needed to stay separated. What kind of destruction could occur when two impulsive people joined forces?

* * *

Bess tossed her dirty clothes and wet towel toward her hamper and missed. She was too tired to pick them up. Her arms ached from chiseling.

She called Abby. “I’m passing on dinner.”

“Is everything all right?” Concern laced Abby’s voice.

“After chipping all day, I’m too sore to walk over. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Hanging up, she grabbed her mister, but stopped in the center of her living room. She couldn’t mist her orchids. They were all at Fitzgerald House.

The housekeeping crew knew to check her schedule. If she didn’t get to the flowers, they would take care of her plants. But she wanted to take care of her orchids. She bit her lip. Without her plants, the apartment was empty— impersonal.

Residents of two other apartments had moved last week. No one had moved in yet, but one unit had sold. Dastardly Daniel must be pleased.

She watered her Tradescantia pallida, wandering Jew, the last plant in the apartment.

Peering into the fridge, she grabbed the jambalaya Abby had sent home last week. While it heated, she opened a beer.

Setting everything on a tray along with her laptop, she headed to the balcony. As she ate, she scrolled through her inbox. Her heart raced. The mortgage company had responded to her updated income.

Clicking the email open, she scanned the contents. “Oh, come on.”

They’d bumped the loan amount, but it wasn’t enough to make an offer. They weren’t giving her full credit for the income she earned from the B and B. She needed a full-time job.
As she ate, she sent out a couple of résumés to reputable nurseries, getting farther and farther away from Savannah. Something had to pop, and soon.

The doorbell buzzed.

Resigned, she peered through the peephole. Daniel?

She opened the door. “Hey.”

“Hi.” He was dressed for a sail on his boat. His tan T-shirt matched his khaki shorts and he wore boat shoes without socks. She wore wrinkled shorts she’d owned since college.

“Got a minute?” he asked.

“I’m eating.”

“Keep eating.”

She sighed. “Want a beer?” she asked, unable to tamp down the hospitality Mamma had drummed into her.

“Sure.”

She detoured to the kitchen and grabbed the last beer before heading to the balcony. She hated the way Daniel upset her equilibrium.

He leaned against the railing, looking like an ad for a clothing company.

She handed him the beer.

“Thanks.”

“What’s up?” She grabbed her bowl.

“The real estate agent called today. She’s showing your apartment tomorrow.”

Did bad news always come in bunches?

“Bess?”

“I heard. What time?”

“Around ten.” He twirled the bottle in his hand. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” In her head, she knew losing her apartment wasn’t Daniel’s fault. But her heart couldn’t keep taking the hits that came with every interaction with him. Disappointment followed by rejection followed by more disappointment.

“So—” Daniel cleared his throat. “Are you and Nathan having that drink together?”

Why would Daniel care? “What?”

“Are you going to date my brother?”

“What?” she repeated.

“I...it would be—” He stopped.

She filled in the blanks. “Fine with you?”

“No!” He blew out a breath that would have blown back her hair if he’d been closer. “Awkward. Damn it.”

She didn’t want to laugh, but a giggle bubbled up.

He swore.

Her laughter died. “Why do you care?”

Daniel took a gulp of beer. “Nathan’s a troublemaker. The two of you together...”

She rolled her eyes. “Neither Nathan nor I are the same people we were ten years ago. You’re the one stuck in the past.”

He closed the distance and loomed over her. “Do you plan to go out with him?”

This was too weird. “It’s not your business.”
“But—”
“It’s none of your business,” she repeated.
He pulled her from the chair. His hands cupped her shoulders. “Please don’t.”
“Are you jealous?” His concern didn’t make sense. She made him crazy.
“No... I... Promise me.” The gold in his eyes flashed.
She pried his fingers off her arms. “You don’t have a say in who I date.”
“Bess, listen—”
She didn’t let him finish. “Thank you for letting me know about the real estate agent. I need to clean the apartment. Right now. Leave.”

***

The next morning, Daniel pulled in next to Carleton House and threw his truck’s transmission into Park. He wasn’t needed here, but he couldn’t stay away.

Maybe he shouldn’t have said anything to Bess about Nathan. Knowing her, she’d date Nathan just to throw it in his face. But he and Bess had slept together.

His hands formed fists. He was stewing for a fight. He’d break a board over his brother’s head before he’d let Nathan sleep with Bess. That wasn’t being possessive, it was being practical. Nathan was trouble. With Bess’s impulsiveness, they were a disaster waiting to happen.

In the courtyard, three crew members and Bess worked on the wall. She wore a skimpy tank top and shorts. He wanted to cover her up so the guys didn’t ogle her.

He hurried up her ladder, reached around her and grabbed the cap. “Let me.”
She glared over her shoulder. “I’ve got it.”
“I’ll help.”

Their bodies were plastered together. Bess’s earthy flowery fragrance curled up and tugged him even closer.

The five of them lifted together.
“We’ve got it,” Quint said.

Daniel, Eddie and Bess released their side of the block. Quint and Sullivan eased the mass down on the Carleton House side of the wall.

She gave Daniel a shove. “We’re fine without you.”

Eddie snickered.

Daniel glared until Eddie hurried down his ladder and moved to the next section of the wall.

Bess nailed him with her elbow. “Go do whatever’s next on your list.”

Her eyes flashed green lightning at him. His crew looked at him as if he’d lost his mind.

He headed down the ladder. “I can finish with the guys if you need to do anything else.”
“Not necessary.” Her tone was icy.

“Fine.” He could check on Nathan over at the Oglethorpe restoration. But he also wanted to clear the air with Bess.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked.

“I’m working here.” The words snapped at him like a hungry gator.

“Two minutes.”

“We’ve got this, Bess,” Quint said.
Her boots rattled the ladder in an angry staccato beat. “What?”

He pulled her farther into the Fitzgerald courtyard, not wanting his crew to eavesdrop. “It’s just...”

She tapped her foot.

He couldn’t get the words out.

“What?” she asked.

“I can’t stand the idea of you and Nathan—dating.” *Sleeping together.* Her eyes became huge circles. “You’re still obsessing about this?”

“Don’t tell me it’s none of my business.” He reached for her.

She knocked his hand away. “What is wrong with you and Nathan?”

“I’m not dredging up our crap.”

“He wants to reconcile with you.”

“You’re crazy.”

“No. He told me,” she said.

When? The image of Nathan kissing her flashed in front of him, and he saw red. His hands fist at his hips. “Stay away from my brother.”

Bess shook her head, her braid slapping his arm. “You don’t have a say in who I see. Talk to your brother. Reconcile. If not for you, for your parents.”

“We’re talking about you and my brother.” He crossed his arms. “Not my brother and me.”

“No, we’re not. We agreed to keep everything businesslike. Stay out of my personal life.” She stomped away.

He froze. First Eddie laughed at him and now Bess was walking away. What else could he foul up today?

Daniel headed over to Oglethorpe. Might as well irritate Nathan and complete the trifecta.

Gabe’s and Marcus’s cars were there, but not his brother’s truck. Inside, instead of hammers and saws, he heard quiet conversation. Gabe and Marcus sat on the second-floor landing, drinking coffee.

Daniel crossed his arms. “What’s going on?”

Gabe shrugged. “We’re waiting on spindles.”

“And?” Daniel waited. Pop had finished the Oglethorpe staircase work and the replacement bookcase cabinets for the library yesterday.

“Nathan forgot them. He headed back to the shop.”

“You haven’t got anything else to do?”

“We installed the new cabinets.” Marcus stood and waved him forward. “They’re stunning. Come see.”

The new owners were restoring the second floor. In the library, they’d stripped the original shelving and replaced the broken doors where someone had added a media center.

Daniel smoothed his hand over the wood. “Nice.”

“The owners picked out a light stain for the shelving, but they’re keeping the dark flooring.”

Marcus angled a piece of maple against the floor. “You’ll want to add this room to the website photos when we’re done.”

“Good idea.” Daniel stewed. “How long ago did Nathan leave?”

Marcus checked his watch. “About an hour.”

An hour? These were expensive carpenters sitting around. “I’ll check on him.”

“Thanks.”
Daniel rubbed his finger on the sanded woodwork. “This could use another wipe down.”
“Will do.”
Daniel headed to his truck, dialing his brother.
“Hey,” Nathan said.
“Where the hell are you?”
“I’m the hell in Starbucks,” Nathan snarled. “What bug crawled up your ass?”
“We’ve got finish carpenters getting paid to drink coffee.”
“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”
“I don’t know how you do things in Atlanta, but we can’t afford to pay people not to work.”
“Get off my case.” Nathan hung up on him.
Daniel stared at his phone.
He checked a couple more projects, but by midafternoon Carleton House drew him back like a magnet.
In the garden, all the concrete caps were gone and most of the wall was down. The combined courtyard was huge.
Bess was sorting flagstones. He touched her shoulder, worried she’d take his head off. “Your wall is down.”
She brushed a hand on a mustard-colored piece of rock. “Almost.”
He shivered, remembering her running her fingers across his chest. He wanted to ask about his brother, but he stuck to business. “What about the columns?”
She moved to the column nearest the carriage house. “I may build a small wall, make it look like it crumbled and the garden grew around it.” She shaped the air with her hands. “Purples, maybe lavender and some yellows. I can see clematis or woodbine climbing the wall. Spring bulbs. Daffodils would be nice. Anchor everything with a small palm.”
He could see it, bright splashes of color against the stone. “I like your vision.”
She tossed her braid over her shoulder, another flash of brilliance against the earthy colors. “I might add a water feature on the opposite side. And I want to try my hand at making stone pictures.”
“Like a painting?”
She shook off her gloves and pulled out her phone. “No, like this.”
The picture showed a rock wall with stones forming the shape of a flower. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”
“Good.” She opened a picture of a face sculpted out of rock. “This would be fun, too. Create a garden god.”
He tapped the screen to zoom in to the picture. “Interesting.”
What if his mom’s artist friend could do a sculpture of the Fitzgeralds?
She blinked, her green eyes full of possibilities. “I’m not sure what I’ll do, but it will have to wait. I want to see what everything looks like before I decide.”
It wasn’t the way he worked; he preferred planning things out. But Bess wanting to wait gave him time to noodle on an idea. An idea that had just brightened his day.
“Let me know if you need the crew’s help.” He tugged out his phone and made a note.
He headed to his next project. But he’d be back.
CHAPTER SEVEN

I cry at random things, like a flower, or someone giving me a present, or my sister giving me a nice hug.

Naomie Harris

“GOT A MINUTE?”

Bess nodded at Gray but kept spritzing her orchids. They were doing well in the Fitzgerald House sunroom, but she missed living with her plants. “What’s up?”

Her sister’s fiancé closed the door and moved into the room. “I have to head to Boston for a week.”

“Over Abby’s birthday?” she asked.

He grimaced. “I can’t figure out a way to get back in time.”

“Does Abby know?”

“Yeah. She’s fine with it. Too understanding.” He brushed back his curly black hair. “I wanted to make her birthday special.”

“Dolley and I will help her celebrate.”

“I know.” His blue eyes sparkled. “You three would go to battle for each other.”

She waved the spray bottle around like a sword. “All for one, and one for all.”

He laughed. “I’d planned to take her to dinner. Can I set everything up for the three of you?”

“Absolutely.” She touched his arm. “We could cook her a dinner.”

“I made the reservation. I’ll change it to three. I’m picking up the tab.”

“You don’t have—”

“Nope,” he interrupted. “I’m missing Abby’s birthday dinner.”

She let out a sigh. “Where are we going?”

“The Olde Pink House. She hasn’t been there in a while.”

“Okay. If I must.” Bess grinned. “Don’t tell Abby, but rumor has it their fried green tomatoes might be better than hers.”

“Not possible.” Gray always supported Abby.

“I’ll let Dolley know.”

“Thanks. I owe you.”

Not a bad thing to have Grayson Smythe owing her. He owned Savannah condos. Her eyebrows popped up. “With your condos for sale, what are you doing with the front of the building?”

He tilted his head. “We put awnings over the first-floor windows.”

“This is Savannah.” She scoffed. “I’m talking flowers.”

“Flowers?”

“Wrought-iron planters off all the balconies.” She closed her eyes. “Deep green trailing vines against the red brick, bright colors. Flowers that won’t require much maintenance.”

Gray raised a dark eyebrow. “But only a few units are occupied.”

She shrugged. “Hire me to plan, plant and maintain.”

Gray tapped her nose. “Give me a bid.”
“I will.” She wanted to do a happy dance. “I’ll need a key to take measurements.”
“Can you get over there today?”
She’d make the time. “I can head over in fifteen minutes.”
“Daniel’s there. I’ll let him know you’re coming.”
“Thanks.” Her face went hot. She turned back to her plants with a jerk. Fate wasn’t letting her
avoid the man.

***

Daniel held the drywall in place, keeping it steady as Nathan shot the screws. Today they were
actually working together. If they kept their mouths shut, maybe they could set a new record for not
arguing.

Before he grabbed another panel, he checked his task list. If they kept up this pace, they’d have the
rock in earlier than estimated.

His phone buzzed. Gray texted: Bess is on her way over.

Why? He glanced at Nathan. Better not be because of his brother.
“You sleeping?” His brother shouted. “Need more drywall here.”
“Yeah, yeah.” Daniel grabbed the next sheet. “Just checking timelines.”
“You and your schedules,” Nathan complained.

The squeal of the screw gun echoed through the half-finished space.
“Make sure you’re hitting the studs.” Daniel shifted his hands so Nathan didn’t screw them to the
wall. “And my planning keeps us from paying idle employees.”

Nathan glared. “I was moving slow yesterday.”
Daniel lined up the next piece of plasterboard. “Limit your drinking to two beers.”
Nathan waved the screw gun at him.
Daniel ducked. “Cut it out.”
“You had more than two drinks at Mamie’s wedding.”
Daniel’s chest tightened. Look what kind of trouble drinking had gotten him into that night. “The
next day was Sunday.”

Nathan swore. For a few minutes, the screw gun was the only sound.
“I’m sorry I’m defective, baby brother.” Nathan shoved the gun into Daniel’s belly. “I’ll hold for a
while.”
“I’ve already scored the pieces we need.”
“Thank you, oh perfect one.” Nathan shot him the finger.
Daniel slammed the gun down. Crossing the floor, he stepped in front of his brother. “Knock it off.”
Nathan straightened. “What?”
“Knock off calling me ‘perfect’ and ‘baby.’” He drilled a finger into Nathan’s chest. “Grow up.”
“Stop acting all high and mighty.” Nathan knocked Daniel’s hand away.
“Guys,” Bess called. “Guys!”
Daniel held up his hands and took a step back. Nathan did the same.
Her coppery eyebrows scrunched together. “What’s going on?”
“Nothing.” Nathan shuffled to the edge of the room and grabbed his water, glaring at Daniel.
“Nothing,” Daniel echoed, moving to the opposite corner.
Her gaze bounced between them. “Did Gray call?” she asked.
Daniel nodded. “What do you need?”
His tone was rude, but his emotions were back in high school. Back when Nathan picked fights with him all the time. And his parents relied on him to stay in control, because Nathan was only capable of chaos.

He wanted to punch his brother. For once, Bess had stopped him from doing something crazy. His fingers eased out of their fists.

“I’m giving Gray a bid on flower boxes for all the balconies. I need to take measurements.” She glanced again at Nathan and then him. “Can you let me into each condo?”
“I’ll do it.” Nathan held out his hand. “Give me the master key.”
“I’ll take you through,” Daniel snapped.
Nathan tossed him a dirty look. “Whatever.”

Yup. When they were together, he and Nathan reverted to their high school selves. He sent Quint a text asking him to come work with Nathan.

“What was that about?” Bess asked as they headed down the hallway.
He pushed his hair back and stuck his cap on. “Nothing.”
“Right.” She shook her head. “If I hadn’t come in, you might have hit each other. He’s your brother.”

He held open the stairway door. She slipped past him. Her earthy floral scent filled the small space. Her smell was—calming. Not something he usually experienced with Bess. “My brother and I aren’t like you and your sisters.”

Her green gaze drilled into him. “With everything going on in your family, maybe you should try and get along. Family is forever.”

He released a deep breath. Forever sounded like purgatory.

And Daniel thought they’d been getting along. But Nathan just couldn’t resist pushing his buttons. “Getting along is not going to happen.”

* * *

Bess walked out of the final apartment. She’d taken her time getting the measurements, trying to keep the brothers apart. Hopefully, their tempers had cooled in the hour she’d spent with Daniel.

She opened the third-floor door. The snap of the fire-exit bar echoed through the building’s atrium. Grabbing the curved brass and wrought-iron railing that circled the floor, she asked, “What are the plans for in here?”

“None that I know of,” Daniel said.
“What do you think of flower baskets in here, too?” Bess caressed the railing. “And seasonal decorations.”

He shrugged. “Gray hasn’t said anything.”

“He’ll be talking about it now.” She pulled out her measuring tape. “And so will the people who live here.”

Daniel messed with his phone. He’d done that the entire time he had shown her around the space. “I could hang pots off the top of the railing.” She tapped her lip. “Or bolt them to the overhang.”
Daniel knelt next to her. He measured the depth of the overhanging floor. “What kind of clamp would you use?”

She scrolled through the pictures she’d found earlier. “Something like this.”

He leaned in to look at her phone and their shoulders brushed. Specks of plaster lightened his hair. With his face in profile, the bump where she’d broken his nose was more prominent.

Embarrassed, she shoved her phone at him. “There’s a couple of options if you scroll through.”

He swiped. “I don’t think this will work.” He returned her phone, grinning. “It won’t hold your baskets.”

Instead of baskets or planters, the screen showed the picture she’d taken of her Cyrtorchis chailluana orchid this morning. A full-wattage grin from Daniel had the power to loosen her knees—and inhibitions. She grabbed her phone and scrolled back to the baskets. “Try these.”

“The orchids might look classy in here.” Daniel said.

At least she’d taken his mind off his brother. “The temperature and humidity aren’t ideal.”

“I’m kidding.” He bumped her shoulder. “What size basket would you use?”

“Four foot in here, unless you think I could use a six-foot planter.” The atrium was a rectangle. She stood and pointed. “I see three baskets on the long legs and two on the shorter legs.”

“It sounds possible. I’d bolt them to the floor. There’s concrete under the wood. My team could help with the installation.”

“Thanks.” She envisioned a tall Christmas tree on the main floor. And she would provide the ideas and labor to get this done. One more income stream in her quest to buy her apartment.

“Done?” Daniel asked.

“Yes.” She chewed her lip. Would Daniel go back and restart his fight with Nathan? They needed a referee. But she had to leave.

Daniel stared at her mouth.

She let her bottom lip slip out from between her teeth. His stare drilled into her core and the temperature climbed ten degrees.

“Good.” His gaze slipped away from her face and he stared over her shoulder. “I should check on whether the crew, and Nathan, got the rooms finished.” Daniel spit out his brother’s name.

It was wrong for the brothers to be estranged. She would do anything for her sisters.

Bess straightened her shoulders. If she helped the brothers, she’d be helping Samuel and Debbie.

“I have a couple of Carleton House ideas I need to run by you,” she lied.

His jaw clenched. “Okay.”

“I don’t mean now.” She reached out to touch him, but stopped. “Can you swing by Fitzgerald House around seven? We’ll grab a beer or a glass of wine and Abby’s appetizers.”

He sighed. “Sure.”

She waved him off. “Thanks for letting me into the condos.”

As Daniel went to the stairs, she pulled out her phone. She only had a couple of hours to set up an intervention.

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